

**IX**

**VOLUME I**



# **A New Christian Authoritarianism?**

**Christian Nationalism, Theology, and  
Magisterial Protestantism**

**A Journal  
for Pastors**

# **Church Matters**



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Church Matters: A New Christian Authoritarianism?

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# **Biblical Thinking For**

# Building Healthy Churches

# Why This Is a Mission of the Church Conversation

by Jonathan Leeman

**L**et's start with what this edition of *Church Matters* (formally the *9Marks Journal*) on theonomy and Christian nationalism means to do and not do.

It does not mean to call into question anyone's profession of faith. It addresses "second tier" not "first tier" issues, to use the rankings of theological triage. First tier issues, like the doctrine of God or salvation, are *gospel issues*. A person's salvation depends on getting them right. Second tier issues, like the ordinances or ordination, are *church issues*, referring particularly to the local church.

Disagreements over second-tier issues involve conversations among Christians by Christians, and hopefully this journal models such a spirit.

Yet second-tier conversations remain crucial because they serve to display, protect, and provide an apologetic for the gospel. And that's why the local church exists—to display, protect, and provide an apologetic

for the gospel. Individuals might get saved apart from a church, but preserving their gospel witness from one generation to the next requires a biblically constructed church.

On the whole, the conversations raised by a new generation of theologians, Christian nationalists, and magisterial Protestants are second-tier conversations. Should the church pick up the sword in order to aid the work of the church? Are churches tasked with “transforming” the nation in any sense of that word? Should they apply Christ’s name to a nation? Our answers to those questions will decidedly impact what a church is as well as its mission.

That’s why you should take an interest in this conversation, pastor. It’s a mission of the church conversation.

How Developed Is Your Political Theology?

Taking a step back, the bigger picture is this. A pastor’s own theological development should include what the academic crowd calls *political theology*. Political theology is that area of theology that helps us to situate churches on the landscape of the nations and their governments, like pins on a map. It includes topics like the relationship between church and state, religious liberty, views on Christ and culture, the duties of citizenship, as well as what’s appropriate for preachers to preach about an upcoming election. Sometimes people refer to some of these topics—especially as it pertains to public engagement—as “public theology.” Use that term, too, if you want. The larger umbrella label, as I prefer it, is political theology.

“Political theology is that area of theology that helps us to situate churches on the landscape of the nations and their governments, like pins on a map.”

Faithful pastors rightly deplore the politicizing of the pulpit—employing the pulpit for partisan or policy-program ends. Doing so subverts the agenda of Jesus’s heavenly kingdom to earthly ones. Still, your political theology, like your eschatology and your view of the biblical covenants, will shape your view of the church’s mission. Therefore, it’s a necessary topic for pastoral study.

A Christian’s politics begins the moment a brand-new baby believer declares, “Jesus is Lord!”

Then it’s yours and the church’s job, pastor, to teach the new baby Christian everything Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:19), including in the so-called political areas of life. Our politics are hardly exempt from Christ’s Lordship. They cannot be quarantined off from our “religion.” Rather, politics is one area of Christian discipleship.

Yet what does obedience entail for a Christian in the political domain? How specific and detailed should a pastor be? How broadly should a church or its members seek to influence the state? Here’s where the second-tier conversations begin.

## Authoritarianism

A new generation of writers and speakers offer an expansive and—I believe—authoritarian answer. I use the term authoritarian first *descriptively*: they ask the state to do more than classical liberalism asks it to do, at least by recent definitions. Classical liberalism foregrounds *liberty*. It asks the state to secure the maximal amount of liberty for everyone. This group of writers, therefore, might be called post-liberal.

Yet I'm also using the term authoritarian *evaluatively*: their teachings about civil government give more authority to the state than the Bible does, or at least than biblical wisdom recommends. I'm not saying the Bible gives us classical liberalism. But I would say the Bible's view of government overlaps with liberalism at least at these two crucial points: both impose a narrower jurisdictional lane on the government than theonomy and magisterial Protestantism do, and both charge the government with protecting the basic political equality of all citizens.

Yet turn to the rest of the journal for that argument. The point for now is, this edition of *Church Matters* hopes to help you become more conscious of your political theology, pastor, so that you might better ascertain how it shapes your understanding of your job as well as the mission of the church.

## Mission of the Church and the Risks of Political Urgency

That brings me to a word of caution, and the main thing I want you to walk away with from this opening piece. The

mission of the church is a risky topic for pastors because we always run the risk of getting sidetracked by whatever political, economic, or moral challenges feel most urgent in our time and place. If you're able to open your Bible and find anything remotely connected to your present challenges, you'll be tempted to shape the mission of the church around them.

Do you feel oppressed? The Bible opposes oppression. So say the church exists to oppose oppression.

Do you worry about the decline of morality in your nation? The Bible opposes the decline of morality in a nation. So say the church exists to fight for a moral nation.

Do you care about good government? The poor? Material blessing? Finding purpose for your life? Healthy families? The Bible addresses all of those things. So say the church exists primarily for those things. At least that will be your temptation.

When people feel the pressures of political division or cultural decline, that's all they want to talk about. They'll post on social media, "Now is the time to take a stand and fight." And they'll shape the mission of the church around it.

No doubt, there are times to take stands or do the unusual. You don't want to be the pastor arguing "Let's avoid politics!" in 1859 United States or 1938 Germany. You want to be the guy who takes the right stand in such moments.

Yet it's precisely in these high-political-stakes moments we need to be especially careful, lest our churches veer off track. The temptation to swerve

“More than anything, then, days of cultural turmoil and political tumult require us to double down in studying Scripture.”

grows when strife grows. More than anything, then, days of cultural turmoil and political tumult require us to double down in studying Scripture. There’s a difference between *being sensitive* to the economic waves and political winds and *being driven* by those waves and winds. When churches are driven, their playbooks—their sense of their mission—easily succumb to biblical imbalances and worldly agendas.

So here we are, standing at what feels like the transition from one major historical epoch to another—from a civilization that flew under the banner of “Christendom” to one counted as post-Christian and neo-pagan. Compared to 50 and especially 100 years ago, Christianity no longer possesses the respect of the political, commercial, legal, and cultural establishment, even if that respect was only nominal. The Protestant primacy given to the individual’s conscience before God feels the teeth of identity politics biting at its heels. Even basic civilizational building blocks like gender and family are suddenly up for grabs. It’s no surprise, therefore, that Christians find themselves thrust back into intense mission-of-the-church conversations. It’s not hard to understand why so many young Christians are asking—and, God bless them, it’s primarily

young men asking— “Wait a second, is there more the church should be doing here?!”

Does the change in a nation’s disposition toward Christianity and Christian morality change the church’s mission? Certainly not, and no one would say it would. Still, look around. There is a surge in the popularity of postmillennial eschatology. Theonomy and magisterial Protestantism, long thought dead, have recently been resuscitated. And movements like these contribute to an expanded view of the church’s mission. The church isn’t asked just to make disciples and teach everything Jesus commanded, but to work for the transformation and restructuring of society *in this present age*.

Right here, ironically, the authoritarian versions of the political right and left converge. They impose different political agendas on the church, but both impose a more substantive political agenda. The left calls the church to dig water wells in Africa. The right wants to put Jesus’s name into the constitution. The left calls for racial reparations. The right wants to criminalize blasphemy. If you push back, the left will charge you with caring only about gospel creeds, not gospel deeds, orthodoxy, not orthopraxy. The right will charge you with being pietistic, spiritualistic, passivistic, and maybe anabaptistic. My point is not that “We need a third way because Jesus is neither politically left nor right.” My point is that there are more or less authoritarian versions of the left and right, like a y-axis of authoritarianism running perpendicular through an x-axis of left and right (similar to the y-axis here).

If you lean authoritarian, therefore, whether left or right, I'd ask you to remember what Jesus said to Peter when Peter picked up the sword in the Garden of Gethsemane: "We're not going to build my kingdom that way, Peter!"

Should Christians pick up the sword to accomplish civil ends? Yes. But ecclesial ones? No, and sorting out the difference between those two things is the burden of this journal.



Jonathan edits all 9Marks titles as well as Church Matters. He is the author of several books focusing on ecclesiology. Jonathan earned his MDiv from Southern Seminary and a Ph.D. in Ecclesiology from the University of Wales. He lives with his wife and four daughters in Cheverly, Maryland, where he is an elder at Cheverly Baptist Church.

# A Guide to the Journal

by Taylor Hartley

**S**ince it's unusually long, we thought a more careful guide to the Journal might help.

Jonathan Leeman kicks off this issue by sketching out and critiquing the basic premises of what we're calling Christian Authoritarianism. Building off this evaluation, Leeman moves on to consider the nature and extent of the government's authority according to the Bible. With these two articles in hand, Leeman provides several reasons why one should ultimately reject Christian Nationalism.

Our next batch of articles aims to present the lay of the land concerning the theonomic conversations happening in our day. Tom Hicks leads this effort by identifying four key features of General Equity Theonomy. Joseph Thigpen follows by trying to show what daylight exists between old-school Reconstruction theonomists and new-school General Equity theonomists. Lastly, John Wilsey argues for religion's place in the public

square by sketching out Christian Nationalism's history and impact on the United States since its inception.

Next up is a series of articles bringing critique against some of the theological constructs of theonomy and Christian nationalism. Batting first is Albert Mohler, who argues that theonomy is not only anti-conversionist and anti-Baptist but also contradicts the Westminster Confession and is, therefore, anti-Presbyterian. Second in this lineup is David VanDrunen, who shows us what characteristics and responsibilities God gives to all civil governments not named Israel through the Noahic Covenant. Next up is Matthew Emerson's take on Christian Nationalism from a credobaptist perspective and what a positive Baptist political theology looks like. David Schrock then joins the batting order, where he argues that postmillennialism's optimism for renovated nations before the return of Christ is faulty and futile. Because so much of this conversation centers on the Mosaic law, Jason DeRouchie rounds out the inning with helpful hermeneutical tools for Old Testament passage-making.

Like recognizing that Route 66 is only one of many ways west, our next group of articles drive competing covenantal perspectives to the same endpoint concerning theonomy—it simply doesn't work. These articles feature Ligon Duncan, who hails from the land of Westminster Presbyterians; Justin Perdue, from the company of 1689 Baptists; and Joshua Greever and Jason DeRouchie, who travel in from the new world of Progressive Covenantalism. Together they

demonstrate how one version or other of covenant theology works as a bulwark against theonomy.

Our next section trades in history and logic as much as theology in order to combat theonomy and Christian Nationalism. Matthew Bennett leads off this effort by helpfully showing three similarities between theonomy and Islam's sharia law and how theonomy undermines the Church's mission. Following Bennett, Michael Horton employs history, biblical theology, and practical wisdom to argue against seeing culture war and Christian mission as coterminous ideas. Nathan Finn plays a similar historical note as Michael, only from a Baptist perspective, to show that state-endorsed religion is antithetical to Baptist ecclesiology. Next, John Wilsey warns that the Christian Nationalism of the Moral Majority and Stephen Wolfe's Christian Nationalism wrongfully rely on nostalgia instead of Christian and classical virtues like faith, hope, temperance, and justice. Next, Matthew Arbo argues that Christian Nationalism is intrinsically utopian because it imports into this life features of the next and secures them by temporal means. Ian Clary follows Arbo to examine 18th-century Baptist John Gill's understanding of natural law in order to show where theonomy is out of step with the Reformed and Baptist traditions. Matt Martens joins these authors' ranks, where he shows how a muscular government the likes of Magisterial Protestant formulation is beyond the biblical and practical pale and should, therefore, be rejected. Finally, Dustin Asbury looks at the life and legacy of Charlemagne to argue

“Our next company of articles means to encourage you, pastor, as you face the troubled waters created by the winds of theonomy and the like.”

for Christian reliance on the ordinary means of grace as opposed to political violence.

Our next company of articles means to encourage you, pastor, as you face the troubled waters created by the winds of theonomy and the like. John Piper is first across the line with his admonition for preachers to aim their sermons at helping Christians prepare for suffering in this life and glory in the next, not the other way around. Next, Kevin DeYoung places church and state relations and the liberty of the individual conscience in the larger economy of a biblically faithful political theology. Following DeYoung, Jeremy Walker helps us orient our loves and priorities by comparing compromise in the church and nation. In a similar key, Jamie Southcombe follows Walker to emphasize the priority of unity amongst

Christians over and above unity with our countrymen. Jeff Weisner joins the mix to help us think through how pastors can practically reinforce their people’s understanding of Covenant Theology as a defense against theonomy and co. On the practical front, Ken Barbic poses ten diagnostic questions to help us think through the ordering of our allegiances and the impact this has on our following Jesus. Next up is politician-turned-pastor Dave Brown, who shares a few lessons he learned about idolatry whilst trading political punches on the Hill and working alongside the Moral Majority for President Reagan. Next, we asked a few international pastors whether they were thumbs up or down on culture war as part and parcel of the church’s mission. Their answers are especially helpful to those of us living in the U.S. Lastly, we collected several transcribed prayers prayed in public civic settings by faithful pastors. We hope these encourage you to remember your leaders and teach your people to pray for them regularly.

Lastly, we solicited a number of book reviews on books central to this conversation. We hope these reviews will prove helpful to you as you consider the merit of the arguments being made.



Taylor writes, edits, and project manages for 9Marks. He earned his MDiv from Southern Seminary and intends to pursue more education. Taylor is married to Rachel, and they live on the Hill in Washington, D.C. They are members of Capitol Hill Baptist Church.

# Section One

# Authoritarianism and Gospel Authority

# A New Christian Authoritarianism

by Jonathan Leeman

**Y**ou might have noticed American life feels increasingly politicized. Just think about the conversations you've had as a pastor in the last two years compared to the last twenty.

Or consider the broader landscape: debates over national anthems at football games, rainbow flags adorning businesses, neighborhood "co-exist" lawn signs, pronouns in email signatures, a broad array of speech codes, diversity training in corporate America and the military, protests against a fast-food establishment, debates about COVID masks and quarantines as well as divisions over whether medical authorities are trustworthy, and the list goes on and on, pushing into more and more areas of life. We live in the era of The Political.

The cultural moment is captured in William Butler Yeats's 1938 poem "Politics," which begins with the epigram, "The destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms." Yeats looked leftward and saw communism, rightward and saw fascism. Both ideologies made totalitarian

claims—political claims on the totality of people’s lives, from art to romance to religion. The middle ground in European politics was vanishing, squeezed out by this authoritarianism on the left and right.

A few years later, around 1945, C. S. Lewis remarked, “A sick society must think much about politics, as a sick man must think much about his digestion.”<sup>1</sup> By this measure, it would seem we are an increasingly sick society. Moral division abounds. People feel an impulse to fix things. They assume government needs to act. And everything gets politicized.

Christians today hardly live between monsters quite as ugly as Yeats. No one is yet calling for concentration camps. Yet if a nation’s “politics” refers to that place it goes to resolve disputes, punish the bad, and reward the good by governmental power, the creeping kudzu of politicization reveals our deepening moral, ideological, and finally religious divisions as well as the conviction that those divisions are so deep that only governmental power will resolve them. Creeping politicization, in other words, implies a creeping authoritarianism.

## **The New Christian Authoritarians**

In response to the secular authoritarianism of the left, a growing chorus of Christian voices on the right have adopted their own authoritarian approach to politics. Whether they go by the title of “general-equity theonomist,” “Christian nationalist,” “magisterial Protestant,” “Roman Catholic integralist,” or, in legal circles,

“common good constitutionalist,” their basic pitch is the same:

The middle ground of classical liberalism’s restrained approach to governmental power has proven inadequate for maintaining a moral, religious, and just society. The liberal DNA of the American Experiment, following secular Jeffersonian and Madisonian trajectories, has betrayed us. The Experiment has become the “high church form of secularism.”<sup>2</sup> And “liberalism has failed because it succeeded.”<sup>3</sup> The liberal Experiment has matured (or, better, devolved) into the LGBTQ+ and so-called woke identity politics of the progressive left, which threatens its own authoritarianism. Therefore, we’re left with no choice except to adopt one of two authoritarianisms: the secular left’s or the Christian’s. So pick your side. If you think you can defend some form of non-authoritarian middle, you’re a “regime theologian.” You’re handing the sword to the godless authoritarians.

It’s a compelling pitch, and maybe it’s correct, historically speaking. Hope for a non-authoritarian option may vanish. The American Experiment is an experiment. Its main goal—that a people of diverse religions, worldviews, cultures, and ethnicities may live together peaceably around the shared affirmations of freedom, rights, and equality—may prove unworkable. As such, the future may indeed look like one authoritarianism or another.

Why is this post-liberal movement rising up now? When people feel existentially threatened, they reach for a strong man. Think of President Trump. He’s a playground bully that embattled people hide behind. Likewise, many

American Christians increasingly feel existentially threatened. We no longer live in a positive world or even neutral world, but a “negative world,”<sup>4</sup> where “being known as a Christian is a social negative.” Theonomy, Christian nationalism, and magisterial Protestantism offer a theological strongman.

Meanwhile, other Christians watching the rise of this movement are slack-jawed that anyone would think it’s possible to renew Christendom now. *Realpolitik* responds, “Are you kidding me? You think our country would ever go for this?”

Yet in a way that’s just the point. In the history of political philosophy, fresh rounds of theorizing occur when people feel oppressed and embattled, whether Jefferson writing a Declaration in response to British imposition or Marx writing in response to the inequalities of industrialization. Those in power who enjoy the ease of majority-status don’t typically feel the need to rethink theories of government.

### **Authoritarian = Post-Liberal**

What do I mean by authoritarian? For starters, I’m using the term in a *historically descriptive* fashion merely to mean “not classical liberalism.” These writers, in varying degrees, are post-liberal, like the critical theorists of the left. They believe the government should possess authority over religion and establishments of religion in a manner that liberalism does not, or at least does not intend to. They are also as likely to critique the freedom of speech and the press as defend it. “Every society restricts some forms

of speech” is what they say when the topic comes up.

Liberalism is a contested term, but to avoid the weeds for now and get our head around what *liberalism* is in short order, just think *liberty*. Liberalism foregrounds liberty, as with the shared Latin root (*liber* means free). A just government, says liberalism, protects liberty and our rights to it.

These more authoritarian writers don’t begin with liberty, but with Lordship. Liberty is not foregrounded, authority is. “If [Jesus] is Lord, we should do what He says,” says Doug Wilson. “If He is not, then we needn’t bother.” For that reason, Wilson wants a Christian “theocracy.”

Yet don’t be fooled, Wilson says. So do you. So does everyone: “all societies are theocratic, and the only thing which distinguishes them is which God they serve.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, says Wilson, Radical Muslims understand the implications of lordship better than many Christians do: “Radical Muslims . . . are the ones who at least understand the nature of the conflict. If Allah is God, then follow him. If he isn’t, then we shouldn’t.” And just as this is true for Radical Muslims, so it’s true for Christians: “And I would say the same thing about Jesus.”<sup>6</sup>

These writers, in short, want a stronger government with more authority that constrains or places impositions upon people’s worldview or religion. Or, at least, they want a government that admits that this is what all governments do.

Writing in the *American Reform-er*<sup>7</sup>, Timon Cline is explicit about the need for a stronger government. Cline

refers to himself as a magisterial Protestant, which is a slightly different vein of post-liberalism than Wilson's theonomic vein. The magisterial Protestants invoke the magisterial reformers like Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, and they rely more on natural law arguments than the theonomists. Yet they arrive at a similar location—a more authoritarian government. Cline, a state deputy attorney general by day and an astonishingly well-read theology writer by night, wants to see a new conservative right shed the “tired and deleterious dogmas” of the past like “small government.” “Market fundamentalism and libertarian fictions can no longer inform policy,” he says. Rather, “we need a party of opposition . . . a party of the state and a party of nature.” By party of nature, Cline means one that appeals to natural law, an idea that has grown in Christian academic circles as quickly as the cause of a nature-denying transgenderism has grown on the political left. Yet notice the other two things he says we need: we need a party of opposition—meaning, it opposes the establishment—and a party of the state—not small government but big, one that's willing to establish Christianity.

If “theonomists” like Wilson and “magisterial Protestants” like Cline represent two theological traditions or perspectives—ways of making the argument—the label “Christian nationalism” is more of a political program. It describes what its adherents want for a nation, and they'll employ both theonomic or magisterial Protestant arguments to this end.

To be clear, people might use the phrase “Christian nationalism” in one of two ways. Some might be referring merely to Christian *influence* on a nation's lawmaking. That's not my concern here. Others want to *identify* the United States as Christian essentially at a constitutional level, similar to how modern-day Israel might refer to itself as “Jewish” or Iran as “Muslim.”

The latter usage is my interest. Christian nationalists in this latter sense will appeal to both theonomic and magisterial Protestant arguments, since all three groups want a religiously muscular government.

For instance, independent scholar Stephen Wolfe, in his book *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, acknowledges that his argument is “not ‘conservative,’” at least not as measured by the standards of the conservatism that stretched from post-WWII to the early 2000s (p. 434). Instead, Christians need to be revolutionaries who are willing to overthrow the present system, even violently (p. 326). Wolfe calls for a “theocratic Caesarism” (p. 279), ruled by a Christian prince “who brings a Christian people to self-consciousness” (p. 279). To this end, church and state should work together: “The church's duty is to teach true religion, and the civil government must ensure that truth is taught and that harmful false teaching is restrained” (pp. 35657). Governments should therefore “suppress blasphemy, heresy, and flagrant disregard for public worship among the baptized” (p. 262, also 182).

## Enforcing Both Tables of the Law

In fact, I, too, believe that a Christian's politics begins with the phrase, "Jesus is Lord," which by itself would be enough for many non-Christians to count me as authoritarian.

I also believe Doug Wilson is right—minus the word "only"—when he says that "all societies are theocratic, and the only thing which distinguishes them is which God they serve." As I myself put it in a book<sup>8</sup> once upon a time, "Governments serve gods. This is true of every government in every place ever since God gave governments to the world. The judge judging, the voter voting, the president presiding, all of them work for their gods. No citizen or officeholder is religiously indifferent or neutral." And in another book<sup>9</sup>: "Not only shouldn't the public square be naked, it cannot be. It's nothing more or less than a battleground of gods, each vying to push the levers of power in its favor. Which means, there are no secular states, at least in terms of what the basis is for a nation's laws. There are only pluralistic states."

In my mind, the fundamentally religious nature of all our politics is beyond dispute, whether your name is Franklin Graham or Nancy Pelosi, Antonin Scalia or Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the Republican or Democrat Party. Name one political or policy position you hold that's not backed up by a moral perspective that itself is not backed up by a theological perspective. I don't think you can, including a law that says we should drive on one side of the road or the other.

Yet here's where my path (and I assume most American Christians) diverges with the post-liberals. I would also endorse the U.S. Constitution's injunction against Congress making a law "respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Like most American Christians (I assume), I'd say these First Amendment words are at least wise, if not fundamentally biblical. These writers would count them at least as unbiblical, if not also unwise.

Differences exist between the post-liberals, which I'll get to momentarily, yet the crucial piece that unites them is this: they believe that God intends for the governments of the nations to enforce not just the horizontally directed second table of the Ten Commandments (commandments 5 to 10), but also the vertically directed first table (commandments 1 to 4). This, more than anything, is why I count them as post-liberal and authoritarian. My friend and Davenant Institute president Brad Littlejohn jokingly referred to himself and everyone else in this group as First Tabularians. They would enforce the first table or tablet of the law.

Littlejohn, like Cline, places himself in the magisterial Protestant camp. In fact, Littlejohn provides the most compelling biblical argument for enforcing the first table of the law that I've encountered. It's simple, elegant, and summarized in seven quick steps (his words<sup>10</sup>, condensed by me for length, follow):

1. It is the task of government to punish evil and praise/reward good (Rom. 13; 1 Pet. 2).

2. All humans know what good and evil look like from the natural law, which is restated and clarified by the Ten Commandments.
3. Putting these two propositions together, then, we can say that governments should enforce both the first (1–4) and second tables (5–10).
4. Based on the Protestant two-kingdoms doctrine, the government has jurisdiction only over the external temporal sphere, not over matters of the heart. Government cannot make people Christians, but it can forbid non-Christians from working against true religion (Christianity), which is the foundation of society.
5. However, just because government can punish something doesn't mean it should. If trying to stop some false religion does more harm than good, the government should tolerate it.
6. The law has a pedagogical function, teaching us what to regard as good. Even if a law cannot effectively restrain some evil, it may limit its spread by its moral authority.
7. Governments can promote as well as restrain. This was the basis of the American religious settlement: very few religious practices were actively restrained, but public institutions affirmed and celebrated the good of the Christian religion.

Points 1 and 2 provide the biblical premises which most Christians will

affirm. The real argument begins with point 3. Before you reject it, consider it slowly and carefully. He's surely right that God commands governments to punish evil and reward good. Romans 13:4 says so. I'm not sure he's right that the entire Ten Commandments republish the natural law that can be known by all people (e.g., can the Sabbath be intuitively known?), but I think we can all agree the first commandment belongs to the natural law. Romans 1:20–21 says it's known by all people. Therefore, if Caesar should punish evil, and if disobeying the first commandment is an evil recognized by every human as hardwired by God into the conscience, then shouldn't Caesar punish those who disobey the first commandment?

In case you're panicked that Littlejohn wants to convert people by the power of the sword, forcing them to worship God, he doesn't. On principled grounds, point 4 pulls the reins back on Charlemagne's warhorse. Of course, the sword cannot compel belief, point 4 says. None of these post-liberal writers believes the government can. On prudential grounds, furthermore, point 5 tightens the reins a little more: don't prosecute the first four commandments if doing so will do more harm than good.

Points 6 and 7, however, loosen the reins again: even if you don't criminalize false worship, the government can still teach and promote right worship.

### **Like Parental Authority**

A useful analogy for getting your head around the post-liberal and "first

tabularian” proposal, which they commonly use, is the authority of a parent. Christian parents know that they cannot compel their children to trust in Christ. Still, they can use their authority to create a family environment that is conducive to belief, or that makes belief *more* rather than *less* likely. Up to a certain age, for instance, you as a Christian parent require your children, saved or not, to attend church; and you probably penalize them in some form or fashion if they take the Lord’s name in vain or blaspheme Christ.

By the same rationale—my post-liberal friends reason—Christians should aspire to establish civil structures and cultivate a civil culture that broadly affirm the truths of Christianity and that make belief *more* rather than *less* likely, as in a so-called Christian home. If you’re able to install a Christian prince or win a Christian majority in your legislature, you can then work to create a similar environment in a nation. So place Christ’s name or the Apostle’s Creed in the constitution. Maybe impose penalties for Sabbath-breaking among believers. Probably place tight restrictions on false religion (you wouldn’t let your ten-year-old attend a mosque, would you?). And so forth.

Some might even argue there’s a biblical basis for equating parental and state authority like this. Israel’s governance was patriarchal, meaning civil and familial authorities blurred together. At one point David calls King Saul “my father” (1 Sam. 24:11), and Isaiah anticipates a day when “kings shall be your foster fathers” and “queens your nursing mothers” (Isa. 49:23; cf. Num. 11:12). Older confessions like the

Westminster Confession or the Cambridge Platform therefore refer to civil magistrates as “nursing fathers” and “nursing mothers.” Never mind for a moment that these particular promises from Isaiah are fulfilled in the church, not in today’s nation states (see 1 Thes. 2:7b).

## Internal Versus External and Religious Freedom

Like Littlejohn’s fourth premise above, Wolfe also relies on the same two-kingdom’s distinction between internal beliefs and external actions. He argues, “Civil authority has no concern with true or false belief *in itself*, for civil authority concerns itself directly only with outward good and evil.” Or again: “False belief itself must never be the basis of civil punishment. False religion *externalized* is the only principled object of punishment” (ital orig., 357; see also 300f).

So consider blasphemy. “The public authority is bound to repress blasphemy, false doctrine and heresy,” Martin Luther remarked in 1538, “and to inflict corporal punishment on those that support such things.” How could Luther or the Magisterial Reformers think that way if salvation is by faith alone? The key is this internal vs. external distinction. A government should not criminalize *believing* wrong things about God; rather, it should criminalize wrong *acting* about God, particularly insofar as such actions threaten to undermine the civil order. This is how restrictions on blasphemy or mosque building—both actions—begin to

make sense even after admitting the government cannot compel the heart.

Furthermore, as secular speech codes grow tighter and tighter, costing people their jobs and livelihoods, who wants to deny that secular progressivists have their own version of blasphemy<sup>11</sup> which they're trying to stamp out?

By this token, the post-liberal perspective requires us to rethink religious freedom. Littlejohn acknowledges, with a friendly wink, that "saying you're against religious liberty is a bit like saying you're against kittens." For his part, he loves kittens. But "just because I am unabashedly pro-kitten, that does not mean I cannot support reasonable restrictions on kitten rights for the sake of the common good." Therefore, he and others are willing to place various limits on religious liberty. And this comes in varying degrees, as I'll explain in a moment. Littlejohn himself would not restrict the ability of other religions to gather in their own houses of worship. Others like Wolfe might.

That said, Wolfe reassures nervous readers that he would not sanction "any government-run inquisition whereby authorities force people to profess their beliefs and then punish them on account of their alleged falsities" (ibid, n.8).

Why his proposals would not include such government-run inquisitions is unclear. After all, a person's answers in response to a government-run inquisition surely counts as "religion externalized." It's also unclear what would prevent the next generation of adherents to Wolfe's principle from pursuing government-run inquisition, even if Wolfe himself wouldn't.

## Differences

Plenty of differences exist between these various brands of post-liberalism, and just about any generalization one might offer about them as a singular group may well provoke an exasperated eye roll in one or another.

For instance, the theonomists divide into the older Reconstructionist and the newer general-equity branches. The former appeals a little more directly to the civil codes of the Mosaic Covenant, while the latter argues we need to adapt those codes for different times and places.

Theonomists disavow all talk of religious neutrality in the public square, as I mentioned in the quote from Wilson above. This is because theonomists, whether Reconstructionist or general equity, are generally strong presuppositionalists. The magisterial Protestants, on the other hand, tend to criticize presuppositionalism and appeal instead to a common grace and natural law framework. That showed up in Littlejohn's argument above.

The general equity theonomists, for all their willingness to expand the reach of government into first-table matters, also display a libertarian-like distrust of big government. They want to talk about putting Jesus's name into the U. S. Constitution, but they don't want to hear talk about sanitation commissions and fair-housing authorities. You may have also caught news of their protests against COVID restrictions, regarding them as tyrannical incursions by the government. At least some magisterial Protestants, on the other hand, are more comfortable with

“big government” in the more common contemporary use of that phrase.

Magisterial Protestants like Littlejohn, who is an Anglican, believe in an established church. A general-equity theonomist like Wilson would prefer to avoid one, at least for prudential reasons. Wilson observes that a “strong argument can be made that establishment (official recognition and tax support for the churches) is the spiritual kiss of death for those churches. As a general rule, we do not look for spiritual vibrancy among all the state’s kept clerics.”<sup>12</sup> Yet while he argues “against establishment,” he distinguishes this from and argues “in favor of our forms of government being explicitly Christian.” Here he believes the Bible is on his side:

The magistrate has a responsibility to recognize that Jesus rose from the dead and that He is seated at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. This is a scriptural requirement because the Bible says that *every* tongue must confess this in his mind and heart and to consult with the Church when he has questions about what it all means. . . . He should propose an amendment to the Constitution that consists of the text of the Apostle’s Creed. He should not put any particular denomination on the dole. If we don’t like welfare queens, we should not want to encourage bishop queens (193).

Two more differences to highlight. Some members of the authoritarian crowd do more to affirm the basic values of liberalism like liberty and equality. Littlejohn, whose PhD advisor was the Anglican Oliver O’Donovan, would broadly affirm O’Donovan’s so-called

“Christian liberalism<sup>13</sup>,” which leaves room for an established church, but also affirms “freedom,” “merciful judgment,” “natural right,” and “openness to speech” as the gift of Christianity to the world. Wilson, too, remarks, “I want a theocratic society that maximizes human liberty, including liberty of conscience.”<sup>14</sup> Wolfe, meanwhile, devotes a chapter of his book to a revolution that would dramatically overthrow the present liberal order and install a Christian prince. His system is also open to dividing ethnic groups and encouraging repatriation based on political preferences and each group’s distinct vision of the common good.

Finally, and this distinction is more my impression than how they would describe themselves: some authors foreground the work of the state in ushering in a Christian nation, treating the church almost as an afterthought. Others foreground the church, saying we’ll never achieve a Christian nation apart from evangelism and revival. Or at least they say we should foreground the church. Wilson is better than Wolfe in this regard. Why the latter group doesn’t actually spend more of their time talking about evangelism instead of spending all their podcasts, tweets, and articles on contemporary politics and long-term political arrangements is unclear to me. Still, I appreciate the positive affirmation of the priority of the church and the ordinary means of grace.

## Levels of Coercion

One of the challenges of this conversation is the amount of ambiguity that remains concerning what people mean

or don't mean when talking about "enforcing" religion or a command like "you shall have no other gods before me." Does that mean publicly recognizing Christian holidays like Christmas? Establishing a church? Criminalizing all false religion? The question of whether we enforce the first commandment sounds like a yes/no question, as if the answer came with an on/off switch. But really the answer comes with a dimmer switch of options.

I can envision at least six clicks on this dimmer switch for what "enforcing" religion can look like. Number 5 represents maximal enforcement, while 0 represents none. To be sure, each step contains a spectrum within itself, but here's a start. Further, each of these steps could be adapted for any religion or worldview, as the examples will suggest, though I have Christianity principally in mind:

#### *Active enforcement*

5) Penalty (fine, imprisonment, or execution) for false religious belief—"We'll hunt you down and demand answers because you're not allowed to even *think* otherwise." *Examples*: USSR, Nazi Germany, Taliban.

4) Penalty (fine, imprisonment, or execution) for false religious public profession or advocacy—"Believe what you want; just don't act on it. Don't teach it in your assemblies or to your children." *Examples*: colonial Virginia, Communist China, Muslim Iran, anti-conversion laws in certain states in India. *Increasingly soft versions include*: freedom of false worship in the privacy of one's home, as

with Catholic recusants in post-Reformation England; the freedom to build a place for public worship but without the right to proselytize, as was afforded to Jews in medieval Europe or Christians in the United Arab Emirates today; or the freedom to build a place for public worship and to proselytize, but still be excluded from various institutions like universities or government.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Passive enforcement*

3) No active penalty for false religious belief/behavior, but a formal affirmation and subsidy given to true belief/behavior by (a) financing establishments of true belief/behavior and (b) creating two classes of citizenship—"Believe, profess, and teach what you want, but we're going to establish true belief (a) by using your tax money to subsidize ministries, buildings, clergy, and schools of true belief/behavior and (b) by preventing you from holding political office." *Examples*: a number of early U. S. states, even Massachusetts until 1834. *A softer version with (a) but not (b)*: present day United Kingdom or Sweden; arguably the progressive woke and LGBT left.

#### *No enforcement, but religious speech and action by government*

2) No penalty for false and no substantial subsidy for true religious belief/behavior, but symbolic affirmations of true belief/behavior by the government *as the government*—"Believe and practice as you want, but we as a government and nation will declare true belief in our founding documents, money, recognition of certain holidays, and oaths of office and

court.” *Examples*: various U.S. state constitutions over the last 200 years; “In God We Trust” on the dollar bill; the opening sentence of the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights.

***No enforcement, but freedom of religious speech and action by individuals in government\****

1) No penalties, subsidies, or symbolic endorsements *as the government*, but freedom for individuals in government to publicly affirm and promote their beliefs in office—“Speaking for myself as one senator among 99 who may not share my convictions and who are free to vote according to their religious convictions, I would urge this chamber to outlaw abortion. Every unborn child is created in God’s image, and both Scripture and our consciences bear witness to God’s final judgment for all who depart from his law. ‘Kiss the Son lest he be angry,’ the Psalmist tells us.” Or: “Speaking as your mayor, we will no longer open up our public libraries to drag queen story hour. This new injunction is *not* a prohibition against a drag queen’s ability to worship themselves, their gods, or goddesses as they see fit. It is, however, my attempt as your mayor to protect marriage and the family, which falls within the jurisdiction that God has assigned to governments. You may vote me out, but so long as I’m here I will strive to faithfully uphold what is right.”

***No enforcement; no moral pressure***

0) Forbidding of public declarations of religious belief/behavior in any form—“Say or believe whatever you want in private; just don’t talk about

it in office or in public. And certainly don’t impose it.” *Examples*: advocates of the liberal tradition coming out of Jefferson or Madison tradition, particularly those who seek to limit the government’s role to proceduralist claims (i.e. outcomes are “just” if the right procedures are in place).

Three further words of explanation about this table. For starters, I’ve included step 0 since I assume many Americans (Christian and not) profess it. Yet I believe the position is both incoherent and a ruse. Every government fears one God or another, as I said earlier. And every person entering the public square seeks to pull the levers of power on behalf of his or her god. In other words, I don’t believe the position 0 actually exists, even though people place themselves here.

Second, the difference between steps 2 and 1 amounts to the difference between speaking for others and speaking for oneself, respectively. For instance, the Canadian Charter’s reference to “the supremacy of God” and the dollar bill’s reference to trusting in God both presume to speak for the nation, even though many in the nation may not believe those words.<sup>16</sup> It imposes *an affirmation of belief* where none may exist. It offers a nominal affirmation of faith. On the other hand, a senator who says the unborn are made in God’s image speaks for himself. He may impose his or her *decision*, even a religiously motivated decision, but not the claim that people believe things they don’t. I don’t mean to evaluate this distinction here, only make note of the fact that it categorically exists.

Third, I trust that a committee of lawyers and historians could improve this table. I'm neither. Still, I hope that, if nothing else, it conveys the point that vague language about "imposing religion" or "enforcing the first commandment" can mean a number of things. Littlejohn sounds like a 3, Wolfe a 4, Wilson sometimes a hard 2 and sometimes a soft 4 (as when he justifies the Crusades). For the record, I place myself at step 1. I am not in favor of a "Christian nation," but I am in favor of "God-fearing governors."

### **The Opposite Error: Applying Religious Liberty Logic to the Second Table**

Before explaining why or moving to critique, it's important to offer one last word of sympathy to the post-liberals. They are onto something, meaning, they see real problems in the present moment, and liberalism has something to do with it.

A moment ago, we observed liberalism says a just government is one that protects and maximizes liberty. That's not exactly what the Bible says a just government is. The Bible says a just government is one that punishes the wrong and rewards the right, as Littlejohn observed (Rom. 13:4; 1 Pet. 2:14). Those are two different frameworks for moral evaluation in the public square. Not only that, from time to time, American Christians will forget about the right/wrong biblical framework for public morality and default entirely to the free/unfree liberal framework.

What's the problem with that? It leads Christians to morally abdicate

from the public square. They become unwilling to make any moral impositions on non-believers whatsoever. It's as if their brains become so trained in the moral logic of liberalism, they become unable to apply any other moral logic than "freedom first."

Where the liberalism of a first generation restrains them from applying the power of government to the first table of the law, calling this the requirement of religious liberty, a second generation applies that same restraining, religious-liberty logic to the second table of the law. Call it downward creep—from commandments 1 to 4 downward to 5 to 10.

Here are two classic examples, one on abortion (relevant to the sixth commandment) and one on gay marriage (relevant to the seventh commandment). First, Governor Mario Cuomo, in his famous speech on abortion at Notre Dame University in 1984, begins by invoking the principles of religious liberty: "I protect my right to be a Catholic by preserving your right to believe as a Jew, a Protestant or non-believer, or as anything else you choose.<sup>17</sup> We know that the price of seeking to force our beliefs on others is that they might someday force theirs on us." So far, so good. Most American Christians would agree. Yet then Cuomo applies this same first-table-restraining logic to second-table matters, including abortion:

The Catholic who holds political office in a pluralistic democracy—who is elected to serve Jews and Muslims, atheists and Protestants, as well as Catholics—bears special responsibility. He or she undertakes to help create conditions

under which all can live with a maximum of dignity and with a reasonable degree of freedom; where everyone who chooses may hold beliefs different from specifically Catholic ones—sometimes contradictory to them; where the laws protect people’s right . . . to choose abortion.

Notice that the guiding moral framework for governmental activity is what protects freedom, not what’s right or wrong. It was this speech that provided a basis for the whole “personally opposed, publicly pro-choice” stance on abortion. “I accept the Church’s teaching on abortion. Must I insist you do? By law?” Cuomo asks. He spends the rest of the speech explaining why the answer is no. In short, he applies the logic of religious liberty regarding the first table to a second-table matter. It’s the equivalent of me affirming religious liberty by saying, “I’m personally opposed to Islam, but publicly I won’t stop you,” which I do say.

Second, David French makes the same argument for supporting same-sex marriage.<sup>18</sup> Notice how the first sentence here appeals to the logic of religious liberty, while the second applies this logic to a second-table matter:

The magic of the American republic is that it can create space for people who possess deeply different world views to live together, work together, and thrive together, even as they stay true to their different religious faiths and moral convictions. The Senate’s Respect for Marriage Act [which sanctions same-sex marriage] doesn’t solve every issue in America’s culture war . . . but it’s a bipartisan step in the right direction.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, he may be personally opposed to same-sex marriage, but he’s publicly supportive. Essentially, he asks Christians to forsake the government’s biblically assigned duty of adjudicating between right and wrong in second-table matters.

Both Cuomo and French affirm the right of Christians to make Christian arguments in the public square, calling it a constitutional right. Yet both tend to discourage them, saying we should instead make arguments built on shared values. Cuomo again: Catholic arguments will “divide us so fundamentally that it threatens our ability to function as a pluralistic community.” In other words, we should stick to making liberal, freedom-first arguments. French’s entire career, he’ll tell you, has been spent making these kinds of arguments.

The result of this downward creep is several generations of Americans, Christian and non, who lack any moral language other than “my freedom, my rights, my choice.” There’s no answer to such assertions, because it’s the only ethical language we have left that’s counted as rational and compelling in the public square. Say the very words “good” and “evil” and people will discount you as religious and authoritarian. It’s as if liberalism has completely addled our brains and left us unable to think publicly in the language of “evil” and “good” whatsoever. That’s a problem for Christians who believe the Bible says that governments exist “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Pet. 2:14). Furthermore, if freedom-first arguments apply to abortion and gay marriage,

why not apply this logic to every moral principle? Moral insanity results. Pretty soon the U.S. Department of Justice is filing a complaint<sup>20</sup> for a Tennessee law forbidding minors<sup>21</sup> from receiving puberty blockers and transition surgeries.

Now, with all that in mind, consider again how simple and intuitive the post-liberal solution looks: acknowledge that theology and morality are necessarily connected and legislate both—first table and second.

If the government should pick up the sword for the sake of right and wrong, it makes immediate and intuitive sense for it to pick up the sword for the sake of God. Which is why nearly every culture does. The ancient Greeks did. The Romans did. The Aztecs did. The ancient Chinese did and the modern communist Chinese do. Both radical and moderate Muslims do. Hindus do. Atheists and secular progressivists do. Basically, it's an utterly human thing to claim that we need to protect our god or God with the sword, like Peter picking up the sword in the Garden of Gethsemane. It's universal. Almost.

### **The Key to this Entire Conversation: Jurisdiction**

I have used the term “authoritarian,” I said, as a matter of *historical description*. Yet clearly I am also using the term *evaluatively*. I believe my post-liberal friends in this movement give more authority to the state than the Bible does, or at least than biblical wisdom recommends. Hence, I intend the negative connotations that come with the word authoritarian. I'm not

saying the Bible gives us classical liberalism. But the Bible's view of government overlaps with liberalism at least at these two crucial points:

- both impose a narrower jurisdictional lane on the government than theonomy and magisterial Protestantism by establishing a domain of religious liberty, which roughly applies to the vertically-oriented first-table-of-the-law matters;
- and both charge the government with protecting the basic political equality of all citizens in a way that authoritarianism threatens, because authoritarianism invariably treats some groups of people as less corruptible than others, namely, those who share your theology.

That's why, in a society characterized by adherence to Christian morality, liberalism and liberal institutions “work” for producing relatively moral outcomes. To some extent, liberal institutions function like a mirror. They reflect a society's reigning worldviews back to itself, whether that's Christianity in the early United States, Confucianism in post-World War II Japan, Hinduism in India, Roman Catholicism in central America, or progressive secularism in Western Europe or today's United States.

Let's go back to Doug Wilson's statement that “all societies are theocratic, and the only thing which distinguishes them is which God they serve.” I agree, except for the word “only.” Governments do serve gods, I said earlier. Every government ever has. Yet this

is not the *only* thing that distinguishes one government from another. Some view themselves as possessing a broad jurisdiction, like the parent of a three-year-old who has complete charge over every aspect of the child's life. Some view their jurisdiction as comparatively narrow, like the babysitter who is charged with keeping the kids alive and fed but not much else. Some impose more of their religion, and some impose less.

Biblical Christianity, I'll argue at greater length in a separate piece, makes a narrower imposition, as does liberalism. That means, even when liberalism and its attendant institutions turn to betray us by trying to impose pagan religion on our children, biblical Christianity still constrains us from outlawing false worship. Yes, we should fight politically against those impositions on our children. Ban the drag queen from the public library if you can get enough votes. Work for better curriculum in public schools. Or maybe make tax dollars available to religious charter schools.<sup>22</sup> In other words, do what you can to keep the drag queen's false religion from applying itself in the domain (roughly speaking) of the second table of the law, as when a transgender state representative moves to allow "sexual attachment to children" to be classified as a protected sexual orientation.<sup>23</sup> But, no, don't impose a constitution on that drag queen that says he's Christian when he's not. Don't tear down his Artemis statues, wherever those might be (see Acts 19:21–41). Don't categorically ban him from running for public office by virtue of his false pagan religion. Rather, share the gospel widely

so that people stop buying his Artemis statues and he goes out of business.

The key to this entire conversation is jurisdiction. It would take a larger theology of the government's authority to demonstrate the point<sup>24</sup> but, in short, God calls the government to enact a *protectionist* form of justice that roughly covers horizontal, love-of-neighbor, second-table matters, not a *perfectionist* form of justice that covers vertical, love-of-God, first-table matters. That latter assignment he gave to Old Testament Israel, and then handed it off to Christ and the church when Israel proved unable.

Consider just one biblical text in order to see the government's horizontal-not-vertical jurisdictional assignment: the Bible's "Great Commission" text for a government's use of coercive force—Genesis 9:6. Notice first that the assigned jurisdiction is human to human or horizontal: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." Notice second that the theologians are correct—that horizontal-jurisdiction possesses a theological or vertical foundation: "for God made man in his own image" (Gen. 9:6). The horizontal and vertical are inseparable in all Christian ethics, political and otherwise. Yet notice, third, that God simply does not authorize force for sins against him. The criteria for coercive force is blood, not blasphemy. After all, all the mechanisms for due process depend on something measurable, and sin is not measurable by human tools, at least not until concrete horizontal evidence shows up.

In other words, I don't believe we're authorized by God to bar the Christian

Scientist's "freedom of religion," at least not until it causes him to deny necessary medical attention to his children—when his vertical commitments cause horizontal harm. That's when the government is authorized to step in. Likewise, I don't believe we're authorized by God to bar the drag queen's pagan worship, at least not until it, too, makes second-table impositions. At that point, the government possesses the obligation to reward good and punish evil.

In other words, the Bible leaves what might feel like a frustrating tension in place. On the first hand, it tells us to use the sword to protect humans because they're made in God's image. On the second hand, it doesn't authorize us to use the sword to protect belief in God. On the first hand, it suggests that a society that denies God will veer toward injustice since he's the foundation of all ethics, as is happening in our own society. On the second hand, it doesn't then give us the sword to fix the God-problem. Instead, it tells us to preach the gospel.

When Christians begin to insist "There must be a political solution to a decline in religious belief and the growth of injustice," they've begun to succumb to a theology of glory instead of a theology of the cross. They've begun to trade in a hope for the next world with a hope in this one, even if unintentionally.

No doubt, Jesus's disciples were frustrated by this tension, too. They wanted to fight with swords. Yet Jesus remarked, "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered

over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world" (John 18:36). Jesus's servants *should* fight to love their neighbors and seek justice by fulfilling their political duties in the protectionist, horizontal, second table matters. Yet they *should not* fight to expand his kingdom, using the sword or any tool of the flesh to actively or passively enforce belief in first table matters ("enforce" as indicated by steps 2 to 5 in the table above).

### **Reward the Good, Punish the Bad**

If God has indeed assigned government a horizontal, protectionist jurisdiction, how do we understand Paul and Peter's claims that God tells the government to reward the good and punish the bad?

Does that mean all good and all bad? Presumably not. That would make the government God, with an absolutely exhaustive reach into hearts, minds, and souls. Presumably, therefore, God means a subset of goods and bads.

Littlejohn says the natural law comprises that subset. Yet why that assumption? What's the basis for it? Scripture doesn't say that's the case. It's a missing premise on his seven points above. Furthermore, doesn't the natural law apply to the desires and worship of our hearts? Yet Littlejohn's version of two-kingdoms doctrine rules out the government's consideration of the heart and its desires. So that would mean the government should prosecute some of the natural law, but not all of it, which is another missing premise. Also, don't governments always (rightly) require criminal intent before

prosecuting a crime? Don't they (rightly) distinguish between things like pre-meditated murder and manslaughter? So, apparently, it's not only the outer man which counts.

Furthermore, did Israel apply a two-kingdoms paradigm to their prosecution of the Ten Commandments? It doesn't feel like they did. Read Deuteronomy 13. So why has that changed under the new covenant, especially if the new covenant doesn't apply to the nations and their governments, but to God's people? Speaking of Old Testament Israel, why make the assumption that governments today should do what its kings did? Their work was fulfilled by Christ and its work overtaken by the church. In short, Littlejohn's argument skates over lots of crucial details and hides a host of assumptions.

Yet back to the question of what's the subset of good and bad that God intends government to prosecute. The sentence "reward the good and punish the bad" means different things depending on who you're talking to. You probably have one set of goods and bads in mind if you're addressing a parent, another set if you're addressing a babysitter, another a high school teacher, another a car dealer salesroom manager, another a policeman. What you mean depends on the jurisdiction of each. Again, jurisdiction is key.

We should only ask the sword to do what Jesus would tell the sword to do.

## **Christ's Lordship Over Every Square Inch**

Post-liberals are right to assert Christ's lordship over everything. Christ is Lord over every square inch.

Yet post-liberals are wrong to claim that assigning government a narrower jurisdiction is tantamount to public atheism. Christ is Lord over every square inch, but he does not ask us to exercise his authority over every square inch in the same way. Through parents one way, through governments another, through churches still another.

Placing a limitation on Caesar's jurisdiction is not to adopt public atheism or religious neutrality. It's just to say he's limited in what he can do, like a parent limits a babysitter. Period.

Now, within his jurisdiction, Caesar must only do what God would have him do, defining right and wrong, just and unjust, as God would have him define it, just as a babysitter should only do what the parent requires. Caesar should "kiss the Son, lest he be angry," Psalm 2 warns. As quoted above, Wilson is right to say, "The magistrate has a responsibility to recognize that Jesus rose from the dead and that He is seated at the right hand of God" and that "every tongue must confess this in his mind and heart and to consult with the Church when he has questions about what it all means." In fact, let me clarify the point further: the magistrate should do this not only as an individual person, but in his or her capacity as an officer of the government. Insofar as every government officer departs from the law of God within the jurisdiction that God has assigned government,

God will judge that officer. I don't know how else to interpret Revelation 6:15–17. It says that kings and generals will prefer a mountain falling on them to facing Christ's wrath. Every unjust judge and jury, senator and major, will face God's judgment not for failing to maximize freedom, but for failing to reward the good and punish the bad as God intends—within their jurisdictional lane.

So “yes” to these first sentences from Wilson. It's the next sentence that takes a sharp turn down a wrong street: the magistrate should therefore “propose an amendment to the Constitution that consists of the text of the Apostles' Creed.” Hold on. That's a change of subject. It's true a U. S. senator should acknowledge and obey God and do so in his job. Yet it's another thing entirely to make that U. S. senator, together with the other 99, the judge of sound doctrine for the sake of the nation. That job belongs to the key-wielding church. It's also another thing to place convictions into the mouths of people who don't believe them. I assume Wilson doesn't ask his non-Christian bankers to place the Apostles' Creed into his home mortgage papers. Yet why not? In part, perhaps, because doing so would falsify those papers the second the non-Christian lender signed them.

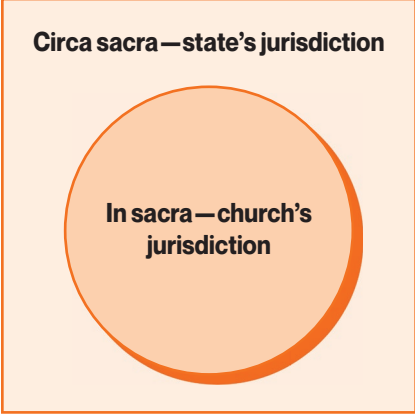
In short, a “moral ought” (a senator ought to submit to God) does not equal a “sword-wielding ought” (the senator ought to use the sword to require others to submit to God).

Wilson tries to distinguish a church establishment from a Christianized government. The trouble is, Christianizing the government requires that

government to establish itself as part church—a key-wielding judge and declarer of right doctrine. Church establishment and a Christianized government aren't as separable as that.

Elsewhere, Wilson says he maintains the distinction between *circa sacra* (around sacred things) and *in sacra* (in sacred things). The government, he argues, possesses jurisdiction only over the former. They can determine the fire-safety codes for your church building (*circa sacra*), but they cannot tell you what to teach in your church building. For my part, I'm pretty sure I agree with those jurisdictional assignments entirely.

#### **Circa sacra—state's jurisdiction**



**In sacra—church's jurisdiction**

The trouble is, Wilson then claims that both the original Westminster Confession as well as the 1789 American “downgrade” both maintain these same jurisdictional assignments, which is not quite right.<sup>25</sup> The original Westminster confession does indeed argue that the “civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Yet in the very next sentence it

contradicts itself by arguing the magistrate possesses the duty to ensure “that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented and reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed” (original WCF 23.3).

These job assignments hardly keep the government on the *circa sacra* side of the line. Instead, they ask the government to tromp on into the *in sacra* domain, and in some ways do the work of the church. The American “downgrade,” on the other hand, fixes the internal contradiction. It argues it is the duty of governments “to protect the Church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest.” I don’t personally know a single Christian who would deny this job assignment—that governments should protect churches and their ability to do all that God calls them to do as churches. This is precisely what it means to give governments authority *circa sacra*.

## **Eight Critiques**

A full-on critique of these authoritarian, post-liberal perspectives requires a fuller exposition of what the Bible positively says and doesn’t say about government. In other words, critique number one is “it’s not biblical,” which I’ve attempted elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Beyond this most fundamental critique worth multiple articles of its own, let me throw in eight additional critiques.

### **1. These post-liberal theories grant the church the wrong kind of authority, which works against the gospel and undermines the church’s gospel witness.**

Making this point, I fear, will take a little bit of foundation-building on the topic of authority. So—deep breath—God has established two types of authority on earth. Both types of authority possess the authority to issue binding commands. One type may compel obedience externally with the threat of discipline (*examples*: state with the power of the sword; parents with the power of the rod; church with the power of the keys). The other type may not apply external pressure. It instead must seek to compel obedience by appealing to internal desire (*examples*: husbands by the power of love and empathy; elders by the example of a righteous life). I have labeled these two types the *authority of command* and *authority of counsel* elsewhere<sup>27</sup>, and expand on it at length in my forthcoming book *Authority: How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing*.

The parent of a three-year-old can unilaterally enact consequences for disobedience. So can a policeman. So can a church over its members. A husband cannot, and an elder cannot (I say as a congregationalist). Rather, these latter two possess an authority of counsel.

An authority of counsel is a form of authority that strives to lead by appealing to internal desire—to hearts that, little by little, are learning to *want* to obey or follow. It’s a real authority because God commands the wife and church member to submit. Wives and

members possess a real moral obligation that God will one day enforce. Yet the husband and elder, in the here and now, lack an enforcement mechanism. Instead, their form of authority forces them to love, to live with in an understanding way, to teach with great patience, to wait, to woo, and in all things strive toward provoking that internal desire (e.g., see 1 Tim. 1:5; Phlm. 8, 9, 14).

Consider:<sup>28</sup> God gives husbands the opportunity to exercise this type of authority with the drawing power of a Song-of-Solomon-like love. This is his common-grace gift for all creation, and part of the underlying logic of the typological connection between husbands and wives and Christ and the church. God then gives elders the special-grace opportunity to exercise it with compelling lives of righteousness. Their righteousness should prove attractive to a born-again congregation, so that elders can say with Paul, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

An authority of counsel doesn’t use force, but renounces force because doing requires it to rely on the beauty of whatever compels those new desires. It works best by pointing to that beauty. By inviting. By compelling with kindness. Then the hearts “under” it *want* to follow. It’s a form of authority suited to partnership, collegiality, and oneness.

All of this means that an authority of counsel is essentially evangelistic. You invite. You don’t force. Sometimes you correct, but mostly you compel with hope. You point to the law, but mostly you announce grace. You speak plainly, but you also speak kindly, because

your goal is to win people over—wives toward unity, members toward righteousness, non-Christians to the gospel. You’re not to be a pushover, any more than Jesus was a pushover, nor to capitulate, any more than Jesus capitulated. Yet like Jesus calling his disciples from their fishing nets, so husbands and elders exercise authority by initiating and pointing in love toward the path forward. Wives and members, in turn, possess an obligation to obey, even as the non-Christian hearing the gospel does.

All that, then, is theological foundation for the following critique: theonomy, magisterial Protestantism, and Christian nationalism ask the church to face toward the world foregrounding the wrong kind of authority—an authority of command. They seek to compel the world with an external pressure or threat, which works against the evangelistic authority of the gospel.

In other words, the church *should* take an authoritative posture toward the world. It should say, “Jesus is your King. You should bow before him or judgment will come,” even as elders and husbands teach church members and wives of their obligations. Yet this authoritative posture amounts to an evangelistic authority of counsel. Even while individual members quietly work in politics as good citizens, the church collectively must renounce all external threat and pressure. Its authority is declarative, not coercive. Which means it should instead seek to compel outsiders with the love and beauty of the gospel. After all, the church seeks a change of heart, so that people might join it based on new-creation,

born-again, internal desires. Yet the more the church collectively dabbles in politics, the more it works against its ability to compel with beauty and love. It becomes like the husband who thinks he can demand love and affection, or the elder who thinks he can scare someone into righteousness.

Non-Christians resent churches for many reasons, many of which are not the church's fault. Yet one cause of resentment which can be our fault occurs when the main foot we put forward into the world is the political foot. We do this, of course, when we love them less and our political safety more. Again, we play the part of the authoritarian husband or elder, who at best secures short-term results even while undermining long-term affection and love.

One lesson of the Old Testament is that the sword cannot produce true righteousness. External pressure, that is, doesn't change the heart. Only the gospel, working through Word and Spirit, creates a new heart, and that heart, in its ideal form, *wants* to obey. An evangelistic authority of counsel, which is the church's right posture toward the world, is suited to this ideal.

## *2. These post-liberal theories over-identify the state and the family and infantilize the citizens of a nation.*

As we saw above, these post-liberal theories liken the state's authority to a parent's authority. It's true we can draw analogies between one office and another, but we should be leery of mapping different offices on top of one another too precisely, even when both

are an authority of command. Fathers who characterize themselves as kings of their own little castles and then treat their families as a king are storing up God's judgment for themselves. Or, coming at it from the other side, I've not spoken with Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, but my guess is that he loves it when Chinese citizens refer to him as "Xi Dada."<sup>23</sup> It seductively softens and personalizes this oppressive and tyrannical ruler, as with George Orwell's infamous and totalitarian government which stylizes itself as "Big Brother."

Paul describes a king as "an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom. 13:4), while he instructs fathers "do not provoke your children" (Eph. 6:4). Governments punish. Parents discipline. That's different. Or consider those Israelite parents who are instructed to teach their children God's law in Deuteronomy 6—who does that work in the new covenant? Caesar? Or the church and Christian parents, the former equipping the latter? See Ephesians 6:1-3 for the answer.

I'd even say parents play an evangelistic and church-like role in a child's life, nurturing and incubating the seed and earliest flowering of faith, until the child reaches an appropriate age for baptism and church membership. The parent does this, furthermore, not primarily with the threat of discipline, but with something more like the church's own authority of counsel, exercised as instruction in love, especially as the child ages out of discipline.

Would anybody say the state can nurture and incubate faith in the same way two Christian parents can? Parent

and government, clearly, are not the same office. The first possesses a very broad, almost totalitarian jurisdiction touching on the whole range of human existence: from teaching a child to speak, wipe himself, and memorize math facts to helping him love, think, argue, marry, and worship. It also covers the gamut from provision and protection to instruction and correction. A government's jurisdiction is much narrower. Nothing in the Bible says Caesar possesses a discipling, training, nurturing job. He possesses a protective "keep everyone safe" job.

Yet parents also gradually surrender their authority of command over children. Little by little they stop disciplining, as a fully formed human emerges. John Locke puts it well:

Children, I confess, are not born in this state of equality, though they are born to it. Their parents have a sort of rule and jurisdiction over them when they come into the world, and for some time after; but it is but a temporary one. The bonds of this subjection are like the swaddling-clothes they are wrapt up in, and supported by, in the weakness of their infancy: age and reason, as they grow up, loosen them, till at length they drop quite off, and leave a man at his own free disposal.<sup>30</sup>

Theonomy and magisterial Protestantism, strangely, reverse course and put the swaddling-clothes back on the adult, infantilizing them, yet they ask the state to do it. It spans the citizen, calling it a fine or tax, for using the Lord's name in vain, thinking this will somehow induce or prepare that citizen toward belief.

Putting critiques 1 and 2 together, it's worth remembering that flesh can only give birth to flesh, not the spirit (John 3:6). The sword cannot create spiritual life (2 Cor. 10:3-6). To acknowledge this fact is not to succumb to quietism. It's to acknowledge that we are not the Holy Spirit and cannot coerce his hand.

This sense of our limitation should stand at the center of a Christian theory of political engagement. We cannot "expand" the kingdom through our political efforts. We can only protect or clear a path for it. The threat of God's final judgment, shadowed dimly as the punishment of the state, presumably possesses some pre-evangelism power. Yet that power is limited indeed.

It's not surprising, therefore, that Jesus and his apostles completely renounced making any kind of temporal threat for his kingdom-advancing purposes. Folks might respond, "Well, that was the condition of the Roman Empire." Fine, but why did God choose that time to send his Son? Or, why didn't the resurrected Christ, having made a payment for sins, then initiate a military putsch, or at least give his disciples a political strategy?

Christ could have, but relying on the sword to accomplish kingdom purposes undermines the credibility of the power of the gospel, and it dismisses the work of the Spirit.

***3. These post-liberal theories give too little attention to the limits of government authority.***

In their effort to expand the reach of the government into first-table matters, none of these writers, best I can

tell, have spent much time meditating on the limiting principles of government. I'm never able to get answers to questions like, "So if ancient Israel doesn't provide us with an actual political program, but at least a precedent for what's hypothetically possible, why not a conquest-of-Canaan-like holy war? What principles do you offer to prevent such an enterprise besides prudential ones?" Their version of two-kingdom's doctrine doesn't do it. Consider Luther's treatment of the peasants. Or Calvin and Michael Servetus. Or all the Reformation wars of religion.

Once you assign the government with actively or passively enforcing all Ten Commandments, it's hard to find consistent principles of limitation.

On the other hand, running throughout Scripture is the demand that governments operate by the principles of accuracy, due process, impartiality, and proportionality.<sup>31</sup> These criteria are difficult if not impossible to apply to crimes exclusively against God. For that reason, God limits what we can prosecute, sanction, or subsidize to matters governing our relationships with other human beings.

By the same token. . .

***4. They apply an inconsistent anthropology—people with beliefs different than my own are more corruptible than I am—and a rose-tinted view of authority.***

Why assume that so-called Christian governments would prove more just, especially as one generation gives way to the next? Do people forget how the second generation of American colonialists abandoned the first generation's

Christianity? Or the terrible anti-semitism and racism which characterized the Magisterial Reformers in Europe as well as the more Christian governments of the United States?

In other words, Christian authoritarians quickly affirm that unbelievers in positions of power are corruptible and will use their authority unjustly. Yet they're slower to acknowledge that they or their children will use authority in a corrupted fashion.

By the same token, Christian authoritarianism depends upon an idealized and rose-colored view of human authority, or at least its own authority. It's as if Christians can remove themselves from the doctrine of the Fall and place ourselves inside of a realized redemption, at least in terms of how we will exercise authority in government. The doctrine of depravity applies more to the other guy than it does to me. No doubt, this point relates to the last one and the failure to reflect on the government's limitations.

If only we only get *our* hands on the sword of state, we'll surely do good. So will our children.

For my part, I believe we must simultaneously keep one eye on authority in creation and redemption (which does good) and one eye on authority in the Fall (which does bad). And that lesson applies to our own use of authority as Christians, too. This is why the *Federalist Papers* wisely worked to protect against abuses of authority. And I believe it's also why the Bible doesn't place the First Table into Caesar's jurisdiction. There is something even worse than a corrupt government stealing and murdering, and that's a corrupt

government stealing and murdering in God's name.

Keep in mind, also, that the strong man who is your friend in one moment will turn on you in the next.

### ***5. They tend to work against basic political equality.***

In the authoritarian framework, the concept of equality, politically conceived, grows increasingly thin. "Equal rights" is not an historic Christian view," says Wolfe.<sup>32</sup> I'm not sure I agree, yet whether or not it is, should it be? Genesis 9:6 alone affirms the equal dignity of all people; and the equal right to governmental protection; and the equal right to a government of due process; and, arguably, even an equal right to remain unhindered and protected in fulfilling the dominion mandate to "be fruitful and multiply," which is the more basic command that 9:6 serves to facilitate (see verses 1 and 7).

In a conversation over coffee, a theonomist friend of mine asserted that it would be entirely fair to restrict the vote to landowners or to men. His logic was, the Bible doesn't require a democracy, but leaves room for a monarchy. Which means, no one is entitled to a vote. Which further means, we're free to give it to some people rather than others, right? So why not give it to Christians, but not to non-Christians, or to members of your denomination, but not to others? There's precedent for this type of thing in colonial America, after all.

God does indeed ordain certain unequal distributions of power, as between parent and child, husband and wife, elder and member, or governor

and governed, as published in his Word. He establishes certain offices. Yet he also builds these offices on top of his own creation designs. The offices protect and clarify what's endemic to that design; they have the potential—when handled rightly—to work for the good of every party. When, however, human beings began to establish permanent government structures or offices that arbitrarily discriminate between classes of people, giving a permanent authority to one class over another (landowner over non-landowner, rich over poor, man over woman, white over black, Christian over non-Christian, Muslim over non-Muslim) in places that the Bible does not reveal such structures or where such structures are not hardwired into creation design and natural law, those structures violate a basic creational equality. Moreover, history amply demonstrates that more injustices quickly follow.

### ***6. Such "Christian" governments or nations misrepresent Jesus.***

Though I've placed this sixth, one could argue that it's the most important of all, which is why I've devoted another whole article to it elsewhere.<sup>33</sup>

Christian authoritarianism broadly, whether of the theonomic or magisterial variety, presents political policies, programs, and structures as if they speak for Jesus and possess his endorsement. Laws and structures teach, as Littlejohn observes in point 6 above. Yes, they do. If we therefore "Christianize" the government, the lesson is: all its actions formally represent Jesus in the same way that a church formally represents Jesus as

it binds and looses on earth what's bound and loosed in heaven.

To be clear, this is why pastors and churches must be extraordinarily careful to tie their sermons and pronouncements to Scripture or what's clear "by good and necessary consequence" in Scripture (Westminster Confession). A pastor with no Bible is a pastor with no authority. That's why a pastor who tells you which home to buy, which girl to date, which march to attend, how much money to spend on a car, or which candidate you must positively vote for, is abusing his authority.

Yet now to the government's work. Ninety-nine percent of its work is to make judgments in matters of prudence, not matters of biblical principle: what tax structure, what airline safety standards, what eighth grade math curriculum, what interest rate, what battlefield strategy, and so forth. Biblical principles may inform any given decision, but the vast majority of decisions can hardly be said to be "biblical" or "Christian" decisions. Yet once we slap the "Christian" label on a government, we're at least subtly suggesting those prudence-based judgment calls come with a divine endorsement. Yet I'd no sooner want to identify our work of governance with Jesus as I would a particular approach to plumbing, engineering, or automaking.

Christians in the common grace sphere surely represent Jesus, whether a Christian mother, plumber, or mayor. How each conducts him or herself reflects on Christ. And some dynamics of mothering, plumbing, or mayoring might be distinctly Christian. Yet much of the work is common to humanity.

The Christian mother, plumber, or mayor's witness depends mostly on his or her display of Christian virtues (e.g. the fruit of the Spirit) amidst the work. This divide between our special grace and common grace work gets lost when we "Christianize" our vocations. That's why Jesus never told us to baptize our jobs. He told us to baptize people.

Christian nationalism in particular baptizes a "nation" into Christ, even though Scripture affords not one instance of nations being baptized, only people "from" the nations (Rev. 5:9; 7:9). Other than the "holy nation" of the church, no nation will stand before God on Judgment Day. No nation is eternal. Yet declaring a "Christian" now effectively sacralizes that nation and gives it eternal standing. (See critique 6 of David Schrock's article on Postmillennialism.)<sup>34</sup>

As these governing philosophies misrepresent Jesus, furthermore, they exacerbate the problem of Christian nominalism. It's true, nominalism will show up any place the gospel is faithfully preached, as Jesus's parable of the sower teaches. Not only that, moral, nominally Christian people might make for better neighbors in certain respects than immoral pagan ones. The question is, what's the cart and what's the horse? Christian nationalism treats nominal Christianity as a horse—something it purchases by "Christianizing the nation" in order to pull the nation toward better morality. To switch metaphors, it *builds* on nominalism, arguing that this is better than paganism. The trouble, of course, is that doing so grows nominalism,

misrepresents Jesus along the way, and sends millions of people to hell assured of their salvation. It's the seeker-sensitive church's strategy. "Sure, we'll hand out some false assurance cards, but people will get saved, too." Better and more biblical, I'd say, to let faithful churches name who the Christians are, and then get to work trying to improve government.

### *7. These theories distract the church from its mission.*

I discussed this at length in an editor's note.<sup>35</sup>

To add one further note, these theories, together with the postmillennial eschatology often undergirding them, treat culture and the condition of society as "the report card of the church."<sup>36</sup> If the world is getting better, the church must be doing its job rightly. If the world is getting worse, the church must be failing to be faithful. Of course, that runs directly contrary to Scripture, where Jesus promises that we'll have trouble in this world, and even more so, apparently, when we're being faithful to him (John 16:33).

Consider for a moment, therefore, all the blogs and podcasts and tweets devoted to this topic. What do they urge you to do? And what do they urge you to expect? Do they challenge you to love Christ more, hate your sin more, share the gospel more, in spite of what persecutions come? Or do they call you a coward for not doing more to "own the libs"?

### *8. These theories have not overcome the temptation of the ideologue.*

The possibility of picking up the sword for prosecuting the first table of the law feels like a strong solution to our present chaos and disorder. It will feel attractive to Christians under pressure. But I do think there is a genuine risk here of being seduced away from Christianity's kingdom-built-on-sacrifice principles. Plus, some church members will be drawn by the appeal to strength, while others won't, leading to division in churches.

To put this another way, this overall movement hasn't solved the age-old problem of the ideologue or utopian. Ideologues give lip service to only advocating what's realistic, but they love their theories a little too much. As such they fail to adequately account for the whole history of the oppression, abuse, and violence which has accompanied the ideologies and utopias that have preceded us.

In recent literature, the theonomists and Christian nationalists have bemoaned the secular and proceduralist versions of liberalism that have prevailed since the middle of the twentieth century. Yet they fail to take note of what spawned these historically recent versions. Mid-century theorists like Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, and John Rawls had become utterly exasperated with the historicist ideologies which produced the nationalist atrocities of World War One and the fascist and communist atrocities of World War Two and the U.S.S.R. (The Episcopalian Rawls lost his faith fighting

in WWII.) Those ideologies, remember, emerged in the soil of Christendom, which, like postmillennialism, offered their own heretical versions of historical progress. Therefore, the post-war generation of scholars, surveying the devastations of Germany, Russian, Italian, and Spanish politics, decided, “Enough of your theories.” They redefined freedom negatively, removing all truth content from it; and they sought to establish the rules of liberalism in mid-air, unmoored by any comprehensive worldview. With that decision, they flushed Christianity, which offers its own version of positive liberty and a foundation for a better liberalism, down the drain with the rest of the dirty water.

So now a new generation of (mostly) young men, forgetful of history’s harder lessons, wants to theorize once more. They talk about theological retrieval, meaning, they open up old books of theology. Yet they would do well to open up old books of history, too. How did all that theorizing work out in the Reformation? Any comments on the wars of religion which decimated European populations for centuries? Anything to say about the ravages of anti-semitism? Or the burning of fellow Christians at the stake or drowning them in rivers? Or the rank hypocrisy of power-hungry princes and city magistrates and slave owners who were only too happy, day after day, to cloak their abuses and thievery in under the sacramental cloak of baptism? If we’re going to retrieve history, we should retrieve all of

it, not just the clinically sterilized formulas of old theology books or state constitutions.

The danger of theological retrieval, in other words, is that too often it’s ideologically driven. So it hunts through history selectively.

## Conclusion

“If theonomy and Christian nationalism are wrong, what’s your alternative program?” A pastor friend sympathetic with theonomy asked me that question the other day.

It’s sort of like sitting next to a cancer patient in a hospital bed and having a fellow pastor who is sympathetic with the health-and-wealth gospel ask, what your alternative program is to his name-it-claim-it prayers.

Answer number one is, change your expectations. God doesn’t guarantee or give us tools to make sure this patient or this nation gets better in this world. Rather, he gives us ways to pursue imperfect common grace improvements and, more importantly, faith to endure whatever comes, including irreversible declines.

In other words, don’t put your hope in horses and chariots. The Babylonians’ horses and chariots may win the day. Rather, put your hope in the Lord, so that, even if they do, you can trust that Christ’s final victory is certain and that your primary job is to declare as much.

Answer number two can be found in the next article.<sup>37</sup> Yet here it is in a sentence: use whatever political stewardship you have (whether voting, lobbying, paying taxes, or acting as a cupbearer to the king) to work for a government

that administers the justice requisite for protecting human life, secures the conditions necessary for fulfilling the dominion mandate, and provides a platform for God's people to declare God's perfect judgment and salvation.

Hopefully, that's an answer that works for Christians in eighteenth and twenty-first century United States, in Sweden and India, in Argentina and Saudi Arabia. A biblical answer should work in all those places.

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1. C. S. Lewis, "Membership," in *Fern-Seeds and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity* (Fontana, 1975), p. 14.
2. Douglas Wilson, *Empires of Dirt: Secularism, Radical Islam, and the Mere Christendom Alternative* (Canon Press, 2016), 10.
3. Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale, 2018).
4. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/02/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism>
5. Wilson, *Empires*, 4.
6. Wilson, *Empires*, 10.
7. <https://americanreformer.org/2023/01/conservative-no-more/>
8. Leeman, Jonathan. 2018. *How the Nations Rage*. Thomas Nelson.
9. Leeman, Jonathan. 2016. *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press.
10. <https://eppc.org/publication/against-religious-liberty-the-inescapability-of-public-religion/>
11. <https://jonathanturley.org/2022/12/18/censor-or-else-democratic-members-warn-facebook-not-to-backslide-on-censorship/>
12. *Empires of Dirt*, 191
13. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/political-theology-oliver-odonovans-christian-liberalism/13401594>

14. *Empires of Dirt*, 4.
15. *Thanks to Brad Littlejohn who helped with these three examples.*
16. *The difference between step 2 and step 1 is significant only in a democratic republic or with any form of government in which the government or its founding documents presume to speak for "we the people." In a monarchy, on the other hand, the government and the individual are one, and the government can only speak for himself.*
17. <https://archives.nd.edu/research/texts/cuomo.htm>
18. <https://newsletters.theatlantic.com/the-third-rail/6377fb0dce44df0038de4c62/respect-for-marriage-same-sex-religious-freedom/>
19. <https://www.sinema.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/RFMABillText.pdf>
20. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-challenges-tennessee-law-bans-critical-medically-necessary-care>
21. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2023/02/13/tennessee-senate-passes-trans-youth-medical-ban-legal-fightooms/69900698007/>
22. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2023/4/11/23679564/religious-charter-school-oklahoma-school-choice-tax-dollars>
23. <https://reduxx.info/transgender-state-representative-moves-to-allow-sexual-attachment-to-children-to-be-classified-as-protected-sexual-orientation/>
24. <https://www.9marks.org/article/what-authority-has-god-given-to-governments/>
25. Wilson, *Empires of Dirt*, 50.
26. <https://www.9marks.org/article/what-authority-has-god-given-to-governments/>
27. <https://www.9marks.org/article/complementarianism-a-moment-of-reckoning-part-3/>

28. *The following three paragraphs have been adapted from my book Authority (Crossway, 2023).*
29. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/28/briefing/xi-jinping-china-authoritarian.html>.
30. *John Locke, Second Treatise of Government, ch. 6 "Of Paternal Power" (my edition: Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration, edited by Ian Shapiro, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 123).*
31. *Matt Martens, Reforming Criminal Justice: A Christian Proposal (Crossway, forthcoming).*
32. <https://twitter.com/PerfInjust/status/1600845284531003392?s=20&t=QUySNBWQEk126-ns3DgRpg>
33. <https://www.9marks.org/article/say-no-to-christian-nationalism/>
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# What Authority Has God Given to Governments?

by Jonathan Leeman

***T**he government's job description: To administer the justice requisite for protecting human life, secure the conditions necessary for fulfilling the dominion mandate, and provide a platform for God's people to declare God's perfect judgment and salvation.*

Some governments are better, and some are worse. So says the Bible. The Pharaoh of Joseph's day was better; the Pharaoh of Moses's day was worse.

Governments are God's servants, one passage tells us (Rom. 13:1–7). Yet they're also imposters, says another, because they rage and take their stands against God and his messiah (Ps. 2:1–3).

So, what makes a good government good? A good government provides a basic protective justice for all its citizens, including God's people, whether it recognizes them as God's people or not. (Think of Cyrus sending the Jews back from exile.) That means Christians should care about

good government both for their neighbor's sake and for the church's sake.

With the other offices we're discussing in part IV, the focus is on your individual authority—as with a husband, a parent, a manager, or an elder. Yet government and church are a little different, because we're thinking about exercising authority in a group where we may or may not have much influence and where our individual voice may or may not reflect the group voice. This is especially true of the government. The “government” might be one person—the king. Or it might entail “We the people” of the nation. Government is even more difficult because we must deal with the church-world relationship, and Christians disagree about the nature of that relationship. Consider three models. Someone could say that Christians . . .

1. should seek to enforce Christianity through the government;
2. should seek to enforce aspects of Christianity through the government, namely, a number of its moral standards;
3. should not seek to enforce Christianity through the government at all, but should express their faith entirely in the private sphere.

I assume that options (1) and (3), as stated here, don't sit quite right with any reader. Yet people do lean toward one or the other. The (1)-leaning people feel the weight of God's Lordship and judgment over all things, and they point to the Ten Commandments. The (3)-leaning recognizes that we cannot

force our faith on people, and they point to Jesus's instructions about rendering to Caesar what's Caesar's and God what's God's (Matt. 22:21). Still, most of us, including myself, don't feel like we can move all the way to position (1) or position (3), but put ourselves somewhere in the middle.

Through the centuries, Christians in this middle lane have tried different ways to explain why we can open our Bibles and seek to impose with the sword a verse like “You shall not murder” on unbelievers but not one like “Jesus is Lord.” That's when they start talking about things like Augustine's two cities, or some version of Martin Luther's two kingdoms, or Reformed views on the spirituality of the church, or Baptist views on religious freedom, or even John Locke's distinction between the inner and outer person in his *Letter concerning Toleration*. Whether or not you're familiar with any of these specific viewpoints, where would you place yourself on the spectrum between (1) and (3)?

My goal in this chapter is to answer the questions about authority that we've been considering in part IV, in a way that leads to position (2) as related to governmental authority. This means that, contrary to position (1), I believe we should affirm the separation of church and state, or at least a version of it. Yet contrary to position (3), I don't believe we should affirm the separation of religion and politics. That prospect, I'll argue, is impossible. Yet all these additional complexities make this the longest and most dense chapter in the book. Buyer beware!

## What Is the Civil Government's Authority?

In the first instance, governmental authority is a necessary entailment of the dominion mandate that God gave to Adam and Eve (“be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it”). It’s a condition of expanding our presence on the planet with other people, so that we might live together in an orderly, predictable, and cooperative fashion. Even in an unfallen world, someone needs to decide whether we drive on the right side of the road or the left.

Yet governmental authority after the fall must also deal with sinful agents and the scarcity of resources. That means governmental authority must recognize that God does indeed command all human beings to fill the earth and subdue it, but also that these humans are now murdering each other (Gen. 4:8), stealing one another’s provisions (Gen. 14:11), lying to their husbands and fathers (Gen. 27:13, 19), raping one another’s daughters, and slaughtering entire cities in retaliation (Gen. 34).

For this reason, God introduces the authority to use coercive force. Nothing in the original dominion mandate says that one human being has the right to arbitrarily use force over another human being. The natural law doesn’t say that either (I don’t believe). After all, every human shares equally in creation in our God-assigned authority. Therefore, God must specially authorize the use of coercive force, which brings us to what we might call the “Great Commission” text for governmental authority on this side of the fall: Genesis

9:5–6. Just like Matthew 28 does for churches, Genesis 9:5–6 doesn’t spell out everything a government will need to do, but it lays down a few basic constitutional principles.

Let’s start with this phrase: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” You may not have spent a lot of time meditating on that verse, but it’s worth pulling up a chair and staring at it for a moment. It packs quite a punch. First, it authorizes the use of coercive force in order to prosecute the taking of life. By implication it also authorizes a government to prevent the unjust taking of life. For instance, I’d say it gives a government moral permission to say, “Here’s the speed limit,” or “Commercial aircraft must meet these safety codes” (see Deut. 22:8), or even “Pay taxes so that we can build an army for our nation’s protection” (see Luke 3:13; Rom. 13:7).

Second, this verse establishes a principle of due process: parity. The punishment must fit the crime. It’s life for life, not life for stealing a horse, like the fifty-one recorded instances of people being hanged for horse stealing in early America, the last one in 1851.<sup>1</sup> The punishment should always fit the crime—“eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth,” as a later passage puts it (Ex. 21:23). People are sometimes scandalized by this principle (called *lex talionis*), but keep in mind that, in the ancient world, this principle typically served to limit the otherwise unconstrained demands for vengeance. Think again of Jacob’s sons massacring a city in retaliation for the rape of their sister Dinah (Gen. 34).

Not only that; under-punishing a crime risks devaluing the worth of the victim. It says the life that was murdered or the goods that were stolen weren't worth much, like offering you a stick of gum to compensate for your stolen diamond ring.

The affirmation of parity also implies that every governmental action requires a just measurement. "A just balance and scales are the Lord's; all the weights in the bag are his work. It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness" (Prov. 16:10–12). Practically, for instance, a government must not bribe or overtax its citizens for selfish gain (see Prov. 29:4 ESV mg.). Any tax requires a clear and just gauge that accords with government's basic life-protecting purposes.

Third, Genesis 9:6 affirms the value of every human life as made in God's image and therefore equally valuable. People of every color and creed, men and women, deserve to be treated as God-imagers and possessors of a basic political equality. Jim Crow laws that read "separate, but equal," pushing blacks to different drinking fountains, are unjust.

Fourth, the verse subjects every human to its requirements, including governments themselves. Look again at the first word of verse 6: "whoever" wrongly sheds blood. The verse becomes a boomerang whenever governments use their authority unjustly. It indicts the murderous dictator and the racist town sheriff alike. No government can claim to be "above" its reach. It keeps governments and citizens alike accountable.

Fifth, this verse possesses a theological basis—"for God made man in his own image"—but it doesn't authorize us to enforce that basis. The trigger for action is harm to humans—"blood"—not harm to God. After all, how do you measure or establish parity for an offense against God, to say nothing of the fact that we cannot harm him. As such, the verse doesn't authorize us to prosecute crimes against God, like blasphemy or idolatry, if there is no quantifiable harm done to a human person. It leaves open a space for religious freedom, and that space is anything outside of the government's jurisdiction. On the flip side, however, the verse doesn't allow someone to claim "freedom of religion!" if their religion causes actual harm, like a Christian Scientist who wants to deny medical care to a child whose life is medically threatened.

As I said, there's a lot of punch packed into this one little passage which applies to all humanity, every son and daughter of Noah, and not just to God's special people. As you can see with several of the citations above, I'm reading this passage with later biblical texts in mind. And I'll cite more throughout this chapter.

There is one more thing to notice about verses 5 and 6 of Genesis 9: they are set inside a paragraph bookended with the command to "Be fruitful and multiply" (vv. 1, 7). What does that tell us? The authority to use coercive force facilitates the larger goal of enabling people to fulfill the dominion mandate.

Governments exist, then, to help secure the basic conditions necessary for fulfilling the dominion mandate. For starters, that means governments

should protect the basic structures of marriage and the family, so that people can indeed “be fruitful and multiply.” Governments should not redefine marriage to include homosexuals, because (i) governments don’t have the authority to do so; (ii) they weaken real marriage by defining marriage around the feelings of the couple rather than their potential for fruitfulness; (iii) and the redefinition denies children the right to a mother or father. In a sense, they steal a mother or father away from a child. The children are victims.

One might envision many other factors that hinder the work of fruitfulness, dominion, and the basic God-imagining political equality required for fruitfulness and dominion. The oppression of ethnic minorities hinders it. So do entrenched cycles of poverty. That doesn’t mean the government must ensure every citizen possesses the same economic starting point. But I can imagine a Christian arguing that a basic economic safety net—enough to wake up with a roof over your head, eat, and get to work in the morning—serves the purposes of dominion. As King Lemuel’s mother says to him, “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Prov. 31:8–9; also, 29:14).

A Christian might also argue that facilitating the dominion mandate includes a good monetary policy. Such a policy provides both a stable currency and standardized interest rates. A stable currency protects everyone’s wealth and livelihood, and standardized interest rates prevent usury and the

exploitation of the poor (see Ex. 22:25; Prov. 22:7; 28:8; Matt. 25:27). Jesus himself affirmed that a coin printed with Caesar’s image legitimately fell within Caesar’s jurisdiction: “Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar” (see Matt. 22:21).

Yet whether or not monetary policy or a welfare policy or any other policies we might think of are reasonable deductions to draw out of the relationship between Genesis 9:6 and the bookended verses 1 and 7 (“Be fruitful and multiply”), the Scriptural baseline is that God grants human beings the authority to form governments that protect our lives and promote the conditions necessary for fulfilling the dominion mandate. That’s why Paul tells us to pray “for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim. 2:2–3).

### **What Kind of Authority Is Governmental Authority?**

Clearly, governmental authority is a coercive authority, and it’s an authority of command, as defined in chapter 11. But it is also a divinely ordained means of justice. All people are made in God’s image and therefore deserve righteous treatment. Government serves the ends of justice by protecting these God-imagers.

“By justice a king builds up the land,” says Proverbs (29:4). King David’s throne, therefore, existed for the sake of upholding justice: “So David reigned over all Israel. And David administered justice and equity

[righteousness] to all his people” (2 Sam. 8:15).

What is justice in the Bible? People often define justice as giving people their due. That’s not a bad definition. It gets us part of the way there. Yet I think we do slightly better by putting God’s law front and central in our definition as well as by observing that the Hebrew word for “justice” is the noun form of the verb “to judge.” Biblical justice, I’d say, is making judgments in accordance with God’s standards of righteousness.

Think of Solomon standing in front of two prostitutes, both of whom claimed a baby was hers. Solomon’s task in that moment was to render a righteous judgment—and so do justice. Gratefully, he did: “And all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice” (1 Kings 3:28). Justice depends on a judgment, but that judgment needs a standard, a ruler or scale by which to measure the judgment. The right standard is the law of God’s righteousness. Not surprisingly, the Bible says of God’s own government, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne” (Ps. 89:14).

To translate this into an American setting, we can say that all three branches of government should do justice—render righteous judgments—each in its own way. The legislator should pass just laws. The executive branch should enforce just laws in a just way. And judges should uphold just laws and overturn unjust ones. In each case, their work of justice should

not be defined by some other god’s version of righteousness, but by God’s definition of righteousness.

Many Westerners assume otherwise. Our nations are pluralistic, we reason. People believe in many different gods, from the big-G Gods of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or Mormonism, to the little-g neo-pagan gods of sex, body worship, consumption, and identity politics. Therefore, Christians who lean toward position (3) at the beginning of this chapter say we need to create a public square and establish rules of justice that are neutral between people’s competing gods. And we can do that by defining justice as “protecting people’s rights.”

That solution to societal pluralism is not entirely wrong. But it’s like picking the fruit without attending to the root. Justice does include protecting people’s rights. The trouble is, it’s a society’s reigning gods that will define which rights are right. Shall we affirm the right to an abortion, the right to same-sex marriage, the right to define our own gender as children apart from parental intervention?

It’s true that justice entails protecting people’s rights. I’d agree with those who argue that the fact that we are created in God’s image is the foundation for human rights.<sup>2</sup> Returning to our meditation on Genesis 9:5–6, we might say that it grants us the right to life, the right to be treated by our government with equal dignity, the right to worship God free from coercion, the right to insist on a fair trial and due process, even the right to all the liberties requisite for fulfilling the dominion mandate. Still, we possess these rights not because

they are inherent in us apart from God, but because God says they are right. Rights are right only when and where God says they're right. Right is the root of justice, rights are the fruit. Pay attention to the "s." And the government's job begins with what's right (see Rom. 13:3–4; 1 Pet. 2:14).

Group (3) and others will quickly reply, "But whose definition of 'right' shall we legislate? Which God or god's?" They ask the question as if anyone has ever abandoned his god when stepping into the public square. In fact, no one ever does or can. We all argue on behalf of our God or gods in the public square and try to win a majority of the votes. Everyone. It's impossible to do otherwise. In the ballot box or on the Senate floor, you fight for what you most value and worship. Inevitably. The real question is, who, whether by hook or by crook, wins any given debate, election, or war?

### **Why Government Authority?**

Why does God give authority to the government? We've already considered the first two reasons the Bible provides: to protect life and to secure the conditions of the dominion mandate and human flourishing. A government does these two things by administering justice. Call all this the proximate or immediate purposes of government. These purposes are concerned with temporal things.

Yet the government's temporal concerns ultimately serve an eternal purpose: setting the stage for God's work of redemption. You might think of guardrails on a mountain road. Their

proximate or immediate purpose is to keep cars on the road. Their ultimate purpose is to help cars get from City A to City B.

This is the real story behind the story of governments in the Bible. The spiritual forces of hell fight to use governments to devour God's people—from Moses's Pharaoh, to the Assyrian Sennacherib, to the Roman Pilate, to the raging nations of Psalm 2, to the beasts in Revelation 13, depending on how you read Revelation. Meanwhile, God raises up particular leaders to protect and shelter his people—from Joseph's Pharaoh, to the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar after his humbling, to the Persian Cyrus, to the Roman Festus. God's ultimate purpose for government is not merely to keep people alive but to keep them alive so that they might know God. Genesis 9 comes before Genesis 12 and the call of Abraham for a reason. Government provides a platform on which God's redemptive drama can play out. Common grace sets the stage for special grace, like teaching people to read so that they can read the Bible.

Two New Testament texts make this connection crystal clear. First, look at the quote from Acts 17 at the beginning of this chapter. It says that God determines the borders of nations and the dates of their duration *so that* people might seek him (Acts 17:26–27). Our nations and governments help to keep us alive. Why? "So that," Paul says, people can find their way to God. Governments don't bring us to God, but they free us up to seek him.

Now look at 1 Timothy 2. Paul urges us to pray for kings and all in high positions so that we may lead "peaceful

and quiet lives, godly and dignified in every way” (v. 2). Fair enough. We want governments that clear the ground for us to live such lives, lives where we can live out the full range of godliness that God intends. Yet is that all there is to say? No. Paul then tells us why we should pray for governments to do this: “This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). The two steps in these verses are interesting. Step one: don’t pray that governments would work to make disciples but that they would work for peace and safety. Step two: realize that this is important because God wants people to be saved, which apparently is work that belongs to the institution that the rest of 1 Timothy is about: the church. The government’s job is to clear the path, smooth the road, set the stage, build a platform. A clear path and smooth road pleases God and should please us—for salvation’s sake.

In short, we don’t want a government that thinks it can offer redemption, but one that views its works as setting the stage for redemption. It builds the streets so that you can drive to church; protects the womb so that you can live and hear the gospel; protects the currency so that you can make an honest living and give to missions; insists on fair-lending and housing practices so that you can own a home and offer hospitality to non-Christians; protects marriage and the family by not redefining marriage and by kicking strip clubs out of the city so that husbands and wives can better model Christ’s love for the church.

Whom should you vote for in the next election? Vote for the party or candidate that seeks to do all that.

## **What Are the Limits of the Government’s Authority?**

If a government’s job is not to make disciples but to set the stage for disciple making, we need to think about its limits, as well as whether models (1), (2), or (3) from the beginning of this chapter are best. What are the limits of a civil government’s authority?

The first and most crucial limit is, no government should regard itself as God. When the individual officers comprising the government don’t acknowledge God, they will either worship another God or regard themselves as God. Members of group (3), insofar as they are tempted to believe governments can remain neutral between the gods, may need to be reminded of this point. Every prince and member of parliament, voter and judge, should acknowledge God and recognize that he or she is under God:

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.  
Serve the Lord with fear,  
and rejoice with trembling.  
Kiss the Son,  
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.  
(Ps. 2:10–12; see also Ps. 82:7)

I’m not saying a person has the right to use the power of government to require another human being to acknowledge God. A moral “is” does not make for a sword-wielding “ought.”<sup>3</sup> I’m simply saying that, before God

himself, everyone working in government should acknowledge and submit to God—"lest *he* be angry." Remember the principle from chapter 6: good authority is not unaccountable, but submits to a higher authority. That applies to governments, too.

A government of people who refuse to acknowledge the true God of the Bible is a government that has supplanted him. Such governments may, by God's common grace, do justice for a season. But eventually they will turn beastly. As examples, think of Moses's Pharaoh: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice" (Ex. 5:2). Or the Assyrian Sennacherib's lieutenant: "Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord by saying, 'The Lord will surely deliver us'" (Isa. 36:15). So with the communist and fascist regimes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Or the Mongol empire of the fourteenth-century Muslim Tamerlane. Or the many indigenous civilizations, like the Aztecs, who sacrificed countless people to their gods.<sup>4</sup> Or so many more.

That said, members of governments might acknowledge God with their lips (see Isa. 29:13), explicitly calling themselves "Christian," yet still perpetrate grave injustices by failing to acknowledge the image of God in their subjects. Throughout the Middle Ages the Christian monarchs of Europe were violently and grotesquely anti-Semitic. Those same governments, as well as the governments of the New World, supported racial slavery, even when their founding documents acknowledged God. The Dutch Reformed government of South Africa, also, devised the doctrine and practice of apartheid.

So-called "Christian" governments can turn beastly, too.

In short, creatures who deny the Creator revealed in the Bible, or his image in every individual, will eventually use governments to kill and exploit one another. It's easy math: creature – creator + government = terrible injustices. I believe this is why God determines not merely the boundaries of nations, but their "allotted periods" or duration (Acts 17:26). By his common grace he employs a nation and its government for a season to do their work, yet eventually their denial of him leads to injustices that require their removal. This is the biblical story of nation after nation outside of Israel (e.g., Gen. 15:16; Isa. 10:5ff.; Hab. 2:2–20).

In speaking of acknowledgment, I'm not arguing that we need to put Jesus's name into our constitutions, just like I wouldn't argue that we need to put his name into home mortgage or auto loan contracts. I'm not going to insist that the non-Christian officers at a bank, in giving me a loan, put words into the contract that they personally disavow. My simple point for now is, the heart of every voter and president on earth, like the heart of every lender and borrower signing loan papers, should acknowledge and submit to God. "By me kings reign," says Lady Wisdom, "and rulers decree what is just" (Prov. 8:15). And where does wisdom begin but with the fear of the Lord.

The government's second limit concerns the threat of its infringing unjustly into the parental sphere. This is a complicated topic, because God surely intends for governments to protect abused or abandoned children. We

considered this in chapter 5. Foster and child protective services I regard as a hypothetically good thing. Not only that, but the government also seems to have a legitimate interest in ensuring that its citizens are literate in math, reading, science, and more. Nations with high literacy rates flourish more than those with low literacy.

Yet if education policy *inferentially* falls within the government's domain, biblically speaking, it *explicitly* falls within the parents' domain, as we considered in the last chapter (see Proverbs). A good government, therefore, will respect the authority of good parents to educate their children. It may educate children or offer standards for education where necessary. And it will protect children against negligent or incompetent parents. Balancing these different objectives, no doubt, requires the wisdom of Solomon.

Meanwhile, a bad government forsakes wisdom and will eventually usurp the authority of good and bad parents alike.

It's worth observing, therefore, that so many of the church versus state controversies of the last hundred years have occurred in a domain that fundamentally should belong to parents—education. Think, for instance, of the controversies surrounding prayer in public schools, whether tax dollars can assist parochial schools, or what's taught about evolution or sexuality in the classroom. Christians treat these as church/state or religious freedom issues, when really the trouble began upstream when parents let themselves become dependent on the state, ceding sovereignty to it, to educate their

children. To be sure, we would need to radically reimagine the last two centuries of economic, industrial, and civic development in society as a whole in order to envision a nation where parents take responsibility for educating their kids, perhaps with government facilitating, not owning, that education. My point is not to say there are easy solutions here. It's merely to describe the landscape: the Bible gives primary responsibility to educate the child to parents, and when we hand that off to the state, we can expect further jurisdictional problems to occur, like fights over religion.

The government's third limit, which we will think about at considerably greater length, concerns the church and religion. These comments are offered for anyone leaning toward group (1) (government should enforce Christianity), but hopefully they will help all of us better grasp what the separation of church and state means and doesn't mean. Does the New Testament leave room for the government to criminalize false religions? Or to incentivize and sanction true religion? Does it leave room for officially established churches, or for calling a nation "Christian"?<sup>5</sup> No doubt, doing either curtails religious liberty.

The key word, once again, is jurisdiction, and the key jurisdictional division worth paying attention to is temporal versus eternal, as well as protection versus perfection.

Ever since the days of Noah, we have seen God has assigned the governments of the nations the task of working for justice in *temporal matters*. Their judgments, ideally, possess

an *eternal purpose*—they enable and don’t hinder the work of the church. And those judgments possess an *eternal theological basis*—that humans are created in God’s image. Still, their judgments offer merely a *temporal reach*—for this life only. A government can protect lives and work to ensure that the basic conditions are in place for people to fulfill the dominion mandate. But a government’s work does not go beyond death. Its sword cannot reach into eternity (Matt. 10:28; Rom. 8:35). Its impact is temporary, which is one reason Christians never need to fear unjust governments.

The government’s jurisdiction, therefore, must be limited to its actual reach.

That means, we should ask our governments to work for a *protectionist version of justice*. We should ask our churches, on the other hand, to declare and bind its membership by a *perfectionist version of justice*. If the state possesses the power of the sword, the church possesses the power of the keys to declare who God is, what he’s done in the gospel, and everything he requires of his people. The keys of the kingdom, which we’ll think about more in chapter 16, are the authority for a church to say who their members are and aren’t, through the ordinances.

The criteria for a perfectionist version of justice is perfection: “You therefore

must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). The criteria for a protectionist version of justice concerns how you conduct yourself with other human beings—your neighbors: Do you give other people their due? Do you treat them fairly? Or do you harm them, exploit them, steal from them, and so forth? Do you love them as yourself? Furthermore, do you show respect and honor to the government? Do you pay your taxes so that they can do their God-assigned work?

It’s these types of temporal concerns that occupy both Paul and Peter in their most extensive treatments of governments. If you glance at the quotes from Romans 13:3–4 and 1 Peter 2:14 at the beginning of this chapter, you’ll see that each affirmed that God has instituted governments to reward the good and punish the bad. Does this mean that Paul and Peter intend for governments to punish every conceivable bad and to reward every conceivable good? Presumably not, unless we assume they intended for government to play God, who alone can judge all goods and all bads. Paul and Peter have a subset of goods and bads in mind.

What is that subset? Both apostles refer to the “approval” or “praise” of their pagan rulers. Pagan rulers wouldn’t praise those who worship and obey Jesus. They would praise those who fulfill the temporally

	Type of authority	Jurisdiction	Type of justice
Governments	Coercive	Temporal	Protectionist
Churches	Declarative	Eternal (starting now)	Perfectionist

Table 14.1: Authority: Governments versus Churches

concerned matters that Paul mentions in his summary verse 7—paying “taxes” and “revenue”<sup>6</sup> and affording “respect” and “honor” to Roman officials (Rom. 13:7; also 1 Pet. 2:17). Furthermore, Paul’s word for the “good conduct” that receives the king’s approval is used elsewhere for practical acts of mercy for those in need (e.g., Acts 9:36; 1 Tim. 2:10; 5:10). In short, the goods and bads that Paul and Peter have in mind are the temporally concerned matters that will draw the attention of every government, whether for godly purposes or for self-interested ones, simply by virtue of the temporal tool it has—the sword.

Reacting to the broader culture’s push against Christian convictions on marriage, sex, and gender, a growing number of Christians in recent years have begun asking whether God does in fact authorize governments to concern themselves not just with temporal matters but with eternal ones. Should we try to merge church and state, whether partially or completely? If the leaders are Christian, can the government promote or even enforce Christianity? Ever since the Roman emperor Constantine became a Christian in the early 300s, many Christians have believed so. Nations and empires even began to call themselves “Christian.” There are lighter and heavier versions of an established church or state enforcement. Or think of a dimmer switch. You can turn it on just barely, with things like Sabbath laws or using religious language in courtroom oaths. You can turn the switch up with doctrinal tests for office or tax support for clergy of a particular denomination. You can turn

it up all the way by criminalizing false worship or blasphemy, even executing blasphemers, as Calvin famously supported for the Trinity-denying Michael Servetus.

To make this case, Christians typically appeal to the Old Testament kings of Israel, the Ten Commandments, or some other argument from the Mosaic covenant to argue for the fusion of church and state. But is this a legitimate appeal? I can’t address every click on the dimmer switch here. But if we’re talking about turning the switch all the way up, the short answer is no. The Mosaic covenant was given to Old Testament Israel. It does not license the governments of the nations to enforce Christian convictions about eternity, like the first two commandments in the Ten Commandments.

It’s true that every individual in government, standing before God, should acknowledge him. But just because a government is accountable to God for every action it takes doesn’t mean the government has the authority to force you to believe in God. As I said, the government’s jurisdiction should be limited to its actual reach, and a moral “is” does not make for a sword-wielding “ought.”

Yet let’s put Old Testament Israel in context. God had unique and priestly purposes for Israel. He called them to be a “royal priesthood” (Ex. 19:6). What does a priesthood do? They mediate God’s law and God’s presence. Israel’s job as a nation was to mediate God’s law and presence to the nations by obeying his law and worshiping him (see Deut. 4:6–8). For that reason, God placed his name on Israel:

“You are my people, and I am your God” (see Ex. 6:7). Tragically, Israel failed to do its job, and so God cast them out of the land.

Now, think: who has the priestly job in the New Testament? That is, who is to mediate God’s law and presence and on whom does he place his name? The first word out of your mouth had better be Jesus! Okay, but who else? It’s everyone who is united to Jesus by the new covenant of his blood. The church is now God’s “royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9). Sure enough, he places his name on the church. We’re baptized into his name, and we gather in his name (Matt. 18:20; 28:19). Do a word search on “name” in the book of Acts, and you’ll see the extraordinary care the apostles take on who bears Christ’s “name.”

In other words, this priestly job of bearing Christ’s name and mediating his presence to the world doesn’t go to a nation or empire. No, it passes to everyone united to Christ, the church, which is comprised of a people from every nation. To call a nation a Christian nation today or to seek to enforce the first two commandments is to go backwards to the old covenant. It’s to declare a nation priestly. Yet God doesn’t call nations and their governments to patrol the borders of who believes in him and who doesn’t, like Israel did. He calls the church to patrol those borders through its membership. We are the “holy nation” now (1 Peter 2:9). That’s why *pre-conversion* Paul sought to leverage the power of the sword and put people to death for blasphemy (Acts 26:10–11), while *post-conversion* Paul sought to leverage the power of the keys not to

execute but to excommunicate blasphemers—so that they could repent and be saved (1 Tim. 1:20).

The government’s job between the Old Testament and New does not change. From the Noahic covenant in Genesis 9 to today, God has called the governments of the nations to implement a protectionist form of justice. The government’s job between the Mosaic covenant and the new, however, did change. Those priestly responsibilities which uniquely belonged to Israel’s civil order have passed on to the church.

Besides all this, think about the Noahic covenant one more time. God promised *not* to destroy humanity for an indefinite season, in spite of our false worship. To criminalize false worship and idolatry would seem to defy God’s own promise to withhold his judgment.

So how do we put all this together, and how do we decide between options (1), (2), and (3) at the beginning of this chapter? Consider Jesus’s words, “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and unto God what is God’s” (see Matt. 22:21). I can imagine three different ways of picturing this verse, two wrong and one right. Some might say that Jesus intended to separate Caesar’s things and God’s things entirely, like this:

### God versus Caesar: Option (1)

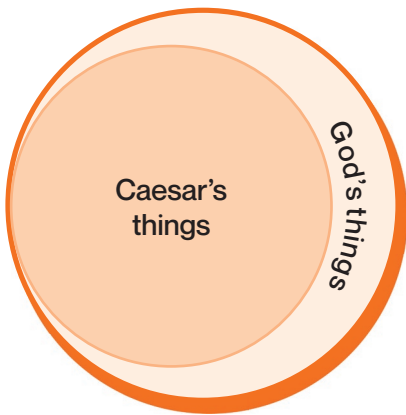


Group (3) above can tend to err in this direction, and I *would* call it a biblical

error. After all, everything that belongs to Caesar also belongs to God. Caesar is made in God's image. He is accountable to God. God's coming judgment applies to Caesar and to every human government. When you, I, or Caesar step into the public square, we will represent some god and some god's version of justice, as I said above. It's only a question of whose. Insofar as Christians have a voice in government, whether as voters, officeholders, or anything else, they should seek to represent the true God alone. They should seek to influence others and pass laws in keeping with a biblical understanding of righteousness and justice.

But none of this means that the Bible calls Christians to criminalize all sin, enforce all worship, renounce religious liberty, and build a theocracy, which would be another wrong way of interpreting Jesus's words about God and Caesar. Suppose someone argued that Caesar should, if he can, promote *all* or *nearly all* of God's things, like this:

**God versus Caesar: Option (2)**



Group (1) tends in this direction. Yet that would seem to be a strange

interpretation of what Jesus said. It's true that everything that belongs to Caesar belongs to God, but hardly everything that belongs to God also belongs to Caesar.

The key word, once again, is jurisdiction. Caesar, I've argued, has a temporal jurisdiction for implementing a protectionist justice. That's an important circle. But when you compare that to God's justice, which is eternal and perfectionistic, it's hardly most of the circle. Churches should speak for the whole circle. And that's a lot of circle that the government doesn't need to enforce, including eternal decisions about who God is. In fact, everything outside the government's jurisdiction we can also call the domain of religious liberty.

The jurisdictional picture that the Bible has assigned to every nation since the Noahic covenant, except for ancient Israel, looks more like this:

**God versus Caesar: Option (3)**



Notice that everything Caesar does is contained inside God's circle. Which means you could, if you wanted, call everything that Caesar does "religious," because it's under God,

whether he acknowledges God or not. I'd even say we cannot separate the political and the religious. I would say, however, the Bible insists that we separate church and state in this sense: One has the sword; one has the keys of the kingdom. Also, one has a temporal jurisdiction and is charged with enforcing protectionist justice; the other has eternal jurisdiction and is charged with enforcing perfectionist justice. In other words, the separation of religion and politics is not the same thing as the separation of church and state. The first is impossible because your religion always determines your politics, while the second is a jurisdictional assignment. Few people today seem to understand this distinction.

Perhaps an analogy would help for filling out the illustration for position (2) above. You might say that the Bible approaches governments like parents do a babysitter. "You're not responsible to teach our kids to love and obey us," they instruct the sitter. "You just need to keep them fed and safe, and prevent them from fighting." The babysitter is entirely "under" the parents, but the sitter's jurisdiction is limited. The babysitter knows the parents' return is imminent and will seek to fulfill the parent's will. Still, the babysitter has been given a modest job: "Your job isn't to teach the kids to love us or worship God. Just help them play well together and go to bed on time." Likewise, a good government will fear and acknowledge God. It knows a day is coming when "the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free" will experience God's judgment for how they

did their jobs (Rev. 6:15). Still, God has given the government a comparatively modest job.

One additional reason to keep that job modest is that, unlike most babysitters, most governments oppose God (Ps. 2:1–3). Do you really think it would be wise to give God-opposers and haters the authority of the sword over worship?

In short, the separation of church and state does not prevent us from enforcing certain Christian moral convictions in the public square; but it does mean we seek to enforce only those convictions that God authorizes governments to enforce.

So, should we use the sword to insist that murder is wrong? Yes.

That marriage is between a man and a woman? Yes.

That Jesus is Lord? Every member of government should acknowledge as much, and individuals in government that don't will eventually veer toward injustice in their jobs, but no, we cannot force them to do so.

Finally, everything outside the government's jurisdiction belongs to the domain of what people have long called religious liberty.

## **How Do Citizens Get to Work?**

In short, good governments don't try to usher in Christ's kingdom by enforcing the worship of God. Instead, they should aspire to clear the ground and make the road easy for pilgrims on their way. Their work is prerequisite and preparatory work. We shouldn't ask governments to provide salvation. They can't, and the vast majority

of them will never want to anyway. Rather, we ask them, much more modestly and in ways that line up with their self-interest, to establish the necessary conditions for salvation. That way, the church can get on with its work of making disciples.

The good news is, Jesus will build his church. No, the worst governments cannot stop the Holy Spirit. Yes, God often moves underground, undisclosed to governments. But bad governments, from a human standpoint, really do make the church's work difficult. Christians should work for good governments.

How?

### *(1) Pray.*

Paul urges us to pray for kings and all in high positions so that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives. "This is good" and "pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:3–4). We pray for our government so that the saints might live peaceful lives and people will be saved.

### *(2) Ask Scripture what God has authorized government to do.*

God authorizes the government to do some things (like prosecute murder) but not other things (like enforce conversions). So before you ask, "How should I vote?" or "What should I protest?" or "What should we lobby for?" first consider what God tells governments to do. That's been the point of this entire chapter. No, Scripture doesn't speak to the specifics of law. It speaks more like a constitution, establishing basic powers and lanes. I've

argued in this chapter that God has given government a narrow, protectionist lane. You might disagree on how wide that lane is. Very well. Let's have the conversation with charity and humility. Yet we have a clear criteria by which to discuss it: what does God authorize?

### *(3) Engage.*

For the sake of loving our neighbor and doing justice, we should not disengage from political cares. We should engage by employing whatever stewardship God has given us, whether we're a voter or the cupholder to the king. We render to Caesar what is Caesar's. In a democratic context we do this by voting, lobbying, lawyering, or running for office. Even in an empire, Paul, for the sake of the gospel, pulled the political levers he had. He invoked his citizenship and appealed to Caesar. Use such opportunities while you have them. Wherever we can build on common ground with non-Christians, we should.

### *(4) Acknowledge God in the public square.*

As a Christian, for instance, we should warn politicians who do injustice. Christians working in government, too, should be willing, when it serves good purposes, to point to God. "Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:10–11). Does this mean a president can take the oath of office with his hand on the Bible? Should he invoke God in his speeches? Can a pastor open a school board meeting in prayer? Answers to questions like these will have to be judged on a

case-by-case basis. As a general principle, I'm more comfortable with an officeholder speaking for him or herself rather than presuming to speak for the nation, as the words of constitution do. We don't put God's name into mortgages or business contracts, even though they govern the relationship. Still, I see no biblical reason for why a Christian office holder should not use his or her pulpit to call a people to repentance (see Jonah 3:6–9).

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1. Matthew T. Martens, *Reforming Criminal Justice: A Christian Proposal* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 325.

2. See, e.g., Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), ch. 16.

3. In other words, it's easy to affirm, "The government should acknowledge God," if the government consists of one person—the king. This is merely a moral claim about what the king should do. Yet when we make that same claim when talking about a form of government that involves a people, as with a democratic republic, things get complicated. If I'm a U.S. senator representing my home state of Maryland, it's true that I should acknowledge God and do so in my job. It's also true that the other 99 senators and everyone who voted me in should acknowledge God. But if they don't, would God have me draft official documents acknowledging him as

if they spoke for the other 99 and all my voters, *even though they disavowed Christianity?* To use a real example, should the British government require a Hindu prime minister to take his oath of office by placing his hand on a Bible he disavows? Wouldn't doing so turn his oath into a lie? My goal here is only to make the moral claim regarding individual officers of government: each one should acknowledge God. I'm not saying we should require others to say what they don't believe.

4. See "Feeding the Gods: Hundreds of Skulls Reveal Massive Scale of Human Sacrifice in Aztec Capital" (June 21, 2018), accessed December 3, 2022, <https://www.science.org/content/article/feeding-gods-hundreds-skulls-reveal-massive-scale-human-sacrifice-aztec-capital>.

5. An "established" church is one that enjoys the patronage of the state. Its doctrine and practices receive the endorsement of the state. Its clergy and members receive certain advantages from the state, if in no other way than financially. And, any changes to the doctrine and practice of the religion require the consent of the state.

6. "An indirect tax levied on goods and services, such as sales of land, houses, oil, and grass" (Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans Pillar New Testament Commentary*, D. A. Carson, gen. ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012], 499). Kruse quotes from Thomas M. Coleman, "Binding Obligations in Romans 13:7: A Semantic Field and Social Context," *Tyndale Bulletin* 48 (1997): 309–15.



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# Say No to Christian Nationalism

by Jonathan Leeman

**W**hen I first envisioned this article, it had the title, “No to Christian Nationalism; Yes to God-Fearing Governments.” Yet its growing length crushed my dreams, so I decided to play Negative Nelly and just say no to Christian nationalism.

Why should we say no? Because Christian Nationalism misrepresents Jesus. Here are six reasons why.

## **1. People Mean at Least Two Things by Christian Nationalism—Christian Influence and Christian Identity.**

Some people use the phrase to mean that Christianity should *influence* the nation and its laws. Others mean that the nation and its government should actually *identify* as Christian.

Critics of Christianity will denounce any Christian influence as Christian nationalism. If influence is the standard, then I’m a Christian

nationalist. The government should implement justice as he defines it, not justice as some other god defines it.

When I say “no” to Christian nationalism, I’m referring to Christian nationalism as a matter of *identity*, as if to say “We the people” are a Christian nation. This is like calling Saudi Arabia a “Muslim nation,” Israel a “Jewish state,” or even China a “Communist nation.”

Now, the distinction between an established and a non-established religion is not an on/off switch. It’s a dimmer switch, which is why debates exist over whether Turkey is a Muslim nation, or India is Hindu, or America is or was Christian. These latter three have “secular” constitutions, but all three offer a few practices or laws that privilege one faith over others, if nothing more than state recognition of a religious calendar and holidays. Still, most of us recognize that, even when you factor in the complexities of the dimmer switch, there’s a basic difference between establishment and non-establishment.

When the dimmer switch for establishing a religion is all the way up, a state effectively says, “This is our god, and we are his people—plus, sure, the Gentile rabble with us.”

## 2. **God Very Much Cares about Where He Places His Name.**

In the Old Testament, God identifies himself with the children of Abraham and the nation of Israel. “You are my people. I am your God” (Ex. 6).

He places his name on them, tying his reputation to them. When the

people went into Canaan, they were to remove the name of the false gods. “You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their *name* out of that place” (Deut. 12:3). And they were to put the Lord’s name there: “But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his *name* and make his habitation there” (v. 5). And then as the people live in the land obeying God’s law: “And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the *name* of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you” (Deut. 28:10).

And then, do you remember what went wrong with Israel? They worshiped other gods. Why was that bad? Because it defiled God’s name! So he excommunicated them. Sent them into exile:

Ezekiel 36: “Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of *my holy name*, which you have profaned [where?] among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of *my great name*, which has been profaned [where?] among the nations. . . . And the nations will know that I am the LORD.

How will God do this? He promises a new covenant:

. . . I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. . . . And I will give you a new heart. . . . And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules . . . and you shall be my people, and I will be your God (vv. 24–28).

With the new covenant, God no longer ties his name to a geopolitical people, but to this Son, and then to everyone united to his Son, the church. Matthew begins, interestingly enough, with a genealogy, as was prominent in the Old Testament. Names matter.

Now fast forward to the book of Acts. It's worth doing a word search on "name" in the book of Acts. Have you noticed how Luke emphasizes the theme of Jesus's name?

- 2:21: everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'
- 2:37–38: The people ask what must we do to be saved, "And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ. . .'"
- 3:16: After healing a lame man, Peter says, "And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know. . ."
- 4:7: The high priest challenges Peter and John, "By what power or by what name did you do this?"
- 4:12: Peter and John explain, "for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."
- 4:17–18: Yet the council decides: "But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name. So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus."
- 5:28: High priest after another arrest: "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name."
- Of course the apostles didn't listen. . .
- 5:41: "Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name."
- 8:12: After the persecution, the Christians scatter and preach and baptize into the name: "when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."
- 22:16: After Ananias gives sight back to Paul, he said to him, "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name."
- 9:28: "[Paul] went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord."
- 10:48: Peter "commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."
- 15:13–18: Of course, all this was a part of God's plan from the beginning. James preaches to the council in Jerusalem: "And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, ". . . I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen . . . and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old."
- 16:18: And this name has authority over all things, even demons. Paul says to a demon-possessed slave girl: "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour."

The word “name” shows up 36 times in Acts. Why this emphasis? Ever since the Fall, God has always drawn a clear line between his people and not his people, because he unites his name to his people. We’re talking about identity politics, here, aren’t we, except it’s an identity politics that begins with the name of Jesus and being identified with that name: Christ-ian?

This is what so many Christians seem to miss in this whole Christian nationalism conversation. The conversation is not just about moral influence, as in should a Christian morality influence our laws. To this, again yes, of course. The harder question is, do we really want to identify a nation filled with non-Christians as “Christian”? Is this what we see happening in the book of Acts? There’s the baptizing of members of nations: Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles from everywhere. But do you ever see the baptizing of a nation? Jesus identifying himself with a nation? As if Israel was being replaced by another geo-political nation? As if we’re going back to the Old Testament? What?! Isn’t the very point that the evangel is to go to the peoples of all nations so that they might form what Peter in his letter calls “a holy nation”?

The apostles’ concern with Christ’s name was about identity. And their concern with identity is also a concern about witness. Who here represents Jesus? Do Ananias and Saphira? Does Simon the Magician? Does Saul the persecutor of Christians? Who speaks for Jesus?

And the concern about witness is also a concern about the integrity and credibility of our witness? We’re

proclaiming the name, but are our lives giving credibility to our message? Are our lives, through our obedience, compelling to outsiders?

Think about all this in light of the defense some friends have been giving of Christian nominalism. One friend calls it “kindling for spiritual awakening” and “a precondition for regeneration and revival.” Nominalism, says this same author, is “a preparatory good—or at least as *less bad* than full-blown paganism. Yes, it can inoculate some against the Christian faith and thereby harden their hearts to the living God. But it can also prepare people to receive Jesus by instructing them in the demands of God and giving them a sense of sin.” This author seems to have a seeker-sensitive, consumeristic view of Christian identity. Do you remember the phrase that was popular a few years ago in certain church circles: belonging before believing? Tell people they belong to the community of your church so they would believe.

Set this positive and preparatory view of nominalism against Ezekiel 36: God literally judges and exiles a nation, letting them be conquered by Babylon, because they bore his name nominally—falsely—and he would no longer tolerate that. Not only that, God sent his Son to die for a people, and his Spirit to indwell a people, so that they would be careful to obey his rules and *no longer be nominal*. Why would he go to all this trouble, only to have us revert to trying to make the United States in the image of OT Israel?

God is profoundly interested in who bears his name, and with integrity represents his name, and is a compelling

witness for his name, and protects and glorifies his name. Think of the second commandment: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” Could it be that Christian nationalism is a breaking of the second commandment? Isn’t knowingly placing Christ’s name on non-Christian people taking his name in vain?

When we turn to the book of Acts, the apostles display scrupulous attention in Christ’s name is all about identity, politics or Lordship, witness, and the credibility and compelling nature of our witness. Big things are at stake when we start thinking about who bears the name of Christ.

### **3. The Work of Placing God’s Name on a People Is a Priestly Task.**

To declare, “This is who God is” and “These are the doctrines we believe” and to declare “These are God’s people” is to undertake a priestly activity. In ancient Israel, the priests were responsible to teach God’s law. And they were responsible to declare who was clean or unclean, holy or unholy, who belonged on the inside of the camp bearing God’s name and who belonged on the outside.

God called Israel as a whole a royal priesthood because God placed his name on them: “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God” (Ex. 6:7; 19:5).

Since Israel was a nation, maintaining this priestly identity meant patrolling national membership borders, and making sure everyone within the nation worshiped Yahweh. That’s why

the Lord commended Phineas the priest as “jealous for the Lord” when he slaughtered the idolaters and gave him a “covenant of a perpetual priesthood” (see Num. 25:11, 13).

To be sure, any individual can say who he thinks God is. Yet when a group formally undertakes to identify and affirm one another according to a set of doctrines and fidelity to those doctrines, they have undertaken priestly work. That is, they are declaring themselves the official representatives or meditators of those doctrines and the guardians of membership among those people. That’s true whether we’re talking about priests of Yahweh, Baal, Marduk, or Jesus. That is to say, the priestly function is an identifying function. It places the name of God or a god on a group and claims that he identifies with them and that they speak for him.

By that token, to call on the governments of nations today to enforce Christian doctrine about who God is, or to formally identify a nation itself as Christian, is to claim that God intends for government to exercise a priestly function.

### **4. While that Priestly Formerly Belonged to the Nation, It Now Belongs to the Church.**

Jesus gave churches the authority to hand out the “I’m with Jesus” name tags and the “This is right doctrine” signs.

- Matthew 18:18: “Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever

you [plural “you”—y’all] loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” Jesus tells the gathered congregation in Matthew 18 just after excommunicating someone.

- How do I know he’s talking about the gathered church here? Well, he addresses the gathered church in the previous verse: “If he doesn’t listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he doesn’t listen to the church. . .”
- And the basis for this authoritative action of exercising the keys by binding and loosing comes a couple verses later: “For where two or three are gathered in my name. . .” Notice they’re gathering in his name. The gathering in his name has the authority to exercise the keys in his name. Jesus is not referring to any two or three Christians who bump into one another in the cereal aisle of the grocery store. No, he’s referring to the gathering of the church where the keys of the kingdom are exercised—binding and loosing on earth what’s bound and loosed in heaven.
- But notice the rest of the verse: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” What does he mean he’s “there”? That he’s hovering like a mystical fog? No, he means their key-wielding actions represent him—speak for him, because he has placed his name on them.

Now jump to Matthew 28: It’s those who gather in his name who have the authority to baptize in his name. You got to read Matthew 28 together with Matthew 18. The text connects them.

- We bind and loose on earth what’s bound and loosed in heaven (Matthew 18). And he’s the one with all authority in heaven and earth (Matthew 28).
- We gather in his name (Matthew 18). Then he commands us to baptize in his name (Matthew 28).
- And the one with whom he dwells now (Matthew 18), he will dwell with always (Matthew 28).

The keys of the kingdom (binding and loosing), Greg Beale has observed, give a church the ability to do its formal priestly work. What’s the authority of the keys? They’re the authority to render official judgments on heaven’s behalf on the what and the who of the gospel—confessions and confessors. Jesus has given the local church the authority to hand out the Jesus name tag, or to hand out team jerseys: “This is the gospel; these are the gospel people.”

Once again, get into your mind the carelessness and nominalism of the people of Israel in bearing God’s name, and the scrupulous, fastidious carefulness of the apostles in the book of Acts. Baptists especially should understand this. We don’t baptize unregenerate babies. We believe in regenerate church membership. We ask people who want to join our church whether they are Christians and can explain the gospel.

When the state establishes a church and names itself “Christian,” it participates in that name-tag-pinning and sign-hanging work. It has usurped the keys and acted as a church. It has named people as Christians who are not Christians. This is anti-baptism, anti-Lord’s Supper.

It's also pro-nominalism and, therefore, missiologically careless. This is why churches who care about evangelism should care about this political theology conversation.

Christian nationalism, at least in terms of identity, takes us back to the old covenant. It gives America Israel's job and sidelines the church.

## **5. Paedobaptist Doctrine Can Be Compatible with a "Christian Nation" in a Way Credobaptist Doctrine Cannot.**

Both Paedo and credobaptists can, in principle, resist identifying a nation with the church.<sup>1</sup> Yet Baptist theology *must* maintain that line in order to be consistent with itself, while Paedobaptist theology, whether of the Roman Catholic or Protestant variety, *can* blur it. After all, it has a mechanism for inducting every natural born citizen of a nation into the church—infant baptism—making membership in the nation and the church nearly coterminous. The result is “Anglican England,” “Lutheran Germany,” “Catholic Spain,” “Christian Europe,” or “Congregationalist Massachusetts.” Within the Constantinian settlement, church and state formally remained separate authorities. The pope was not the emperor and the king was not the bishop. Yet the two authorities ruled jointly over one Christian nation or empire—one people or membership—which inevitably resulted in each involving itself within the jurisdiction of the other as with Calvin's call for

the magistrate to enforce the first table of the law.

Insofar as the new covenant identifies true religion only with Holy Spirit indwelt believers, new covenant religion—aka, Christianity—cannot be identified with a nation, unless they're all born again. There is no such thing as a “Christian nation” in a baptistic understanding since the membership borders of the nation and the church will not overlap. Christian Europe was never Christian, Baptists say, but a continent of people who got wet as babies and a handful of whom might have become sincere Christians along the way. Baptists will reserve the name “Christian” for members of churches who have repented and believed.

## **6. Arguments Based on “Christian Families” and “Schools” Pit Pragmatism Against Principle.**

When I published an article against Christian nationalism as a matter of identity a few months ago, far and away the biggest critique I received, and what seemed to be the trump card for many, frankly, seemed to be, “But what about Christian families or Christian schools?”

Let me confess that I find the argument a bit frustrating. I'm laying out how God carefully united his name to Israel, and then exiled them because of their nominal faith, and then how Jesus gives the church the power of naming, and the apostles are scrupulously careful about Christ's name. And then evangelicals 2000 years later say, “But I really like to say Christian school and

Christian family.” Okay, so we’ll prioritize your cultural habits of speech over the Bible’s entire storyline. Sincerely, it’s a case of placing pragmatism over principle, and yes, there’s a bit of frustration in my tone, because the people making these arguments aren’t typically known for pragmatism. They should know better.

Still, fine, let me give the critique serious attention. On the one hand, I will use the phrase “Christian school,” “Christian publisher,” “Christian radio station.” Why? Because the adjective “Christian” identifies the content of instruction or material, as well as, in the Christian school’s case, the norms and expectations of the school’s culture. It’s a way of saying, “Christianity will be promoted in this school.”

Yet three things are worth observing with Christian schools:

First, they’re voluntary. They’re for Christians to choose if they want. To align a nation with a religion makes it involuntary, as in Muslim or Hindu nations.

Second, Christian schools intend to be an extension of the parent’s instruction—*in loco parentis*. It represents parental instruction (or at least it should), not the student’s identity, because God has given parents the responsibility to teach their children. If you really want to justify calling a nation Christian because we call schools Christian, then equivalency would require you to give the government the job of teaching Christianity.

Third, I fear that Christian schools do too often carelessly treat all their students as Christians, and as such they become terrible seedbeds of Christian

nominalism. My four daughters are presently in a comparatively wonderful Christian school. Yet one of my daughter’s concerns is that a number of their high school classmates very much live like the world in secret, “But dad, these kids think they’re Christians. There’s no way.”

You might think, “Jonathan, sounds like you have some judgmental daughters.” I don’t think so, but we can leave that conversation for another day. What I know for certain from knowing lots of Christian schools is that teachers and principals need to do a better job of regularly reminding children, “Just because you come from Christian parents or belong to a Christian school doesn’t mean you’re a Christian.” So, if you’re willing to argue for a “Christian nation” based on the precedent of a Christian school, are you willing to extend that pastoral care to the whole nation? Good luck.

What about a so-called Christian family? A presbyterian friend recently told me he calls his two and four year old “Christians,” even though he assumes they’re not Christians, because they are “baptized” and belong to the covenant community. Okay, you can go that route. There’s your “Christian England.” And there’s your nation-sized problem of people thinking they’re going to heaven but they’re not.

Yet to my fellow Baptists, this is precisely the change we believe the new covenant brings. We believe that God stopped identifying his name with a nation and with the family structure. We don’t baptize our infants. The circle of “God’s people” and “biological family” are no longer overlapping. Now, the

circle of “God’s people” overlaps with “the church.” The church is *not* a family of families. It’s simply a family. God has no grandchildren, as they say.

What do people typically mean when they refer to a Christian family? Typically they mean the parents are Christian. They take their kids to church and discipline them according to the Bible. Okay, fine. Call it a Christian family. But if you’re going to apply that precedent to the nation, you need Christian parents in every home, so that they can administer the same kind of discipleship and discipline. Yet you need Christian parents not just for the children of homes, but for adults, too. You also need laws requiring church attendance and penalties for blasphemy. Basically, you need to treat your entire nation like children, and you need the full-time discipleship a parent gives if you’re really going to call a nation “Christian” using the so-called Christian family as your justification.

## Conclusion

As I said, I wanted to call this article, “No to Christian Nationalism; Yes to

God-fearing Governments.” Indeed, governments are beholden to God, and therefore we need God-fearing governors and governments. Along these lines, Baptists could sometimes do a better job of presenting a positive case for how God means for governments to serve the churches—articulating what standards he holds them to. Within the government’s lane, governments should do exactly what God tells them to do. Yet one thing they should not do is act as priests. Their job is *not* to say, “Here is a true gospel confession” and “These are the true gospel confessors.” They’re not to act as sign makers and nametag-givers.

In other words, if you don’t get your doctrine of the church right, you’re going to get your doctrine of the government and the nation wrong. A right political theology, it turns out, begins with the church. And the whole error of “Christian nationalism” begins with deficient ecclesiology.

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*1. These two paragraphs are excerpted from my chapter in Baptist Political Theology (B&H, summer 2023).*



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# Section Two

# Theonomy and Christian Nationalism Basics

# Theonomy Primer: What Is It and How Does It Work?

by Tom Hicks

**M**any faithful Christians today sense that the world has been turned upside down. Basic social values that once seemed immovable appear to be collapsing, particularly sexual ethics. Secular and Christian pundits alike are sounding alarms about the present state of American culture and civil order.

In the wake of these social realities, some Christians are asking tough questions. Do churches need to reexamine their message and mission? Have American Christians been wrong about the church's responsibility and perhaps even the gospel?

In the past five years or so, a number of voices have begun to answer these questions. They say society's ills can be traced, in part, to the church's neglect of theonomic principles.

Today's theonomists teach that the church has rightly preached Christ, justification by faith alone, and the need for reconciliation of individual sinners to God, but it has ignored the public aspect of the gospel.

“Do churches need to reexamine their message and mission? Have American Christians been wrong about the church’s responsibility and perhaps even the gospel?”

The whole gospel, they say, involves proclaiming and practicing God’s Old and New Testament law in society as the way to obtain God’s social and cultural blessings on earth. They teach that Christ obtains his victory over the world through the church’s obedience to God’s law and society’s implementation of God’s law across every domain, especially the self, the home, and the civil government.

Theonomists teach that the true mission of the church can be seen in the mandate God gave to Adam in the garden to take dominion over the earth and subdue it. Though Adam sinned and brought the curse upon the earth, Christ came to save his people, which includes enabling us to accomplish the original mandate given to Adam.

This is an important point to grasp. It means the church has not fully accomplished its mission by preaching the Lord Jesus, his law, and his gospel to every tribe and tongue for the conversion of souls and the building up of churches. Rather, the church must also work for transforming the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of our Lord and Christ. It does this by

teaching the nations God’s law and working to implement it. They also believe the church will assert its dominion, promised by the gospel, through the masculine leadership of godly men in their homes, churches, and societies.

Theonomy began as an American Calvinistic movement in the latter half of the twentieth century. It developed from the work of R.J. Rushdoony, who established the Chalcedon Foundation. Later, Rushdoony’s son-in-law, Gary North, also promoted theonomy through teaching and writing, but Greg Bahnsen was probably the most articulate advocate of the older Theonomy.<sup>2</sup> Today, similar versions of Theonomy are taught by public figures such as Doug Wilson, Jeff Durbin, and James White.<sup>2</sup> Theonomists today are generally characterized by four elements: “General Equity Theonomy,” postmillennialism, dominionism, and migration. Consider the meaning of each of these terms.

### **‘General Equity’ Theonomy**

Theonomists hold that churches will advance Christ’s kingdom by implementing the “general equity” of Old Covenant judicial law among the nations today. While the historic Reformed confessions such as the Westminster Confession do indeed refer to the “general equity” of Old Covenant judicial law as instructive today, theonomists seem to use that term differently.

Historic Reformed orthodoxy taught that only the transcendent moral and natural law contained in the Old Covenant judicial law remains

binding across all times and peoples. For example, Francis Turretin said that the application of Old Covenant judicial law must be based on the Ten Commandments, the New Testament, and what can be observed as common practice across Gentile nations. Theonomists, however, appear to be willing to find universal principles of application apart from such hermeneutical controls.<sup>3</sup>

### **Postmillennialism**

Doug Wilson states, “Postmillennialists have a very optimistic view of the future of this world, believing that the Great Commission is going to be successfully fulfilled and that the nations will overwhelmingly turn to Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Crawford Gribben, postmillennialism is “the belief that Christ will return after the millennium has substantially reformed life on earth. Postmillennialists can be either apocalyptic or gradualist and vary in the extent to which they believe the millennium can be expedited by their own effort.”<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes theonomic postmillennialists compare a believer’s progressive sanctification to postmillennialism. They say that just as individual believers are more and more transformed into the likeness of Christ over the span of their lives, so also the world will be transformed more and more into the likeness of heaven during this age. This analogy, however, seems to break down, since individual believers have been supernaturally regenerated while the world has not.

### **Dominionism**

Dominionism is also a distinctive ingredient of theonomy. Dominionism teaches that while the Great Commission commands the preaching of Christ for the conversion of sinners and the implementation of God’s law in all societies, the inevitable result will be mankind’s dominion over all the earth, including the development of medicines, deep sea exploration, mining, music, and so forth.<sup>6</sup>

Dominionism is closely connected to “Christian Reconstruction,” which Gribben defines as “the belief, developed in the 1960s, that the postmillennial coming of Christ will be preceded by the establishment of ‘godly rule’ on earth. This ‘godly rule’ will be marked by an unprecedented revival of Christianity and the international adoption of the Mosaic judicial and penal codes.”<sup>7</sup>

Gribben also says,

The efforts to reform society by the application of divine law is voluntarist and libertarian until it achieves a substantial electoral mandate—for, even as some of its libertarian advocates admit, the program to turn American citizens into citizens of the kingdom of heaven must at some tipping point become a program of “coercive re-enchantment.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Migration**

A final aspect of Theonomy has to do with its practical efforts to implement its theology. Theonomy holds that a Christian society based on God’s law

should be established in order to influence society so that a new Christendom might emerge from the rubble of any impending calamity.

People are migrating to the American Pacific Northwest for this very purpose. Gribben, quoting James Rawles, says, “The goal is to solidify a conservative Christian worldview through a demographic shift. Thus far it has been successful, and. . . with passing years we will further solidify a conservative Christian redoubt within the United States.”<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

Theonomy has a view of the gospel and of the church’s mission that goes beyond preaching Christ and him crucified and risen for the conversion of sinners and the building up of churches. It claims that for the church to be faithful, she must also work to implement the Old Testament judicial law at every level of society as part of society’s transformation into the kingdom of God on earth before Christ returns.

Theonomy is not monolithic, and it includes more nuance and variation than can be expressed in one article, but I have attempted to summarize some of the key features that have been promoted in the past five years.

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1. See R.J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, 3 vols (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon, 1973); Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media, 2002).

2. The material of today’s theonomists can be found largely on the internet. See Doug Wilson’s video “General Equity Theonomy,” Jeff Durbin’s video “What Is the Gospel of the Kingdom?,” James White’s video “Autonomy vs. Theonomy” along with similar videos, sermons, and blog posts.

3. See Doug Wilson’s video, “General Equity Theonomy.” Compare with Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, volume 2, ed. by James T Dennison Jr., trans. by George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992-97), 165-167.

4. See Doug Wilson’s video, “Postmillennialism,” James White’s video “Postmillennialism – Eschatology of Hope,” Jeff Durbin’s video “Postmillennialism with Skin on It.”

5. Crawford Gribben, *Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America: Christian Reconstruction in the Pacific Northwest* (New York, NY: Oxford, 2021), 153. For those interested in reading a descriptive account of the attempt to apply Theonomy in the American Pacific Northwest, I highly recommend this book.

6. See Doug Wilson’s video, “Making Disciples or Taking Dominion?”

7. Gribben, *Survival and Resistance*, 151.

8. *Ibid.*, 31.

9. *Ibid.*, 11.



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# Reconstruction Theonomy vs. General Equity Theonomy

by Joseph Thigpen

**D**efinitions matter. If our definition of “theonomist” is simply “Someone who wants to see God’s rule and law obeyed,” then every Christian would be a theonomist. But discussions about theonomy have something more specific in view: the purpose of government, the proper end of law, and how the Mosaic Law applies to nations and governments today.

Several distinctions can be made among the theonomists of our day.<sup>1</sup> The term “Reconstructionist” describes an older brand of theonomist like R.J. Rushdoony, Gary North, and Greg Bahnsen. “General Equity theonomist” is the name a newer generation of theonomists, including Doug Wilson and James White, give themselves. There are still some Reconstructionist theonomists around today, but it’s the latter whose influence is expanding.

## **Their Plan**

Both Reconstructionists and General Equitists attract evangelicals who bemoan what they perceive as ineffective conservative Christian social engagement. Where the Reconstructionists gained adherents among those tired of dispensational hand-wringing, the General Equitists appeal to Christians disaffected with today's prevailing models of evangelical cultural engagement, such as James Davison Hunter's "faithful presence," Tim Keller's so-called "third-wayism," or the popular phrase, "Jesus is neither a donkey nor an elephant."

Against these, both brands of theonomists argue for a better way. They cast themselves as the few, the proud, the truly reformed who will give "no quarter" to the progressive left or the squishy middle. Their aim is to defeat secularism and its Dispensationalist and Big Eva co-conspirators. Their burden is to construct a society built on God's law.

Reconstructionists and General Equitists share many assumptions, but their project is not mainly exegetical. Nor is their task to do constructive theology as traditionally understood. Instead, theirs is a comprehensive worldview. They attempt to stand amidst traditional reformed thought and construct a social system that confronts western decadence; it's not an overstatement to say that their aim is a transformed society.

## **Presuppositionalism**

Such a program rests on certain theological and philosophical commitments.

It is presuppositional in epistemology, postmillennial in eschatology, and transformationalist toward culture.

Arguing from presuppositional commitments, they insist there is no ideological neutral ground. You can have autonomy or theonomy. Man can make up his own law or obey God's law. For them, secular neutrality is a myth, and accepting the lordship of Jesus is a precondition for making truly just laws.

Historically, this stream develops from Calvinistic forms of thought. It comes by way of Abraham Kuyper via Cornelius Van Til, who espoused a form of presuppositional apologetics to counter the prevailing assumptions of modern society. (Van Til argues that only Christians can have true knowledge of themselves and the world and that Scripture is the objective standard for all human thought).<sup>2</sup> The theonomists develop Van Til's thought and shape it toward political ends. Here's how Rushdoony puts it:

Basic to this study is the belief that the presuppositions of human thought in every field must be basically one in order to arrive at any concept which validates both biblical faith and human knowledge. The sovereignty of the self-contained God is the key to every field, in that only the God of Scripture makes all things possible and explicable and is thus the basic premise not only of theology, but of philosophy, science, and indeed all knowledge. In that God is the creator of all things, he is their only valid principle of interpretation, in that they derive both their existence and meaning from his creative act.<sup>3</sup>

Rushdoony argues no field can be properly understood, no law rightly

shaped, no institution properly built without recognition of God's law at its center. For Wilson and company, this principle shows up in the institution of government when the lordship of Jesus shows up in our constitution.<sup>4</sup> Such a move articulates a key assumption: the Bible speaks to all human institutions and is the measure of their faithfulness. It's not merely a matter of making more just laws; the assumptions of the system must be changed. It's Christ or chaos.

## Postmillennialism

With a dour view of government, you may expect such men to be pessimistic. But they espouse a hopeful postmillennialism. David Schrock will have more to say about this. But here I'll mention that such a view has them resist both the cultural pessimism accompanying premillennial and much amillennial theology and a preoccupation with heaven that eschews worldly responsibility.

Theirs is a worldview with a promise. Engage in the fight, join the fray—victory is assured.

These sentiments have wide appeal. Christians *are* assured victory. But what kind of victory are we promised prior to Christ's return? Postmillennialists say we're marching toward the Christianization of the world. Though Christendom is in tatters now, it will be reconstructed, and it's our responsibility to engage in the fight in particular ways. We may not see ultimate victory in our lifetime, but victory is assured, as our efforts will result in the

Christianization of the world and its institutions. Then the end will come.

Such belief establishes confidence. It tempers their rhetoric with resolve. They're on the winning side. Even though the immediate prospects seem bleak, they don't waver from their principles, for they know victory is assured along particular lines.

## Theonomy Proper: the Use of the Law

Both theonomist streams are transformationalist toward culture. Their aim is to see this world transformed into the kingdom of Christ as its institutions conform to God's purpose. Christ has claimed every square inch of creation, and the task of Christians is to assert Christ's rule and reign.

The method for bringing about societal transformation is bringing everyone into obedience of God's law. Governments ought to objectively acknowledge the supremacy of Christ. Here, to varying degrees, both Reconstructionists and General Equitists see the Old Testament civil law as instructive for society.

But they also diverge at this point.

Reconstructionist Greg Bahnsen in his *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* argues the Old Testament law, including all the civil (but not ceremonial) elements within the Sinai Covenant, remains valid and authoritative. Interpreting Matthew 5:17–19, Bahnsen says, "Jesus, the awaited Messiah, rectifies the fallen standard of the law; He confirms its exhaustive details and restores a proper conception of kingdom righteousness."<sup>5</sup> For Bahnsen, Jesus

did not come to abolish the Sinaitic law but to *confirm* it in its *exhaustive* detail.

General Equity theologians agree on the abiding significance of the Sinai Covenant. They believe the Old Testament Law exists in part to discipline the nations. But for them, the “general equity” (a term from WCF 19.4 and 1689 LBCF 19.4) of the civil elements of the Mosaic law, meaning, their broadly applicable principles of divine justice, is binding on civil governments.

Both Reconstructionists and General Equity theologians agree that God has prescribed laws in Scripture that should govern all societies, but they differ on how the law should be interpreted and applied. Reconstructionists offer a detailed plan or provide a system for bringing a nation’s law in line with the Sinai covenant; General Equity theologians are more ambiguous. The reasons vary. It’s possible these newer theologians have learned from the mistakes of their predecessors. Bahnsen, Rushdoony, and company’s project splintered into factions.

The General Equitists are more subtle. They have cultivated a movement more than a coherent system of thought. Even their name “general equity” resists tight definition. That God’s law should be obeyed in society is asserted, but what exactly that law is varies. Wilson argues that the Christian task is to baptize and teach the nations all that Jesus has commanded, and what he has commanded included the Old Testament law. But they differ from Reconstructionists on further details. General Equitists attempt to discern the principle at work in the Old Testament civil law and apply it

to current laws. They assert there is a right way to order a society, and that is based in part on the civil laws of the Old Testament. Yet their framework is flexible and their application pliable, which allows them to critique various cultural expressions and customs.

Wilson strongly critiques the moral decadence of Western society and argues for better laws. He contends that departing from God’s law has led to chaos. He leaves room for direct action while calling for a long-term approach. He advocates working to transform society through proclaiming the gospel, praying for revival, building churches and schools, and raising families—matters that can gain wide consensus. Wilson is sharpest in his critiques, but it remains to be seen if his version of theonomy offers a constructive alternative that differs from what’s come before. It would seem that his version of theonomy could hypothetically include every civil element within the Sinai Covenant, just like the Reconstructionists. Yet his version is not constrained by the details of that covenant. In that sense, one might almost count him as a biblically unconstrained Reconstructionist. His version can do everything that Sinai does, but more as well.

## **Conclusion: Basis for Critique**

Reconstructionists and General Equitists share many points of overlap. Their plans target similar disaffected people. A transformed society is their goal. Their frameworks are built upon presuppositional and postmillennial commitments, but they differ in the final application of Old Testament law.

Any assessment or critique of such arguments must pay careful attention to these commitments and evaluate their claims along appropriate lines. They must aim to understand the arguments of the theonomists on their own terms. General Equity theonomy resists tight definition, but those who share a concern and attempt to address its weaknesses must establish a common vocabulary and demonstrate where such arguments fail exegetically, theologically, and ethically.

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1. Doug Wilson, "Theonomy is a Many Splendored Thing" accessible here: [https://](https://dougwils.com/the-church/s16-theology/theonomy-many-splendored-thing.html)

[dougwils.com/the-church/s16-theology/theonomy-many-splendored-thing.html](https://dougwils.com/the-church/s16-theology/theonomy-many-splendored-thing.html).

2. For a summary of Van Til and his thought, see John Frame, "Cornelius Van Til" in Walter Elwell, ed., *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 156-67. Also available here: <https://frame-poythress.org/cornelius-van-til/>.

3. Rousas John Rushdoony, *By What Standard? An Analysis of the Philosophy of Cornelius Van Til*, (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 1995) 5-6, Kindle Edition.

4. Doug Wilson, *Empires of Dirt: Secularism, Radical Islam, and the Mere Christendom Alternative*, (Moscow: Canon Press, 2016), 160.

5. Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Median Foundation, 2002), 88



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# The Many Faces of Christian Nationalism

by John Wilsey

**J**ust over a year ago, something called “Christian nationalism” hit American mainstream culture, in the wake of the 2020 presidential election and the January 6 riots at the U.S. Capitol. Numerous books have appeared that explore the phenomenon historically and sociologically. They tell us how Christian nationalism is racist, sexist, homophobic, right-wing, and even a heresy departing from the Christian faith. Our national conversation about this thing called Christian nationalism became mainstream as a response to the so-called Age of Trump.

But nationalism—especially religious nationalism—is nothing new, nor is it best understood in monolithic, simple terms. It is multifaceted, emerges from diverse ideologies, and changes as time and circumstance progress. It is manifested in both political and religious terms. Since the colonial founding, Americans have participated in creating complex and contested nationalities. They have been divided in their visions for the nation, represented at times by loyalists against patriots,

“In all our social media hot takes on Christian nationalism, we miss how nuanced nationalism has been in the American experience.”

Hamiltonians against Jeffersonians, Unionists against Confederates, and segregationists against integrationists. Still today, we find competing nationalisms on the left and right. Why should we be surprised? This process of national identity creation is ongoing.

American history is a demonstration of the complexity of nationalism. In all our social media hot takes on Christian nationalism, we miss how nuanced nationalism has been in the American experience. Not only that, but we also miss how all Americans are, in some measure, nationalists, and how religion is an inevitable part of our nationalism.

To help give substance to the historical picture let us consider a few forms Christian nationalism has taken since 1630. Then we will consider Christian nationalism in our own day.

### **Puritan Millennialism**

At the establishment of the New England colonies, the Puritans saw their project in terms of a covenant with God. They believed they were fulfilling theological types introduced in the Old Testament. John Winthrop (1588–1649), the first governor of Massachusetts Bay colony, famously articulated this vision in one of the most

famous sermons in American history, his “Model of Christian Charity.” Faithfulness to the covenant would mean that God would “please to heare us, and bring us in peace to the place wee desire.” But if the people were unfaithful, then God would “surely breake out in wrathe against us, be revenged of such a perjured people and make us know the price of the breache of such a Covenant.” Samuel Danforth (1626–1674), pastor of the First Church in Roxbury, preached a sermon on Matthew 11:7–9, in which he saw Massachusetts as fulfilling the biblical type of Israel, going into the wilderness to hold a feast to the Lord after escaping Pharaoh’s wrath. The colonists thought there was eternal significance to their “errand in the wilderness.” Cotton Mather, in his history of New England entitled *Magnalia Christi Americana*, saw the New England churches as the golden candlesticks of Revelation 1:20.

Furthermore, the New England Puritans saw the discovery of America, the Reformation, and their colonizing project as evidence that God was bringing near the millennial kingdom of Christ, not in allegorical, but in historical terms. Historian Ernest Lee Tuveson argued that the Puritans replaced the traditional amillennialism of medieval Europe with a progressive post-millennialism that was much more active and optimistic for the future. Augustine posited a view of history that was essentially static, that humans should accept the fallen world as it is: cursed under the weight of sin. But the Puritans read the book of Revelation and came away with a view that God was working through his people to effect

progress that culminated in the breaking forth of the kingdom. The Reformation, they believed, was the beginning of the end for this fallen world.

From the 1630s to the 1750s, Puritan millennialism was the predominant expression of the intersection between theology and nationalism. As historical circumstances changed, theology continued to inform national identity, but did so in ways unique to those changing circumstances.

Summary:

- Envisioned a covenant with God that fulfilled Old Testament theological types
- Faithfulness would bring God's blessings, unfaithfulness his wrath
- Possessed eternal significance
- Evidence that God was ushering in his millennial kingdom

## **Christian Republicanism**

By the time of the American Revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Americans were inaugurating their own nationality. American colonists saw the English triumph over the French in the Seven Years' War in 1763 as the triumph of true religion over the forces of anti-Christ. After 1763, revolutionary ideas drew inspiration from the Bible, English common law tradition, classical antiquity, the Enlightenment, and radical Whig ideology, those liberal ideas emerging from the English Civil War (1642–1649) and the Glorious Revolution (1688). Historians Bernard Bailyn and Pauline Maier argued that radical Whig ideology brought

together those disparate sources of revolutionary thought into a coherent whole. Mark Noll observed that colonial preaching baptized this ideology into the language of Puritan exegesis and theology that produced "Christian republicanism." Christian republicanism was the earliest expression of American nationality.

The blending of biblical language with English liberalism is clear in another famous sermon in American history by Jonathan Mayhew. In his sermon based on Romans 13:1–8, "Discourse on Unlimited Submission" (1750), Mayhew said of a people oppressed by a tyrant: "For a nation thus abused to arise unanimously, and to resist their prince, even to dethroning him, is not a criminal; but a reasonable use of the means, and the only means which God has put in their power, for mutual and self-defence." Mayhew believed that a nation ruled by a tyrant had a righteous duty to overthrow that tyrant because the ruler served God as the minister of good. When that ruler no longer served that divine purpose, the people were justified in overthrowing him.

Mayhew's sermon, influenced by radical Whig ideology, interpreted Romans 13 in light of the principle of consent by the governed. Seeing liberal political theory as consistent with the precepts of Scripture became commonplace during the struggle for independence. Samuel Sherwood preached a sermon in 1776 based on Revelation 12:14–17 entitled "The Church's Flight into the Wilderness," in which he saw the American colonies in similar terms as the church. Following the tradition

of the Puritans, Sherwood used typology to depict the tyrannical George III and the Church of England as the persecutors of the American colonies. The king in Revelation 12 was the dragon, and the colonies were represented by the woman. Connecticut preacher Nicholas Street, in his 1777 sermon, “The American States Acting Over the Part of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness,” saw the colonists in the role of the Israelites of the Exodus, the revolutionary leaders as Moses and Aaron, Britain as Egypt, King George III as Pharaoh, the Red Sea as the military struggle, and victory in the war as the land of Canaan.

Such a blending of biblical motifs with revolutionary ideas gave a strong sense of national purpose and strengthened the idea that God had chosen America and blessed the nation with great responsibility.

Summary:

- In colonial America, historical context, theology, and political philosophy combined to inspire revolutionary ideas.
- The colonies and the church were cast in similar terms and seen to share a similar future.
- “Christian Republicanism” blended biblical motifs and revolutionary ideas for national purposes.
- America was understood as chosen by God and given great responsibility.

## Manifest Destiny

In 1845, John L. O’Sullivan, founding editor of the Jacksonian periodical

*United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, coined one of the most recognizable terms in American history: “manifest destiny.” In the context of the American annexation of Texas, O’Sullivan wrote that Europe aimed at “limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” Along with a Christian concept of providence, manifest destiny also employed Christian-inspired themes of innocence, mission, and millennialism. Thus, there was a divine inevitability to American expansion. O’Sullivan’s conception of manifest destiny was an important justification for the Mexican American War (1846–1848). It was important also in the Spanish American War of 1898 and America’s acquisition of an overseas empire.

O’Sullivan was an important figure in the years prior to the Civil War—a prominent editor, but also a member of the diplomatic corps, having served as minister to Portugal from 1853–1857 under the administration of Franklin Pierce. As an editorialist, he gave voice to the particular form of Christian nationalism that prevailed in the context of westward expansion. He thought of the Christian gospel in thoroughly American terms, presenting “a secular version of millennial ‘political religion,’” in the words of nationalism scholar Anthony D. Smith. He was convinced it was the will of God for America to overspread the North American continent, and because of this, America’s rise to continental dominance was inevitable. Since America was

the providential nation, it was morally pure. It was also in the vanguard of human progress. “All history has to be re-written; political science and the whole scope of all moral truth have to be considered and illustrated in light of the democratic principle” which America embodied, as O’Sullivan wrote in 1837. Furthermore, America was chosen by God to spread freedom to the world—“freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality. . . For this blessed mission. . . America has been chosen,” O’Sullivan wrote in 1839.

We see the continuation of Puritan millennialism and Christian republicanism in O’Sullivan’s Manifest Destiny but articulated in a new context. We also see O’Sullivan’s racial prejudice inform his nationalism, in that he saw the Anglo-Americans as superior to indigenous people, blacks, and Mexicans. In contrast to O’Sullivan’s providential certainty and racial chauvinism, Lincoln’s nationalism was benevolent, generous, and exemplary while retaining its debt to theology.

Summary:

- Manifest Destiny combined providence, innocence, mission, and millennialism.
- America’s continental dominance was understood as God’s will and, therefore, inevitable.
- God had chosen America to spread freedom to the world.
- This form of nationalism depended on Anglo-Saxon superiority.

## Lincolnian Unionism

Lincoln was committed to preserving the Union, and by 1862, he knew that it was impossible to save the Union as it was. By 1865, the fate of the Union, what Lincoln called “the last best hope of earth” in 1862, rested in God’s hands. In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln noted that “Both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other.” But in Lincoln’s view, God was judging all of America for its 250-year embrace of slavery and Americans had to change their conception of their relationship with God. God, Lincoln insisted, should not be described as being on the side of either belligerent. Americans should care more about whether they were on God’s side, and to be on God’s side was to be on the side of right.

This national vision was confirmed in the Union victory, and sacralized after Lincoln’s assassination, as evidenced especially in the construction and 1922 dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. The Memorial describes itself in a carved dictum over the awesome statue of Lincoln as a “temple,” and it has served as a symbol of Lincolnian justice merged with American nationalism for a century.

The Gettysburg Address may illustrate Lincolnian Unionism better than any single document that Lincoln wrote. Lincoln conceived of the Civil War as a great testing of whether or not the American experiment in democracy could actually survive. That experiment, which Lincoln described as “a new nation, conceived in liberty, and

dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” was in stark contrast to the European monarchies that were still dedicated to the principle of natural hierarchy. Men gave their lives to defend that proposition of the Declaration of Independence at Gettysburg. What was required now, said Lincoln, was a renewal of dedication on the part of the living.

Such a rededication should take the form of a “new birth of freedom.” Historian Allen Guelzo likened this to a “religious revival,” the success of which would guarantee the success and spread of liberal democracy. Guelzo observed that Lincoln placed the ongoing strife of the Civil War into a “world historical context.” In doing so, Lincoln normativized the American nation as the paragon of righteous government for all time, but without the racial chauvinism of O’Sullivan. Lincolnian Unionism was a Christian nationalism that was an exemplar to the world, manifesting hope and flourishing through human freedom and equality under God.

Summary:

- Lincoln viewed the Civil War as God’s judgment against America for 250 years of slavery.
- The gravitational center of Lincolnian Unionism is the equality of all persons.
- Liberal democracy was understood as a righteous form of government for all time.
- America was to be an exemplar of equality, freedom, and flourishing to the world.

## Wilsonian Idealism

Woodrow Wilson, the twenty-eighth President, led the American war effort in World War I, beginning in 1917. He believed God had commissioned America to lead the world into Christian civilization through the defeat of the Central Powers and the establishment of the League of Nations. Historian Milan Babik connected Wilson’s vision to Puritan millennialism: “the old Puritan dream of returning to the old world from the transatlantic refuge in order to spread the American millennium worldwide seemed to him on the verge of fulfillment.” Wilson’s dream of an international order of Christian civilization, led by the United States, animated American interventionist foreign policy during the course of the twentieth century. John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State under Eisenhower, said in 1955, “Our people have always been endowed with a sense of mission in the world. They have believed that it was their duty to help men everywhere to get the opportunity to be and to do what God designed.” That sense of divine mission and of solemn duty undergirded American actions, especially in the early years of the Cold War.

Dulles represents Wilsonian idealism as a Christian nationalistic manifestation better than Wilson because he was more successful at advancing Wilson’s vision. Where Wilson’s efforts at achieving a lasting peace at Versailles failed, Dulles’s efforts at forging peace after World War II in the Pacific were successful. And whereas Wilson died before he could see America face down the Nazis to “make the world safe for

democracy,” Dulles became the most powerful diplomat in the world during the early years of the Cold War, as the United States and its allies confronted the Soviet threat.

Dulles repeatedly reminded Americans that theirs was a Christian nation, founded on Christian principles, and the most powerful champion of civilization. Thus, America had both a unique capacity and a solemn duty to stand for human freedom against the great foe of human freedom, the Soviet Union. If America retreated into itself, the whole world would fall. Thus, Dulles conceived of the world in Manichean terms, seeing the United States as the champion of light and justice and the Communists as the purveyors of darkness and tyranny. Wilsonian idealism represented a continuation of a tradition in Christian nationalism in which, as historian Richard Gamble argued, Americans “have seen themselves as a progressive, redemptive force, waging war in the ranks of Christ’s army. . . liberating those in bondage and healing the afflicted.”

Summary:

- Like Puritan Millennialism, Wilson understood God to have tasked America with spreading Christian civilization around the world.
- Dulles, representing Wilsonian Idealism, tasked Christian America with defeating the Soviets for the sake of democracy.
- In Manichean terms, America represented all that was good, and communism all that was evil.
- America was understood as a redemption force for things like international order and free trade.

## Christian America

In 1977 a book appeared that launched the Christian America movement. *The Light and the Glory* by Peter Marshall and David Manuel, sold hundreds of thousands of copies and remains popular today. Marshall and Manuel argued that America was God’s new Israel, chosen to be “a light to the Gentiles.” The book served as a path forward for the nation to recover its Christian origins and calling. The Christian America thesis—the argument that America was founded as a Christian nation—is based on a declension narrative. America, it argued, had fallen from its glorious Christian past and needed to recover what had been lost. Figures like Tim LaHaye, Jerry Falwell, Sr., David Barton, John Eidsmoe, and others produced books, pamphlets, curricula, and multimedia to advance the Christian America thesis.

The Christian America thesis can be summarized in themes under three categories: historical, theological, and philosophical. Historically, advocates of Christian America have argued that the founders were Christians, the Great Awakening set the stage for the revolution, and the founding documents were inspired from Christian sources. Theologically, they argued from a providential view of history that American exceptionalism was evidence of God’s unique blessing on the nation and that America was the chosen nation of God. Philosophically, the original intent of the founders may be discerned using the hermeneutical methods similar to what would be used to interpret Scripture. The founders intended to

build Christian principles into the fabric of the nation.

This form of Christian nationalism seems to be most prevalent today, and critics are reacting mainly to this.

The Christian America movement is different than previous iterations of Christian nationalism in that its proponents orient the nation toward the past. They are concerned with the faith of the founders, the Christian origins of the nation, and returning America to a golden age. Nostalgia plays a crucial role in this brand of nationalism. Prior to about 1970, every generation of Americans took for granted that America was a Christian nation. With the slow dissolution of an American Protestant consensus, however, this is no longer broadly assumed. Advocates of Christian America are now trying to *recover* a Christian nationality.

Summary:

- The Christian America thesis orients the nation to the past.
- This thesis assumes the American founders were Christians, and the founding documents were inspired by Christian sources.
- Advocates of this movement understand American exceptionalism to be a token of God's election.
- This movement arose from the general decline of Protestant Christianity in America.

## **The Many Nuances of Nationalism's Different Faces**

There are many nuances to American Christian nationalism. One thing we can say for sure is that nationalism is

necessarily historical. All nationalistic paradigms orient the nation in time, but not all in the same way.

- Puritan millennialism, Christian republicanism, Manifest Destiny, Lincolnian unionism, and Wilsonian idealism were oriented toward the future.
- Puritan millennialism looked ahead to the thousand-year reign of Christ.
- Christian republicanism and Manifest Destiny saw America turning its back on the past and turning toward the future.
- Lincoln cast America as being in the throes of a national death, but also experiencing "a new birth of freedom" as "the last, best hope of earth."
- Wilson and Dulles looked forward to an international order with America as the indispensable nation, guaranteeing free trade and world cooperation.

Each of these nationalisms was committed to the idea of inevitable progress. These nationalisms are progressive in that they situate America as the nation of the future. And Wilsonian idealism, as a progressive nationalism, directly emerged from the political and religious left (Richard M. Gamble has written extensively on this subject).

## **What's the Importance of History?**

The fact that nationalism is necessarily historical is deeply important. Those who comment, reflect, disparage, or

“Christian nationalism, to be sure, has often been articulated in ways that pervert Christianity’s message. But we should work to understand it, and when we condemn it, we should do it in precise terms.”

praise it must understand the historical complexities inherent in nationalism. Progressive nationalism and conservative nationalism are both nationalism. And both progressives and conservatives have always been nationalists at different points in American history.

And this gets us to the importance of history in general. What all the talk about Christian nationalism indicates to us is that history matters. Who we think we are matters to the way we approach one another.

It seems to me that there are two common problematic approaches to history when it comes to Christian nationalism. Some people are simply ignorant about history because they do not think it is relevant to their daily lives or because they had bad teachers (the football coach who showed movies like *The Patriot* in class to substitute for actual teaching). Others know their history, sometimes quite well, but their knowledge of history does not extend to being able to think historically. So, they use their knowledge of the past to cherry-pick from the historical record, mining those elements from the

past that they like and using them to advance their ideology, all the while ignoring evidence they don’t like, evidence that would undermine their agenda.

## **How Has Religion Shaped American National Identity?**

Enter the dynamic of religion in thinking historically—how has religion shaped the way Americans have identified themselves in relation to God, to other nations, and even to themselves? How religious have Americans tended to be over the generations? How has religious affiliation changed in America since the eighteenth century? Is religion as important to Americans in the present as it was in the past?

These questions and others like them are significant in addressing the changing ways that Americans have thought about themselves as the United States grew from its independence, to continental supremacy, to world power status, and to superpower status in a bipolar world, and later, in a multipolar world.

America was founded upon transcendent ideas, as in the Declaration of Independence: “all men are created equal” and “they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” During the Civil War, it was re-founded upon other transcendent propositions, such as Lincoln’s words in his Second Inaugural Address: “with malice toward none, with charity for all with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right let us strive

on to. . . do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Since America is a nation predicated on ideas that are essential, above and beyond space and time, applied morally and ontologically to all generations, religion plays a unique role in American national identity. Without religion, the ideas that are necessary to the American project are meaningless. Thus, an American nationalism devoid of religion or religious presuppositions is inconceivable.

### **All Americans Are Nationalists, And Religious Elements Are Inevitable**

In such a nation as the United States, founded as it is on transcendent moral ideas, we can count on controversy and contest in the way Americans think of the application of those ideas. We can be certain that religion will be, just as it has been, abused and perverted to suit particular national interests, and some of those means and interests will be unjust and contradictory to the very ideas expressed in the founding documents. But aberrations such as these cannot justify the jettisoning of religion in American nationalism.

All Americans are nationalists of some sort. As long as we abide by the laws, acknowledge the supremacy of Constitution, enjoy the blessings that America gives, appeal to American ideals, and contend for justice in the name of the United States both domestically and internationally, we subscribe to American nationalism. To do

away with religion or nationalism is to do away with America.

We should think carefully about American history, nationalism, and the interplay of religion with American identity. And we should stand against expressions that twist and debauch religion and nationalism to ends that militate against American ideals that many of our forefathers and mothers gave their lives to defend and extend.

As we do so, we may think of our loyalties along the lines of Augustine’s ordering of loves. As Augustine wrote in *City of God*, “When the miser prefers his gold to justice, it is through no fault of the gold, but of the man; and so with every created thing. For though it be good, it may be loved with an evil as well as with a good love; it is loved rightly when it is loved ordinally; evilly, when inordinately.” This is where the distinction between patriotism and nationalism becomes necessary to explain clearly, as Steven B. Smith has done for example, in his 2021 book *Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes*.

### **Conclusion: Religion Must Always Have a Place in the Public Square**

Christian nationalism, to be sure, has often been articulated in ways that pervert Christianity’s message. But we should work to understand it, and when we condemn it, we should do it in precise terms. Racism is a corruption of American ideals, not a basic essential element of American identity. Religious bigotry contradicts the constitutional guarantee of disestablishment

and freedom of conscience, and freedom of conscience cannot be appealed to in the name of bigotry. Christ's kingdom is not of this world, but we do live in the world. We, Christians, do not contradict ourselves when we express ordered love for Christ's kingdom first and our nation subsequently.

We must recognize that we all inherit something from nationalism, whether political or religious. Most importantly, we cannot allow critics of Christian nationalism to use the concept as a way to further undermine the necessary place of religion and religious people

in the public square. Religion must always have a place in the public square, and patriotism as devotion to the national idea is a good thing, provided it is rightly ordered and conceived. Historical and philosophical precision are needed to pinpoint whatever kind of religio-philosophical nationalism is at hand, so that we may intelligently separate the precious from the worthless.

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# Section Three

# Theological Critique

# Theonomy: Serious Theology, Serious Politics, Seriously Wrong

by Albert Mohler

**M**y engagement with theonomy began before I was an adult. I have experienced two periods of intense interest in this movement and theory known as theonomy, Christian reconstructionism, dominion theology, or (more recently) a comprehensive model of Christian nationalism. As a teenager, I was introduced to reconstructionism by older Christian friends, and as a young and eager Christian conservative deeply concerned about the Christian faith and the culture around me, I took it very seriously. Theonomist books and older works foundational to modern theonomist thought were put into my hands. I read them eagerly.

Later in life, leading theonomist thinkers (including Rousas John Rushdoony) would reach out to me. Having read some of my own theological work, Dr. Rushdoony was kind to write me and to send two of his own books. I am not a theonomist, but I take their ideas seriously, and their ideas and proposals deserve such seriousness.

Before I explain why I am not a theonomist, let me explain why this mode of Christian thinking must be taken very seriously. Upon reading theonomist analysis and argument, my first thought was that I had been lied to for many years. Furthermore, I had been lied to by Christians, including pastors and Christian authorities who had misrepresented much of Christian history, subjected the Bible to shoddy hermeneutics, misread the relationship between the church and the culture, had evidently never read many of the documents and writings they cited, and were arguing for a secular state and for Christian cultural surrender. The theonomists had actually read the documents they cited, plus they had a clear proposal and picture of the world. That put them ahead of their critics, or at least most of them.

When I refer to being lied to, I refer to the dominant argument of the day, still tenaciously held to by more secularly-minded Christians, that the American experiment in ordered liberty had been established on an intentionally secular foundation. This was especially foisted upon my generation by more liberal professors and denominational leaders, whose bad thinking was based on bad history and whose wishful thinking extended to the supposed gospel benefits of a secularizing culture. Then and now, theonomists puncture and expose that kind of evangelical foolishness with aplomb.

We are now in a second wave of theonomist revival in the United States. By my measure, the first wave came relatively late in the North American Protestant context of

“Theonomy risks conflating the identity of the church and civil society as a matter of law and polity.”

twentieth-century America. By that time, the rapid swing toward secularization and the radical reordering of morality and public culture had become apparent. The theonomists were not alone in sounding alarms, but they did come with a more developed answer to the obvious question: What do we do now? The second wave has come in the immediate context of America’s current cultural crisis, and some theonomists are certain of their immediate vindication. At the very least, they are generally right about the disaster of the evangelical Left.

Returning to the first wave of theonomist influence, we see that other conservative Christians responded to those times with the movement often labeled the “Christian Right.” The key difference between the theonomists and the Christian Right is that the latter sought to use traditional constitutional means to recover and redirect culture and society. The theonomists meant (and now mean) to *replace and reconstruct* the constitutional order. They saw the existing American order as unsustainable and fundamentally sub-biblical. They were certain that the existing constitutional order was flawed from the start and doomed to fail. Furthermore, they saw the crisis of the American constitutional order in explicitly theological terms.

So, why am I not a theonomist? The most salient factor in my rejection of theonomy is that I am a decided and incorrigible conversionist. Furthermore, I am a Baptist by conviction, formation, and church membership. The central practical implication of conversionism is the separation of all human beings into two categories—those who, by grace, have been born again, have confessed Christ, and who live obedient lives under the lordship of Christ, and ultimately for his glorious kingdom; and those who, having never heard the gospel or having refused its call, remain unregenerate and defiant. I believe in a church that includes only the confessing redeemed and a larger society that includes true Christians, artificial Christians, and pagans of all varieties.

Now, mark this carefully: I do not *celebrate* the presence of artificial Christians and pagans in our society. The theonomists are on unassailable gospel ground when they scorn limp-minded evangelicals who celebrate religious pluralism as a fact. A central error of the theonomists is seeing the civil government as assigned an explicitly religious duty and (among some theonomists) touching the duty of separating the sheep from the goats. Thus, theonomy risks conflating the identity of the church and civil society as a matter of law and polity.

I do not believe it is possible for a Baptist to be a theonomist with any consistency. I sometimes feel the temptation, and I share the theonomic frustration with the ever-present threat of evangelical timidity and stupidity. But, and this turns out to be determinative, I

“If victorious,  
at some point the  
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and water.”

am a Baptist. I am not the kind of Baptist who argues for a secular state and what Richard John Neuhaus called a “naked public square.” As a matter of fact, I believe that the modern secularist dream has turned into a predictable nightmare. I would argue that our American constitutional order is only plausible when a fundamentally Christian worldview provides the background conditions for our conception of law, liberty, rights, dignity, *civitas*, and morality. The deliberate subversion of that Christian foundation has created a set of conditions in which the American constitutional order is increasingly implausible.

To state the matter straightforwardly: A society that has lost the stable categories of boy and girl and defiantly destroys life in the womb is a society that renders the American experiment in ordered liberty impossible. Ordered liberty becomes disordered calamity. The only recovery is ontological and moral and, yes, theological. But that necessary affirmation of a foundation of Christian morality and the biblical affirmation of law, liberty, and dignity as essential to the American order must not exacerbate confusion between the regenerate and the unregenerate.

If I were a Presbyterian (no doubt frightening actual Presbyterians as I write this), I would still reject theonomy and see it as contradictory to the teaching of John Calvin and the doctrinal requirements of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Following Calvin, the Westminster divines recognized a distinction between the moral, ceremonial, and civil law. Theonomists argue for the legislation of Old Testament law, but the Westminster confession, at the very least, recognizes that “sundry judicial laws” given to Israel “expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.”<sup>1</sup>

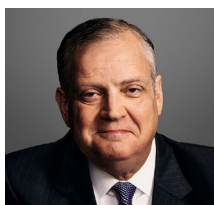
But I must also argue that some form of paedobaptism seems necessary to the theonomist vision and, by deep and abiding conviction, I am not and cannot be a paedobaptist. If victorious, at some point the paedobaptist theonomists will come for me and my fellow Baptists. We will fight back with Word and water.

The theonomists have made me a better and more consistent thinker about both the ideal condition and the

current crisis of church and civil society. I am certain that many of their intellectual enemies are frauds and fools. I am also certain, Baptist that I am, that the theonomist confusion of categories will certainly fail to bring about the society they envision were they to gain control. I stalwartly insist that conversion is normative for the Christian and for the church. I want to see an honest assertion of a necessary and explicit Christian foundation to the American order. I do not celebrate the secular state. I long for the rule of Christ and the saints. I believe such a rule will one day come in fullness. But that day will be announced with the blast of a trumpet, not a conference on theonomy.

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1. *This case is made very well by Professor Sinclair Ferguson in his essay, “An Assembly of Theonomists? The Teaching of the Westminster Divines on the Law of God,” in William S. Barker, W. Robert Godfrey, editors, Theonomy: A Reformed Critique (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 315-352.*



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# The Noahic Covenant's Importance for Government

by David VanDrunen

**G**od and humans aren't strangers to one another, as if their relationship is undefined or their obligations unknown. Instead, God has established *covenants* in which he defines his relationships with people, makes commitments to them, and demands obedience in return. The Abrahamic covenant with the house of Abraham, the Mosaic covenant with Israel, and the new covenant with the church serve as the Bible's most prominent examples. Thanks to these covenants, God's people haven't had to wonder about the nature of their relationship with him or the terms on which he deals with them.

But what about our political communities and civil governments? How should we understand their relationship with God? This article argues that God also relates to civil governments by way of covenant—specifically, the Noahic covenant he established after the great flood (Gen. 8:21–9:17).<sup>1</sup> This fact has profound implications for defining the

importance and legitimacy of civil government as well as its limited authority and modest aspirations.<sup>2</sup>

## **A Few Basic Characteristics of the Noahic Covenant**

Before turning to issues of civil government specifically, I explain a few basic characteristics of the Noahic covenant that provide the necessary background for what follows.

### *Universal.*

First, the Noahic covenant is *universal* in scope. God established it with Noah and his family and with all future generations (Gen. 9:8, 9, 12). He also established it with the entire animal kingdom, “every living creature” (9:9–13, 15–17). This covenant even extends to “the earth” (9:13) and the broader natural order: “seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night” (8:22).

### *Preservative.*

Second, the Noahic covenant is *preservative* in purpose. That is, God promises to sustain this fallen world but nothing more. Instead of destroying the earth again with a flood (8:21; 9:11, 15), he maintains the cycles of nature (8:22) and enforces boundaries between the animal and human realms (9:2–4). Noticeably absent are any promises of forgiveness, a coming Messiah, or a new creation. The Noahic covenant administers God’s *common grace*, not his saving grace.

### *Modest.*

Third, the Noahic covenant promulgates a *modest ethic* for human beings. It requires being fruitful, multiplying, and filling the earth (Gen 9:1, 7), eating plants and animals with certain restraints (9:3–4), and punishing the violent (9:6). These are important. Still, this covenant doesn’t command things that seem even more important, such as worship. This isn’t surprising. Because the covenant’s purpose is preservative, the covenant’s ethic focuses on basic activities necessary for the survival of human society: procreation, material provision, and enforcing justice.

### *Temporary.*

Finally, God put the covenant into effect *for a limited period of time*. He promised to maintain this world “while the earth remains” (8:22). From the New Testament’s perspective, we can say that the covenant’s expiration date is Christ’s Second Coming. Then he will judge the world and bring the present created order to radical consummation (e.g., 2 Pet. 3:3–13). God established this covenant to last for a very long time, which is what calling it an “everlasting covenant” means (9:16), but he never designed it to last forever.

## **The Obligation to Enforce Justice**

While the Noahic covenant doesn’t formally institute civil government, it authorizes it. To understand how consider one aspect of this covenant’s

modest ethic: enforcing justice. God said: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image” (9:6). Although this mentions a specific act of injustice—bloody murder—it points to a broader principle, the so-called *lex talionis* (law of retribution). The Mosaic covenant later summarized it as eye-for-an-eye and tooth-for-a-tooth (Exod. 21:23–25; Lev. 24:19–20; Deut. 19:21). The point isn’t the need for physical mutilation but that the punishment should fit the crime. Acts of violence should receive *proportionate* retribution.

Note three aspects of this requirement: First, the covenant requires the entire community to enforce justice. God doesn’t appoint particular people to be judges or reveal an ideal constitution but simply hands over this general responsibility to the human race.

Second, the covenant indicates that *every* perpetrator of violence should be punished and *every* victim should be avenged. It doesn’t matter whether the perpetrator or victim adheres to a particular religion, is rich or poor, or is male or female (the Hebrew word translated as “man” can refer to either). The Noachic covenant demands equal justice for all. No one should be exempt from its requirements or excluded from its benefits.

Lastly, the covenant’s context suggests that this justice must be tempered by forbearance. In the broader biblical context, God manifested his retributive justice by sending the great flood against humanity because of their violence (see 6:11). In contrast, through the Noachic covenant,

God displays his forbearance by postponing the final judgment despite continuing human sin (see 8:21). As Genesis 9:6 indicates, human beings should enforce justice under this covenant *as God’s image-bearers*. If God now tempers his justice with forbearance, so must we. We would destroy ourselves if we tried to avenge every last wrong. Instead, the Noachic covenant demands enforcing justice in a way that promotes the covenant’s purpose: preserving the human race.

### **The Noachic Covenant and the Development of Civil Government**

Against this background, readers can now understand my claim that the Noachic covenant authorizes civil government. Consider this both from the perspective of the Noachic covenant looking forward and from the New Testament looking backward.

The Noachic covenant commissions the human community to enforce justice but gives no specific instructions for doing so. Thus, how could the human community effectively fulfill this commission? Not by leaving matters in the hands of each individual. That’s no recipe for equal justice. Promoting and maintaining justice requires collaborative action for all sorts of reasons. It’s evident, therefore, that communities must establish *institutions* responsible for enforcing justice.

Fulfilling the Noachic command to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 9:1, 7) requires more than mere individuals; people must form institutions—namely, *families*—that support the

procreation and nurture of children. Likewise, fulfilling the Noahic command to do justice requires institutions designed for this purpose. Private institutions can and do serve this purpose, to be sure. But throughout history, communities have inevitably formed public institutions called *government*. It's interesting to note that governments often justify their existence (at least partly) by claiming to uphold justice in society. Moreover, people regularly beseech their governments to make wrongs right. Most communities did not intend to obey the Noahic covenant when forming such (very imperfect) institutions. But in God's mysterious providence, they fulfilled his covenantal designs.

Consider this also from the New Testament's vantage point. The Noahic covenant doesn't directly institute civil government, nor does any other biblical text. Yet texts such as Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–17 recognize existing governments as divinely authorized. Looking at these texts on their own raises a puzzling question: how are these governments divinely authorized if God never commanded anyone to establish them? The answer is that God has commissioned human communities to do justice under the Noahic covenant. Thus, when communities establish governments intended (at least in part) to do justice, these governments exist with God's approval. Paul and Peter can therefore say that civil magistrates are "appointed" and "sent" by God (Rom. 13:2; 1 Pet. 2:14). He sends them to bear the sword against the evildoer and

approve those who do what's good (Rom. 13:3–4; 1 Pet. 2:14), that is, to do justice.

## Implications

I close with a few implications. At the most general level, we see that Christians' political thinking and conduct should always reflect the fact that our governments are in covenant with God through the Noahic covenant. Our political agendas should reflect God's purposes in the Noahic covenant, and we should beware of trying to make government serve different purposes, however wise they seem to us. This general implication exposes perhaps the most fundamental flaw in the recent theonomy movement. God gave the Mosaic law to govern Israel under the Mosaic covenant (Exod. 19:5; 24:7–8; Deut. 5:2–3; 9:9; 29:1). The Law served that covenant's purposes. But no nation in the world today is under the Mosaic covenant, and thus the Mosaic law is an inappropriate standard for any of them.

I find four adjectives helpful for describing the proper character of civil government under the Noahic covenant. Each has important implications.

### *Legitimate.*

Civil governments are *legitimate*. That is, God has "instituted" and "sent" them to accomplish his purposes concerning justice (Rom. 13:1–3; 1 Pet. 2:14). Hence, all people should submit to their civil authorities, honor them, and pay taxes (Rom. 13:1, 5–7; 1 Pet. 2:13–17), and Christians should

pray for them (1 Tim. 2:1–2). Government legitimacy also implies that Christians are free to participate in politics and hold government office (cf. Luke 19:1–10; Acts 10; 13:6–12).

### *Provisional.*

Civil governments are *provisional*. That is, God has temporarily appointed them—in Noahic terms, “while the earth remains” (Gen. 8:22). They’re necessary but not of ultimate importance. Only Christ’s kingdom is of utmost importance, and that kingdom will one day destroy all earthly kingdoms (Dan. 2:3–45). Governments can accomplish good purposes but not the highest purposes. They might bear the sword to promote justice (and even that imperfectly), but they don’t minister the keys of the kingdom of heaven, which Christ entrusted to the church (Matt. 16:18–19). Thus, Christians shouldn’t stake too much on the affairs of the state. God raises rulers up and brings them down (Isa. 40:23–24). Through it all, our citizenship remains in heaven (Phil. 3:20). At the present, we have no lasting city here but seek one that’s to come (Heb. 13:12). Wise Christians keep politics in perspective.

### *Common.*

Civil governments are *common*. That is, God appointed them for *all* human beings and not for a privileged few. As noted above, God entered the Noahic covenant with all people (Gen. 9:8, 9, 12) and commissioned the entire community to enforce equal justice (9:6). Likewise, Paul calls

“every person” to obey civil authorities (Rom 13:1), says that whatever civil authority exists is from God (Rom. 13:1), and calls these authorities to punish evildoers and praise the good (Rom. 13:3–4; cf. 1 Pet. 2:14). In none of these statements does Paul distinguish between rich and poor, male and female, or Christian and non-Christian. Civil office should be open to all, civil obedience required of all, and the courts of civil justice accessible to all. Thus, Christians should seek equal justice for everyone and support religious liberty for all peaceful people. Believers are most faithful to Scripture when they resist invitations to embrace “Christian America” or “Christian nationalism” and instead promote just government policies that give no special privileges to any identity group.

### *Accountable.*

Civil governments are *accountable*. The idea that governments are common does *not* imply that they’re morally neutral. On the contrary, because they’re in covenant with God, they’re liable to him and his standards. Paul calls civil officials God’s “servants” and “ministers,” appointed not to pursue their own gain but to carry out “God’s wrath” (Rom. 13:4, 6). As servants, they must give account to God on the last day. This reminds Christians to be diligent and just as they participate in politics or hold government office. But most of all, it should encourage Christians who suffer injustice in this life, especially those suffering for Christ’s sake. On the last day, God will hold accountable

the wicked city in which is found “the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth” (Rev. 18:24).

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*1. God also made a covenant with Noah before the great flood (Gen 6:18). This was evidently a different covenant because none of*

*the four characteristics of the post-flood covenant I describe below were true of this earlier covenant. In this article, the “Noahic covenant” simply refers to the covenant post-flood. 2. I’ve discussed and defended all the ideas in this article in fuller detail in David VanDrunen, Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020).*

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# Is It Possible to Be a Baptist Christian Nationalist?

by Matthew Emerson

**C**hristian Nationalism is dominating evangelical conversations at the moment, at least in some circles. Given the current cultural challenges faced by the evangelical church in the West, and especially in the USA and Western Europe, many are looking to Christian Nationalism as an alternative political proposal to procedural liberalism, especially the variety propagated in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Yet is Christian Nationalism compatible with historic Baptist distinctives—with credobaptist, congregational convictions? It is the contention of this essay that it is not, and especially due to the difference in how Christian Nationalism and congregational credobaptists view the relation between the covenants.

## **Q: What is Christian Nationalism?**

A: As a subspecies of Magisterial Reformation political theology, Christian Nationalism sees continuity between the purpose and function

of prelapsarian, postlapsarian, and redeemed nations.

The most recent sustained reflection on “Christian nationalism” comes from Stephen Wolfe. In his *A Case for Christian Nationalism*, Wolfe defines his political philosophy like this: “[Christian Nationalism is] a totality of national action, consisting of civil laws and social customs, conducted by a Christian nation as a Christian nation, in order to procure for itself both earthly and heavenly good in Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

It is important to be aware of Wolfe’s definition and how he arrives at his position biblically and theologically. He claims his work is intentionally one of philosophical political theory rather than exegesis or theology and is grounded in Reformed theology. And, as we shall see below, the foundations of his political theory are entirely grounded in a particular understanding of biblical theology and especially in the relationship between creation, fall, and redemption to nations and political life.<sup>2</sup>

One of Wolfe’s foundational arguments is about Adam and Eve. If they had fulfilled the cultural mandate to “be fruitful and multiply and fill all the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28), their progeny would have naturally formed distinct nations distinguished by culture.<sup>3</sup> Wolfe repeatedly argues that nations in and of themselves are “natural,”<sup>4</sup> not a result of the fall, and that this natural element of God’s creation would have therefore proliferated had Adam and Eve obeyed. By implication, these nations would have been sinless and, therefore, not subject to the effects of sin on governance, relations between

“Is Christian Nationalism compatible with historic Baptist distinctives—with credobaptist, congregational convictions?”

nations, and the like. Due to creaturely finitude, however, prelapsarian nations would need to learn to relate to one another concerning (apparently inevitable) cultural distinctions and scarcity of resources. Along with these factors, civil government would therefore be necessary before the fall to aim humanity toward its highest good, namely fellowship with the Triune God.

These assumptions about prelapsarian nations—including their distinct, culturally defined existences and their need for proliferated civil legislation—carry over into Wolfe’s understanding of nations after Genesis 3 and how Christ’s work of redemption applies to the church’s relationship to nations. Regarding postlapsarian nations, Wolfe insists throughout the book that the fall does not affect nations’ natural existence or purpose. Instead, their inclination toward sinful ends exists because of sinful means.<sup>5</sup> Thus, after the fall, the existence of distinct nations, *and nations distinguishable by culture rather than by creed*,<sup>6</sup> is not in and of itself a result of the fall. In fact, according to Wolfe, this is precisely what we should expect, given that distinct nations would have proliferated and been required to relate to one another before the fall.

This assumption about the inherent goodness of distinct nations leads to Wolfe's final foundational assumption, which is as follows (my summary):

Because grace perfects nature (rather than destroying it), Christ's work of redemption perfects nations if they are so ordered civically to their highest good, namely worship and obedience of YHWH. Though not the church, the state points its citizens to their highest good, the Triune God, and to the locus of God's activity on earth, the local church, through its laws and customs.

According to Wolfe, Adam and Eve were supposed to be fruitful and multiply into many culturally distinct nations, each exercising dominion through obedience to YHWH. Unfortunately, they (and Israel) failed. Still, because of Christ's work of redemption, nations are called again to take up this mantle and exercise dominion within their borders by enacting civic laws that direct citizens to their highest good, the Triune God.

One can see that Wolfe's program relies on particular assumptions about the relationship between covenants and the definition of a nation within that framework. The latter is why his program is called Christian *Nationalism* rather than something like Magisterial Protestant Political Theology. The former reflects Wolfe's insistence on nations being distinguished from one another via *culture* rather than creed.

This brings us to the point of the essay: Baptists ought to reject both Magisterial Protestant Political Theology and later versions of Christian Nationalism and theonomy because we

articulate the relationship between the covenants and, therefore, the duty of the church and its relation to the state, much differently. But before making that point more decisively, let's answer a few other questions first.

### **Q: Is a Baptist view of the relationships between the covenants compatible with Christian Nationalism or a Magisterial View?**

A: No. As part of the Radical Reformation, Baptists see not only continuity but also discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants, which leads them to different conclusions regarding baptism, polity, and the state, namely, the coterminous relationship between the people of God and a nation (Israel) was temporary.

Let me unpack and explain this answer further in six steps.

*1. Magisterial paedobaptists argue the new covenant offers a change in administration, not in substance—covenantal inclusion still occurs through birth.*

I have belabored my summary of Wolfe's argument because this issue lies at the root of the disagreement between credobaptists and paedobaptists of the magisterial persuasion. For the latter, the new covenant is not a change in substance but in administration, and particularly in sign, due to the inclusion of the Gentiles. The covenant of salvation was given to Abraham, and his offspring, namely, the nation of Israel; inclusion in the covenant people was by birth and confirmed by faith;

and the sign of the covenant, given to infants, was circumcision. Because of Christ's completed work, the covenant now includes both Israel and the Gentiles, and so the sign changes from circumcision to baptism. But inclusion is still by birth and confirmed by faith.

According to this variety of paedobaptism, the new covenant's inauguration renders another change: instead of one nation being identified as the people of God, the church would be composed of representatives from all nations. Nevertheless, the nation does not lose its purpose to point its citizens toward their highest good, life in Christ. They do this by approaching the law as Israel did (or was supposed to), with notable changes in its articulation due to contextual differences.

***2. In contrast, credobaptists argue the new covenant offers a substantive change: entrance depends not on physical birth but on spiritual birth.***

In contrast to magisterial paedobaptists, credobaptists believe that the inauguration of the new covenant is genuinely *new*. That is, it is not merely a shift in sign related to national inclusion, but a change in *how* one is included in the covenant and *what* is required for both the sign of entry and participation. In this sense, the change from the old to the new is not merely of administration but substance. The old covenant points toward the new in its promises, but it is not univocal with it<sup>7</sup>.

Concerning the *how*, in the old covenant, entry was by physical birth into Abraham's family. Non-Israelites could become proselytes. For women, this

meant marrying an Israelite man; for men, it meant being circumcised. Still, ordinarily, inclusion happened through physical birth. In the new covenant, however, entry into the people of God is through spiritual birth (or rebirth). Jesus repeatedly teaches this in texts like Mark 3:31–35, John 3:1–8, and John 8:39–42.

In the Markan passage, Jesus subordinates one's "natural relations" (i.e., parental and filial relations) to relation to God. In the first Johannine passage, Jesus makes this even more explicit, stating that physical birth does not equal entry into the covenant people of God; only faith, the new birth, does that. And in John 8:39–42, Jesus makes clear that "new birth" means love for Christ, the one whom the Father sent and who is, together with the Father and the Spirit, I AM (John 8:58).

We also find similar statements by John the Baptist (Matt. 3:7–10) and the Apostle Paul. In Romans 9:6–8, Paul explains the change from the old covenant to the new covenant. He writes:

But it is not as though the Word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."<sup>8</sup> This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

Further along in his argument (Rom. 10:9–13), he answers the question of how both Gentiles and Jews could be included in the new covenant. Paul makes clear that inclusion comes

by faith and not by lineage. He makes a similar point in Galatians 3:1–9, which ends like this: “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”

We could multiply passages and demonstrate their continuity with OT texts like Jeremiah 31:29–30, but the point stands. The New Testament is clear: entering the new covenant is by spiritual faith, not physical birth.

**3. Point 2 means that the nation’s relation to the people of God changes: while the old covenant identifies the people of God with one particular nation, the new covenant identifies the people of God with everyone possessing faith.**

This change also means that the nation’s relation to the people of God changes. Under the old covenant, at least one nation was coterminous with the people of God. To be a part of the people of God was to be a part of Israel and vice versa. God gave Israel authority to enforce the administration of both tables of the law—concerning both the right worship of YHWH, and the right relation to one’s neighbors.

In contrast, in the new covenant, inclusion into the people of God is by faith, not birth, and thus the covenant includes all those united to Christ by faith. Although familial and national bonds are not severed, union with Christ and with one another necessarily transcends these “natural”

loves. In the new covenant, because all those who have faith in Christ are sons and daughters of God (Gal. 3:25–27), “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:28–29).

This *necessarily* means that the people of God are no longer coterminous with a nation or state because the people of God come from every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev. 7:9). The shift of entry into the covenant from lineage to conscious faith disentangles both covenant membership from family and the church from the nation. To identify a particular nation and its government with the people of God is to miss the change from the old covenant to the new covenant and the purpose of the power of government exercised in Israel in the old covenant to begin with.

**4. The governmental power exercised in Old Covenant Israel transfers not to nations today, but to Christ and his church.**

Israel’s theocratic legislation—as well as the general power of government exercised in Israel—exists for two primary reasons: first, to point forward to the coming of the Messiah, who alone can and does fulfill the law’s demands; and second, to guard the line of the seed until he comes (Gal. 3:19–24).

Once Israel’s Messiah and Abraham’s Seed arrives, he secures his cosmic kingship through his life,

death, burial and descent, resurrection, and ascension. The derivative authority he gives to his people is exercised not through the secular state but through his church. All those who submit to him are part of his kingdom, which today exists in seed form in his church, but will one day stretch across the face of the earth when he returns in glory. In the meantime, Christ has given the keys to his kingdom (Matt. 16:17–20; 18:18–20) to his church, and she exercises her authority through the right preaching of God’s Word and the right administration of the sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>8</sup>

Put another way, in our new covenant age, the state no longer functions as the arbiter or mediator of God’s Law to God’s people. The church does. The church preaches and administers the ordinances. The state, meanwhile, ought to enjoy a non-adversarial relationship to the church while exercising the sword in ways that reflect God’s natural law.

***5. The New Testament’s teaching about the state and its limitations confirms and reflects the lesson of point 4.***

We should note that this reflects the NT’s teaching about the state. Let me explain.

Paul is clear that Jesus came in the “fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4), which at the very least echoes Jesus’s own words: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15). While neither of these texts is about political theology *per se*, they indicate that, in the providence of God, Jesus arrived

precisely when he meant to. The early church was born in an environment full of hostility between both Jews and Greeks, a time where syncretistic Greco-Roman paganism regularly engaged in political persecution. This was no accident of history.

It’s worth remembering this background when we read Jesus’ exhortations to the seven churches in Revelation (Rev. 2–3), or Peter’s instructions to endure political persecution (e.g., 1 Pet. 2:11–20; 3:8–4:19), or Paul’s persevering example amid state-sponsored imprisonment and punishment (e.g., Phil. 1:7, 12–30). These situations are paradigmatic for church life. The Bride of Christ ought to expect persecution from the Babylonian Harlot, the embodiment of the followers of the Dragon and his beastly rule (Rev. 12–14; 19). In the NT, the state is not a handmaiden to the church. At worst, the state is the church’s adversary; at best, it’s a tool in the hands of the Lord to punish evil (Rom. 13:1–7) and praise what is good (1 Pet. 2:13–14).

Magisterial paedobaptists read too much into this latter phrase, seeing it as justification to understand the state as a second institution, alongside the church, that exists to enact laws based on the Christian faith. But this ignores the existence of common grace and natural law and the corresponding existence of the human conscience (cf. Rom. 1:18–2:24). To “praise the good” does not necessarily require laws against blasphemy or church attendance. Instead, praising the good requires governments to base their laws and practices on the natural law available to everyone via the common grace

gifts of logic, reason, and, ultimately, conscience.

**6. To be clear, then, a credobaptist understanding of the relationship between the covenants precludes a magisterial paedobaptist understanding.**

Before we move on to Baptist distinctives that arise from this understanding of the covenants, it is important to assert that this credobaptist understanding of the relationship between the old and new covenants precludes a magisterial paedobaptist political theology. On the contrary, the credobaptist articulation of the change from the old covenant to the new covenant necessitates a change in the purpose and operation of the state (i.e., the state no longer has authority over the first table of the law). This change in governmental responsibilities is not from Old Testament to New Testament (when accounting for the responsibilities God gave the nations) but from the old covenant to the new covenant.

The coterminous relationship between the people of God and Israel was a temporary, exceptional situation that foreshadowed but did not duplicate new covenant realities.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the state's role must be limited. We'll return to this below; first, we need to summarize Baptist distinctives that arise from this understanding of the covenants.

### **Q: How are Baptists distinct?**

A: Because of their understanding of the relation between the covenants, Baptists have historically been

distinguished from other groups by their views on baptism, polity, and the state.

Baptists affirm credobaptism because it acknowledges the individual's responsibility before God to confess Christ as Lord consciously, clearly, and publicly.

Baptists affirm congregationalism because Christ is King over the Universal Church and every local church. This places responsibility on each local church to submit to Christ's lordship in its governance via Word and sacrament.

And Baptists affirm a free church in a free state, or what we now refer to as religious liberty, because only Christ is Lord of the individual and the church's conscience. Freedom not only of belief but also of expression (within appropriate limits)<sup>10</sup> honors the human dignity of every person, the personal responsibility they hold before the Lord to either repent or reject him, and the spiritual space needed to decide to follow Christ.

These three commitments—credobaptism, congregationalism, and the conscience's liberty from state intervention—are integral to Baptist life and thought dating back to Baptist beginnings. For our purposes, then, a free church in a free state is one of *the* markers of Baptist identity, at least historically speaking.<sup>11</sup>

### **Q: In light of these distinctives, what does a Baptist political theology consist of?**

A: Baptists offer a three-pronged approach to political theology focusing

on religious liberty, appropriate political involvement, and the church as the sign of the kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

Baptist views on the state do not mean that Baptists are quietists, unengaged in political life. Instead, Baptists have historically seen the importance of political life but have refrained from ‘baptizing’ it and giving the state a larger role than it deserves.

This does not mean that Baptists have no political theology or positive vision for the state. On the contrary, Baptists have taken a three-pronged approach to political theology. Many early Baptists were heavily involved in political life at local and national levels. For them, political involvement was often a matter of survival; after all, the British government did not separate church and state in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, neither in Britain or the American colonies. Dissenters from England’s sanctioned state religion, the Anglican Church, were punished in some fashion. One of the first General (non-Calvinist) Baptists in England, Thomas Helwys, was imprisoned after he became a Baptist and wrote about his beliefs, including his conviction that the church and state should remain separate. Helwys died in jail four years later.

In the American colonies, Roger Williams, Obadiah Holmes, and John Clarke also faced various punishments for departing from the state-sanctioned Congregationalism of the Bay Colony. Many American colonies were founded by Separatists—those who had left the Anglican Church due to its corruption and heavy-handedness regarding worship practices. But once they received a charter from England’s king,

they often did no better at providing religious liberty for their own citizens.

State-sanctioned religious opposition required early Baptists to develop a thorough political theology. The emphases of these early Baptists are biblically rooted, theologically sound, and still relevant for us today. The three prongs to explore are religious liberty, appropriate political involvement, and the church as the sign of the kingdom.

### **Q: (Prong 1 of a Baptist political theology) What is a Baptist view of religious liberty?**

A: Baptists have a robust and theologically-rooted view of religious liberty, one that allows freedom of worship for all people and, thus, evangelism of all people.

Early Baptists emphasized religious liberty as more than merely a means to survive. Instead, they drew on theological principles that remain important today. While most Baptists in 21st-century America do not experience state-sponsored opposition to their faith, there are still important biblical, theological, and distinctively Baptist reasons to support religious liberty for all. Most importantly, religious liberty arises from the Baptist conviction that every person is individually accountable before God.

Put simply, no one (including the state) can coerce a person to believe. Of course, magisterial paedobaptists agree. Nevertheless, Baptists have long argued that laws preventing the free exercise of religion are an implicit kind of coercion, one that cannot and does not “work” at the level of the soul but

still puts unwarranted and unauthorized spiritual pressure on the individual to believe. An analogy is sometimes made between Christian parents, who take their children to church, and the state, who enforces laws related to the first table of the Mosaic Law. But this analogy breaks down immediately because the New Testament does not give the state the same responsibility as parents, not to mention that the gospel transcends and subordinates all “natural relations,” familial, political, and otherwise.

Individuals are free to believe or reject the gospel and, if they are Christian, to believe or deny particular denominational distinctives. Religious liberty for all does not mean that Baptists reject salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone. It simply means that the government should not force anyone to assent to a theological conclusion.

This principle also extends to practice. Early Baptists experienced opposition from the British government not only because they differed theologically from Anglicanism but also because, like other English Separatists, they refused to participate in certain Anglican practices. For example, early Baptists were imprisoned and fined for refusing to use the Book of Common Prayer and licensing preachers outside the Anglican church. This persecution led to the insistence on religious freedom, including for other religions. Therefore, Baptist political theology can champion religious liberty and personal evangelism to all because of its roots in affirming the individual’s conscience.

## **Q: (Prong 2) What Is the Relationship Between Church and State?**

A: Baptists believe that the church and state should remain separate in the sense that the government does not and cannot dictate who the church is or what she should do. The church, on the other hand, has an obligation to proclaim truth from God’s Word to the society in which she resides, including its government.

The early Baptists weren’t shy about participating in the political life of their towns, provinces, and nations. In fact, we partly owe the First Amendment to Virginia Baptist John Leland, who regularly wrote to Thomas Jefferson and maybe also to James Madison. John Clarke spent much of his life petitioning England’s king for a charter for Rhode Island that included a stipulation about religious freedom. Isaac Backus diligently worked for religious freedom in Massachusetts’s political arena before and after the American Revolution. After the United States became a sovereign nation, Baptists continued their involvement in civic and political life, serving in many public capacities. For example, William Carey worked to end the practice of Sati in India. In other words, Baptists have understood the state as one of life’s spheres in which they are called to be faithful.

For Baptists, the “separation of church and state” does not remove religion from the public square. Instead, this separation protects the individual conscience, churches, and other religions from intervention by the

government. Christians' participation in politics is justified and encouraged because God's calling in Christ encompasses every area of life. The Bible may not provide particular policy positions on things like health care or traffic laws, but God's wisdom applies to political life. To put it a bit differently, the church is still the church when it is scattered and not gathered for worship on the Lord's Day.

Historically, Baptists have seen this as especially important in caring for "the least of these." We have worked diligently in civic and political arenas in order to help the poor, orphaned, widowed, and hungry. Article XV of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, "On Christians and the Social Order," articulates this commitment well:

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ.

In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography.

We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick.

We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death.

Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends, Christians should be ready to work with all men of good will in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth.<sup>13</sup>

### **Q: (Prong 3) What role does the church play?**

A: While Christian Nationalists see the nation-state as the sign of Christ's Kingdom alongside the Church, Baptists view the latter as the only true sign of Christ's reign.

I used the adjective "appropriate" in the previous point because Baptists emphasize that Christ's kingdom is seen primarily in the local church, not in government. This means that our efforts should ultimately focus on the local church, the only institution to which Christ entrusts the keys to his kingdom. It is in the local church that the things of heaven are bound and loosed on earth. In the local church, Christ's Word reigns supremely visibly through preaching and the ordinances. In the local church, the lost are called to repentance, disciples are made, and the Holy Spirit is present.

Baptist political theology thus acknowledges that Christians are first citizens of Christ's kingdom, which

is made visible primarily in the local church. (This, by the way, is another reason Baptists have long argued for the separation of church and state—the state isn't the primary sign of Christ's kingdom on earth.) But Baptists also acknowledge that we are citizens of earthly nations. Although every nation will one day fade away (and face judgment) at the second coming of King Jesus, we are called to be faithful citizens now.

**Q: What does this three-prong political theology mean for Baptists today?**

A: Baptists today can work for the good of their neighbors through the political process while refraining from 'baptizing' their government and thereby placing an undue burden on the state to do what only the Church can.

This balanced account was emphasized by early Baptists and should remain an emphasis for Baptists today. Baptists can and should participate in the civil and political life of our counties, towns, states, and nations, but we do so while recognizing that these kingdoms are not ultimate—Christ's is.

Our political theology, therefore, appropriates Christ's kingdom as more important than our earthly kingdoms and chastens its expectations for earthly politics accordingly. We focus our energies on building up the primary sign of Christ's kingdom, the local church, but not to the exclusion of all life's areas, including politics.

**Q: Are there other reasons why Baptists cannot adopt a Christian nationalist position?**

A: Yes, the Christian nationalist's view of the nation subtly works against the Christian missionary impulse.

So far, I've argued that the covenantal theology of congregational credobaptists is antithetical to the theology of the state offered by magisterial paedobaptists. However, it is important to note that Baptists' tension with Christian nationalism goes beyond a fundamental disagreement over the covenants.

In my estimation, there is also a conflict, albeit perhaps subtle, with a Christian missionary impulse. For the Christian nationalist, nations are formed based on cultural commonalities, or "familiarity with others based in common language, manners, customs, stories, taboos, rituals, calendars, social expectations, duties, loves, and religion."<sup>14</sup> Particular nations act in the interest of their distinct peoples, even to the extent of refusing Christian refugees.

To expand on this a bit further, for the Christian nationalist, "missions" can amount to little more than procreation within its own borders and, perhaps in certain, "justified" circumstances, military conquest of non-Christian nations. The propagation of the gospel can thus happen either by birth in the state or by force in this model. Church membership and state citizenship occur simultaneously at birth, and military conquest under so-called justifiable circumstances is supposedly for the sake of Christ and

expanding his kingdom. Conquered peoples are also now church members.

Missions in this model thus seem reducible to procreation and conquest. Rather than emphasizing the need for every person to respond to the gospel, and therefore rather than urging every Christian to share their faith and consider their role in bringing the gospel to the nations around the world, the impetus lies with the nuclear family to procreate and the state to wield its sword, both at home and abroad. Notice that the family and the state thus supersede the church, in one sense, as the locus of God's activity in the world.

Baptists, on the other hand, don't believe the gospel destroys natural relations—marriage, family, nation—but these “natural relations” are transcended and subordinated to the gospel. Indeed, the gospel affirms our natural relations in a variety of ways, as with marriage (e.g., Matt. 19:1–12 and par.) and familial relations (e.g., Eph. 6:1, 4; Col. 3:20–21). Still, the communion of the saints, grounded in union with Christ, transcends and subordinates all other natural relations and loves, what Wolfe calls “complacent loves.”<sup>15</sup>

These natural bonds have been corrupted by sin, and while the gospel can and often does restore these relationships, faith in Christ also transcends and subordinates them. Grace not only presupposes but perfects nature, albeit in a way that does not merely revert to the *status quo*. In fact, according to complacent love, we only treat our natural kith and kin, those who share our blood

and our soil, as those we prioritize in giving and receiving love. As Jesus says, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” (Matt. 5:46). But supernaturally—that is, by grace through faith in Christ and by the corollary communion of the saints—we prioritize the body of Christ regardless of familial or cultural relations. And this includes national relations. For the Baptist, what matters most is not familial or national allegiance but heavenly citizenship with all those who express faith in Christ.<sup>16</sup>

### **Q: Are there any areas of common ground between Baptists and Christian nationalists?**

A: Yes, Baptists believe that a nation's laws should reflect God's laws.

Despite these significant areas of conflict, there remains some common ground between Baptists and Christian nationalists or, more broadly, magisterial political theology. Early Baptists, and indeed many Baptists through the first half of the twentieth century, believed that Christians should support the government's promotion of the good and punishment of evil in ways that reflected God's law.

Contrary to some assumptions, Baptists of old are not automatically Libertarian. They affirmed that government could positively reflect God's law in the laws they enact. However, they also believed governments could and do err, often egregiously.

Contemporary Baptists are not required to support a kind of bare-bones procedural liberalism to retain the label “Baptist.” We, too, can lament the onslaught of progressive liberalism in much of the post-Christendom West. We can also work for better laws that accurately reflect how God designed the world. But we do so not by fighting for an establishmentarian government. Instead, we seek to do good to our neighbors, most significantly by sharing the gospel with them.

### **Q: Once again, can a Baptist be a Christian nationalist?**

A: No.

This brings us back to the question – can a Baptist be a Christian nationalist? No, because Christian nationalism, as a species of magisterial political theology, is antithetical to a Baptist understanding of the covenants.

No, because it misunderstands the purpose of the state in the new covenant.

No, because Christian nationalism erroneously inverts the relationships between the communion of the saints to “complacent loves,” subordinating the former to the latter rather than vice versa. And, in doing so, Christian nationalism inhibits and is at odds with the Baptist missionary impulse.

This does not mean Baptists cannot or should not actively work toward the common good in their political environments via appropriate political means. But that is not Christian nationalism nor is it historical Baptist political theology. In fact, it is not the

political theology of the earliest Christians. Chapter 5 of the second-century writing, *The Epistle to Diognetus*, serves as our final summary:

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh (2 Cor. 10:3) They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20). They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life (2 Cor. 6:9) They are poor, yet make many rich

(2 Cor. 6:10); they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless (2 Cor. 4:12); they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

*should note that not all paedobaptists take a Magisterial position (i.e. there are free church paedobaptists).*

8. *There is thus an eschatological element to Baptist political theology, one that recognizes the already/not yet of Christ's kingdom, its relation to all other kingdoms, and the place of the church in between the times.*

9. *Thanks to Taylor Hartley for his suggestions regarding strengthening the language of this section. This sentence and the previous one relies on his edits and even specific wording.*

10. *It is important to recognize that Baptists have historically insisted that religious liberty has boundaries, specifically those related to harm or violence brought against one's neighbor through religious expression. This sentiment was shared among the American founders. To paraphrase Article XII of the Baptist Faith & Message 2000, freedom of conscience has to be balanced with personal responsibility, both to God and to one's neighbor.*

11. *This paragraph is, with slight adaptations, from Matthew Y. Emerson, "Is There a Baptist Contribution to Political Theology?" The London Lyceum, October 17, 2022. Online: <https://www.thelondonlyceum.com/is-there-a-baptist-contribution-to-political-theology/>. Accessed January 23, 2023. For those interested in pursuing Baptist primary sources, I cite many of the major founding Baptist documents in this essay.*

12. *The following material was originally published at the ERLC's blog as "3 Ways to Learn From Early Baptists about Political Theology," May 9, 2018. Online: <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/3-ways-to-learn-from-early-baptists-about-political-theology/>. Accessed January 24, 2023.*

13. *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article XV: "On Christians and the Social Order."*

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1. *Stephen Wolfe, The Case for Christian Nationalism (Moscow: Canon, 2022), 9.*

2. *Wolfe, The Case for Christian Nationalism, cf. e.g. 21, 42, although he refers to this schema throughout.*

3. *Ibid., 39–80.*

4. *Ibid., 39–80.*

5. *The latter portion of this sentence is my attempt to summarize what I \*think\* Wolfe would say; he hardly touches the issue of how sin affects nations and instead focuses almost the entirety of his attention on their "naturalness" and "goodness."*

6. *Ibid., cf. e.g. 119 for the rejection of the "creedal nation concept," and the surrounding section for the argument for distinguishing nations via culture.*

7. *While credobaptists generally agree with Magisterial Reformers regarding soteriology, i.e. in a broadly Protestant sense, and while certain credobaptist groups (e.g. Reformed Baptists) can even agree on the finer points of soteriology with presbyterians and other Magisterial Reformation streams, the understanding of the relation between the covenants is the major breaking point with respect to both baptism and political theology. On the latter, we*

Online: <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#xv>. Accessed January 24, 2023.

14. Wolfe, The Case for Christian Nationalism, 136.

15. *Ibid.*, 25, 151–62.

16. I owe much of the conceptual point of this paragraph, and indeed even some of the phrasing, to Luke Stamps, who kindly commented on a draft of this paper. Used with permission.

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# Postmillennialism and Theonomy

by David Schrock

If you are looking to understand postmillennialism, the *Dictionary of Christianity in America* offers a typical definition: postmillennialism is “the belief that the return of Christ will take place after the millennium, which may be a literal period of peace and prosperity or else a symbolic representation of the final triumph of the gospel.”<sup>1</sup> This definition is accurate, as far as it goes, but an optimistic amillennial (like myself) could generally affirm everything contained in this definition.<sup>2</sup> I also essentially agree with everything contained in the definition Keith Mathison provides in his book *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope?*

According to postmillennialism, in the present age, the Holy Spirit will draw unprecedented multitudes to Christ through the faithful preaching of the gospel. Among the multitudes who will be converted are the ethnic Israelites who have thus far rejected the Messiah. At the end of the present age, Christ will return, there will be a general resurrection of the just and the unjust, and the final judgment will take place.<sup>3</sup>

Nor do I balk at the six ways Mathison defines Postmillennialism elsewhere in the same book. Let me form his points into questions.<sup>4</sup>

1. “The kingdom of Christ has been inaugurated”? Check. Christ is reigning on high, and all things in creation have been put under his feet (Eph. 1:22–23).
2. “The kingdom is redemptive”? Check. Christ the Lord actively saves and judges the world today (Acts 10:42–43).
3. “The growth of the kingdom is progressive”? Check. The kingdom of God is currently leavening the world (Matt. 13:31–33), even as the weeds and the wheat are growing up together (Matt. 13:36–43).<sup>5</sup>
4. “The kingdom grows supernaturally”? Check. Christ’s kingdom comes through his Spirit and Word (Acts 1:6–8).
5. “This growth will lead to worldwide conversion”? Check. In the end, the number of the redeemed will be a vast multitude, greater (I believe) than the damned (see Revelation 7).
6. “The kingdom will be perfectly consummated only at the second coming”? Check. What amillennial doesn’t believe that?

Long story short, I write this appraisal of postmillennialism as someone who deeply appreciates the postmillennialists I’ve read, watched, and listened to. This list includes theologians like R.C. Sproul, historians like Iain Murray, apologists like Greg Bahnsen,

biblical scholars like Peter Leithart, and pastors like Douglas Wilson.<sup>6</sup> I have benefitted from each of these men, and so I begin with three appreciations that help introduce the appeal of postmillennialism.<sup>7</sup> After that, I will turn to seven reservations that make me ultimately reject postmillennialism.

### Three Appreciations

My appreciation for postmillennialism goes back twenty years to when I read Iain Murray’s *The Puritan Hope*.<sup>8</sup> In that Banner of Truth paperback, Murray outlines how postmillennialism fueled missions among the Puritans. Yet, it wasn’t only missions the Puritans pursued; they also established their homes, lives, and politics around a biblical form of Christendom. In my reading of Murray, I was not convinced exegetically, but I was rebuked by the Puritan commitment to the gospel and its power. Truly, those who believe Jesus is Lord should live with absolute assurance that everything has been placed under his feet.

Twenty years later, amid great cultural strife, it is no surprise that postmillennialism has gained a new hearing. Postmillennialists live with a deep sense of optimism in the power of God through the gospel. By contrast, premillennials, who expect the Lord’s return to follow the world’s ruin, are generally more pessimistic. Meanwhile, amillennials live somewhere in between. In general terms, this is a fair assessment of the attitudes that various eschatological views produce, and it leads to the first of my three appreciations.

### **1. The message of postmillennialism is bold.**

Somewhere between the grip of government lockdowns and the virtue of vaccine mandates, many American Christians began to look for a way to respond to a government that looked more like 1984 rather than 1789, the year America ratified the Constitution. For instance, *James White embraced postmillennialism* during COVID, when in response to the “secular technocratic totalitarianism,” he read Joe Boot’s book, *The Mission of God* and was captivated by its message.<sup>9</sup> Around the same time, I saw many other Christians beginning to consider postmillennialism, many lamenting the silence of evangelical leaders on matters related to church and state.

By contrast, postmillennialists were outspoken against government-imposed regulations. For example, Wilson spoke with a boldness that was equally repellent and attractive. Now, independent of your assessment of Wilson, it is beyond dispute that his ministry attracted a wide following. And critically, his bravado arises from a deep-seated conviction in postmillennialism. After all, in his view, Christ is currently putting enemy nations under his feet, so Christians should seek to spread his rule into all the earth.

Indeed, when the world was shaking, and evangelicals were social distancing, Wilson led his church to sing Psalms in public, some getting arrested in the process. Likewise, he continued to publish, podcast, and push against government overreach in ways that stem from his theological conviction

that Christ is Lord. Question his tact, reject his language, lament his controversial takes, but you cannot deny his willingness to step into the fray. Admittedly, this type of pugilism may foster unhealthy tendencies in some young pastors, but his boldness is related to why others have adopted his theology *and* eschatology.

### **2. The source of postmillennialism is biblical.**

While some might think of postmillennialism as a utopian dream or a tenet of the Social Gospel, there is another form of postmillennialism that seeks to deal honestly with the Bible. The soundness of this dealing is another question, but when we read the Puritans—ancient or modern—we find that postmillennialism is derived from a serious reading of the Bible. Even more, it considers and depends heavily on the history of the first century. That is to say, postmillennialism requires, among other things, a (partial) preterist reading of the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13) and the book of Revelation.<sup>10</sup>

Such a reading of the Bible does not deny Scripture’s authority, as the postmillennialism of Walter Rauschenbusch did. Instead, it necessitates digging deeper into the text. In fact, postmillennialism boasts a strong bench of biblical scholars. This list includes all those above and many others today making biblical arguments for postmillennialism. Ultimately, one may reject postmillennialism, but it must be based on biblical interpretation, not *a priori* assumptions.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. *The vision of postmillennialism is big.*

In an age when the influence of Christianity is shrinking, postmillennialism has a big vision of the world and everything in it. Indeed, whereas rapture-ready eschatologies are left looking to leave earth, and other Pre- and Amillennialists adopt various positions between heaven and earth, postmillennialists uniformly see Christ's Lordship as a command to establish God's kingship on earth. To be sure, all Christians pray for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:9–10), but postmillennialists see it as their responsibility to extend Christ's rule by means of discipling the nations (Matt. 28:19).

Exegetically, postmillennials apply Psalm 2, Psalm 72, Psalm 110, and Daniel 7:13–14 to Christ's rule on earth today. As counterintuitive as it may sound, postmillennialism has appealed to many today *because* the world appears to be getting worse. Yet, behind the rise of this darkness is the sure promise that Christ will soon stamp out his enemies (Ps. 110:1).

Indeed, if Psalm 110 was fulfilled in Christ's ascension, which I have argued elsewhere, then it follows that Christ is today saving his elect (vv. 2–3) and defeating his enemies (vv. 5–7). As Lord over all, Jesus is even now putting enemies under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25) until the last day when he will put death to death (v. 26). That will happen at the second coming. Therefore, postmillennialists have a big vision of the church's mission from the presupposition of Christ's Lordship.<sup>12</sup> This big

vision of the church's mission extends beyond merely making disciples; it includes seeing those disciples bring transformational change to all the nations of the earth.

One may protest at this point, saying that Dispensationalists like Jerry Falwell, Sr., of Moral Majority fame, or historic premillennial, Francis Schaeffer, author of *A Christian Manifesto*, did just as much to engage culture as any postmillennialist. That's a fair point, but one that invites further investigation. For, behind Falwell and Schaeffer, as well as the Religious Right, and the more recent homeschooling movement, stands the same postmillennialist: Rousas J. Rushdoony.<sup>13</sup>

In his book, *Christian Reconstruction: R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism*, Michael McVicar shows how Rushdoony influenced a generation of conservative thinkers and Moral Majority leaders. He was personally involved with Falwell's turn towards the public, and his theology underwrote much of Schaeffer's *A Christian Manifesto*.<sup>17</sup> While Rushdoony's acerbic character pushed Rushdoony outside the public eye, his postmillennial ideas influenced a generation of non-postmillennials.<sup>15</sup>

Add to this, Rushdoony's impact on theologians like Gary North, Greg Bahnsen, and Douglas Wilson, and the way his dominionist theology shaped the New Apostolic Reformation,<sup>16</sup> and you begin to see how wide-ranging postmillennialism is. Today, some of the most ardent advocates for retaking America for Christ are premillennial in eschatology but postmillennial in political engagement. Through

cross-pollination, the impact of post-millennialism is not contained to Moscow, Idaho; it has also landed in places like Lynchburg, Virginia and countless home school curricula.

So, postmillennialism is big in the sense that it has had a larger impact than most people recognize. But my appreciation for its “bigness” is not its effectiveness to impact the masses. Such an appreciation for all things “huge” would be American, not Christian. No, my appreciation for postmillennialism is in the way it takes seriously the call to let Scripture inform every area of life—from the hearth of the cottage to the halls of congress. This does not deny a wide vision for cultural engagement from other eschatologies, but this is still different from postmillennialism, which engages culture as its *raison d'être*.

All this being the case, if cultural engagement is a strength, it can also be a weakness. Whenever a theology or church over-promises (think: the prosperity gospel), it will of necessity under-deliver. And when it under-delivers, and the nations are still not Christian, it can erode faith. As Proverbs 13:12 states, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.” And thus, if a theology of hope (as in postmillennialism) makes claims that go beyond the promises of Scripture, then it not only misses the mark biblically, but it also threatens the soul, practically. To this point, I now offer seven reservations.

### **Seven Critical Reservations**

I have benefitted immensely from post-millennials, and I think others may

as well. But this is much like how I have been helped by Presbyterians—namely, at a distance and without becoming one of them. I enjoy the big, bold, biblical vision of postmillennialism, but covenantally and confessionally, I am a Baptist. And this means postmillennialism, especially of a theonomic variety, does not square with my Baptist ecclesiology or my progressive covenantal understanding of the Bible. So, for that reason, let me offer seven critiques of postmillennialism that call us back to Scripture.

#### ***1. Postmillennials treat the Mosaic Covenant as a universal principle for all nations instead of a forward-looking promise that brings us to the gospel of Jesus Christ.***

In 1 Timothy 1:8–11, Paul says that Moses’s Law must be read *lawfully*. Among other things, this means we must see how the gospel preached beforehand (Gal. 3:8) brings us to Jesus Christ. For as Paul puts it elsewhere, all the promises of God are “yes” and “amen” in him (2 Cor. 1:20). In this way, we should recognize how the Law of Moses—i.e., the Law-Covenant—was given to the people of Israel and applied to them at a particular time and place. As Colossians 2:17 and Hebrews 10:1 indicate, the Law-Covenant presented God’s truth in type and shadow, not in ageless principles. Yet, postmillennialism treats every part of the Law-Covenant (e.g., the Sabbath, penal codes, blessings and curses pertaining to the land, etc.) as a timeless revelation that is equally applicable to every other nation.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the Word of God has application to all people at all times (see Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16–17), but it must be understood on its own terms and through the development of covenant history. In my estimation, progressive covenantalism best explains the framework of redemptive history. And this framework means that God’s plan of redemption does not come through a singular covenant of grace with multiple administrations, as is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Instead, the new covenant, as explicated in Jeremiah 31:31–34 and especially Isaiah 53–55, is the covenant whereby the nations will come into the kingdom of God—hence, kingdom through covenant.<sup>18</sup>

Space does not permit a full explanation of the biblical covenants. Still, it is critical to note that postmillennialism works with a view of the covenants, especially the Davidic covenant, that sees Christ’s reign as granting the church a regal authority on par with, if not over, the nations. I believe this approach fails to read the Old Testament’s typological structures through the new covenant’s sum and substance.<sup>19</sup> A postmillennial reading of the covenants rightly assigns Christ absolute dominion over the nations but wrongly grants that same authority to the church. I will get to this below, but for now, I am observing that the way postmillennialism applies the Mosaic and Davidic covenants is mistaken.

## *2. Postmillennials read the Messianic Psalms without the aid of the New Testament.*

By this, I mean they take passages like Psalm 2, 72, and 110 and apply them to Christ without relying on the

apostles to explain how they should be applied. Instead of recognizing how the new covenant fulfills Old Testament prophecy, they draw a direct connection between David’s son reigning over nations and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Of course, this is true—Jesus *is* David’s greater son (2 Sam. 7:14; Matt. 22:41–46), he does possess the keys to David’s kingdom (Isa. 22:22–25; Rev. 3:7; cf. Matt. 16:18), he does sit on Mount Zion (Ps. 2:6; Heb. 12:22–24), and all things have been put under his feet (Ps. 110:1; Eph. 1:22–23). But the New Testament also explains *how* these things have happened.

Ironically, there is a parallel hermeneutic between premillennialism and postmillennialism. In the former, Christ will return to reign on the earth over a literal kingdom. In the latter, Christ is already reigning over a literal, earthly kingdom; only this kingdom is brought about by the gospel and the church’s mission.

In my estimation, postmillennialism is better than premillennialism, because Christ is at this very moment ruling over all things, just as Paul declares in Ephesians 1:22–23. But what is missed in postmillennialism is the way that Paul and other apostles explain *how* Christ is bringing every nation into submission (see the rest of Ephesians). The church’s mission is not to make nations Christian. Instead, its mission is to make one new nation—namely, one royal assembly created by the Spirit, gathered from all the nations of the earth. More on that below.

For now, I want to point out that postmillennialism, like premillennialism, suffers from a reading of the Old Testament that does not let the New Testament

sufficiently explain how Christ fulfills the messianic Psalms and other prophecies. Accordingly, they treat God’s mission in national terms. This is another piece of evidence that affirms my first reservation and applies equally here—postmillennials misapply the Old Testament.

They argue by simple analogy: As God dealt with Israel as a nation, so now he deals with all nations in the same way. This logic opens the door to theonomy, general equity or otherwise, and a view of the world where God deals with nations as nations.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the question becomes: Is this how the New Testament understands God’s work in the world? I think not.

### 3. Postmillennials understand the Great Commission in terms of nations, more than churches.

If we boil this debate down to one verse and one question, it might be Matthew 28:19 and the meaning of the church’s mission. Is the mission of the church to “disciple the nations” or to “make disciples of the nations.” Do you see the difference?<sup>21</sup>

The former rendering of Matthew 28:19 renders a more literal translation of the imperative (*mathēteuō*), indicating that the disciples of Christ are to take aim at the nations and disciple them. That is, the church is to instruct the kings of the earth to “kiss the Son” and pay homage

to the Lord of lords (Ps. 2:10–12). In this approach, the church’s mission does not terminate on individuals but on nations that come to obey the Son (Rom. 1:7). This is not to impugn postmillennialists as denying individual regeneration. But there remains a difference in how they understand the relationship between church and state. Generally speaking, they long to see nations brought to Christ, even if not every member of the nation is converted.<sup>22</sup>

By contrast, the translation, “make disciples of all nations,” is less literal—the word “make” (*poieō*) is not a word found in the verse—but as I will argue, this rendering is more theologically sensitive. That is to say, the command to make disciples is not only a royal function of Matthew 28:18, fulfilling the words of Daniel 7:13–14, but it is also a priestly function of Matthew 28:18–20. In other words, the call to “make disciples” should be seen in the context of worship (Matt. 28:16–17) and God building a new temple.

How do we see this? It begins by comparing Matthew 28:18–20 to 2 Chronicles 36:23. Notice the parallels outlined in the figure below. In both passages, royal authority is granted to a king by the God of Israel (**bold**). Likewise, a command to build a temple is given (*italics*). And then, a promise of help is also offered (underline).

2 CHRONICLES 36:22–23	MATTHEW 28:18–20
<p><sup>23</sup> “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and <i>he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.</i> Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.’”</p>	<p><sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> <i>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,</i> baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”</p>

Put together, in 2 Chronicles 36, authority is given to a king, Cyrus, who will build a temple, where the presence of the Lord will continue. By comparison, Matthew 28 ends with a greater king, Jesus Christ, who is given authority to build a temple of all nations.<sup>23</sup> Yes, the word *temple* is not present in Matthew 28, but when read in the context of Matthew, we have the promise that God is going to build his *ekklesia*, which cannot be destroyed by death (Matt. 16:18). Moreover, that church will have the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:19–20), which is good for exercising discipline within the church (Matt. 18:15–20). Importantly, the church is not given the keys of the kingdom to discipline the nations *as nations*. Instead, it is given the keys to exercise discipline within the church itself.

From this reading of the Great Commission, I am persuaded that the command to “make disciples” is not simply a commission to instruct or “disciple” the nations and their rulers. It is, instead, a call to see a new nation formulated by means of a living temple being constructed by the death and resurrection of Christ. To build on my first reservation, the kingdom that Jesus has received is not built by discipling fallen nations to obey Christ outwardly, hoping that some within those kingdoms will obey him from the heart. Rather, the primary ministry of the new covenant is priestly, as it aims to see the heart purified (Jer. 31:31–34) and the conscience cleansed (Heb. 9:14). Through regeneration, not Christianization, God is creating a new kingdom, a new temple, and a new covenant people. In Matthew 28:16–20, all

these elements must be read together. And when they are, they lead to a Baptist ecclesiology, which is largely at odds with postmillennialism.

#### *4. Postmillennialism is a generally paedobaptistic doctrine.*

It would take too long to address the doctrine of baptism comprehensively, but it must be noted that postmillennialism best fits with paedobaptism, not credobaptism.<sup>24</sup> If the church’s goal is to win nations for Christ, then those nations become the patrons and protectors of the church. This is what the Westminster Confession Faith (23.3) declares. It is also what a postmillennial view of Matthew 28:19 requires—nations discipled by the church of Christ, who in turn lead their peoples to be baptized in the name of Christ.<sup>25</sup>

Again, this is where credobaptists should step off. Baptists believe that the new covenant is distinct from the old and that the sign of the new covenant (water baptism) is reserved for those who are born again. Accordingly, a local church (as an embassy of God’s one, holy nation) has the right to baptize believers. Nations, Christian or otherwise, do not. Equally, Baptists oppose state churches, which would be tasked with Christianizing the world. While Baptists should engage the public square and pursue political interests, this should be done in a way that maintains regenerate church membership.<sup>26</sup>

Notably, the postmillennialism of the Puritans arose in countries with state churches. Yes, postmillennialism crossed the Atlantic and funded missionary efforts in other places. For example, Andrew Fuller, influenced

profoundly by Jonathan Edwards, was a Baptist and postmillennial. Still, postmillennialism's natural residence is found in non-Baptistic settings. In fact, Stephen Wolfe makes this very point. He writes, "Paedobaptism is consistent with Christian nationalism because it makes possible a society that is baptized in infancy and thus is subject to Christian demands for all of life."<sup>27</sup>

He's exactly right. And he draws the correct conclusion from this observation too. "It is difficult to see how cultural Christianity, as I've described it, could operate effectively with that theology."<sup>28</sup> Today, a growing number of Baptists hold postmillennialism, but at root there is a conflict in passages like Matthew 28:19 and the church's mission.

Baptist ecclesiology is a view of God's church that draws people out of the world and establishes a nation that stands against the nations in which they live. This does not deny a role for Baptists in politics or culture-making. However, it does mean that the fundamental division in the world is marked by regeneration, believer's baptism, and the formation of a new, holy nation.

***5. The church is God's holy nation, which results in regenerate membership, not national Christendom.***

Continuing this line of thought, postmillennialism downplays the New Testament defining God's holy nation as his spiritual house, holy priesthood, and a people created by his Holy Spirit (1 Pet. 2:4–5, 9–10). Indeed, in the New Testament, especially Acts, God does not have chosen tribes, consecrated

“When postmillennialism locates the work of God in transforming nations, it fails to see how Israel is a type of God's people, not a mere example.”

peoples, or disciplined nations. Instead, the New Testament treats Israel as a historical arrangement preparing the way for the church, which is neither Jew nor Gentile (Gal. 3:28), but a “third race” of men (1 Cor. 10:32), a new nation in Christ (see, e.g., Gal. 6:15–16). Indeed, the New Testament is not silent about who God's nation is—it is the church of Jesus Christ, comprised of Jews and Gentiles born again from every nation under heaven (cf. Psalm 87).

When postmillennialism locates the work of God in transforming nations, it fails to see how Israel is a type of God's people, not a mere example. Yes, Christians have a role in bringing salt and light to their nations (Matt. 5:14–16). Regrettably, many Christians have forsaken this calling. Yet, in response to such apathy, many Baptists are now following postmillennial non-Baptists into battle. Without a clear commitment to Baptist ecclesiology (read: biblical ecclesiology), so-called magisterial Baptists are picking up habits of cultural engagement that focus on instructing the nations with God's law. Yet, without recognizing the way

Baptist and Paedobaptist ecclesiologies will result in different political theologies, many postmillennial Baptists are conjoining arguments and approaches from both theological systems. This too needs further assessment.

To speak more succinctly, there is a way God relates to the nations as nations, but this is mediated and explicitated through the Noahic covenant. The Old Testament demonstrates multiple ways God judges nations for things revealed more clearly to Israel (see, e.g., Isaiah 13–23; Jeremiah 46–51; Ezekiel 25–32). Yet, this judgment of the nations is based upon the stipulations of the Noahic Covenant (which was universal to all the nations), not on the Law given to Israel (cf. Rom. 2:14–15). Yes, there is a symmetry between God’s judgment on the nations based on the Noahic Covenant and his law given to Moses—after all God is the author of both. But while there is symmetry, there is also a difference.

The Noahic covenant only offered a measure of common grace and preservation; it could not redeem anyone. In a non-saving way, it made a nation or a king “righteous,” as in the case of Abimelech (Genesis 20). And this may also apply to nations today. But as the storyline of Scripture unfolds, redemption comes to the nations through the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup> And this gospel is aimed at individuals, who by their regeneration are joined to the one, true, and living God and his one, true, and living nation (the church).

Certainly, when a cluster of individuals are born again, families (Acts 16), churches (Acts 11–15), markets (Acts 19), and nation-states

(Acts 20–28) will be changed. But the measure of that change is unknown and not guaranteed. Could such salvation lead to a worldwide golden age? One could hope so. But God has not promised to renovate a fallen world; he has promised “regeneration” for the entire cosmos (Matt. 19:28). Because all nations are under the Lord’s feet, he will gather his sheep from them, and he will build his church. But the church is a “nation” that is guaranteed success, not the renovation of individual nations.

Indeed, across the ages, nations will rise and fall, the weeds will grow with the wheat, and the church of Jesus Christ will be established in the midst of it all. In some places, like America, the church will tremendously influence governors and governments—all three branches no less. In other places, it will not. And while postmillennialism targets nations and their rulers as the object of Christ’s reign, it must restrict the passages about suffering for Christ and worldly hostility to the inter-advental period between Christ’s ascension and his judgment on Jerusalem (A.D. 70). This reading of events in Jerusalem has some textual support, but its approach to suffering in the world is one of postmillennialism’s greatest weaknesses.<sup>30</sup>

### ***6. Postmillennialism understands conversion in terms of nations rather than individuals.***

Returning to the Great Commission, we find another weakness in postmillennialism, and this weakness relates to the way evangelism and conversion is often understood in national terms. That is to say, when Jesus says

to “make disciples of all nations,” post-millennialists are happy to see this in terms of some type of Christendom—a cultural Christianity that sees nations Christianized, even if every citizen is not born again. While I am comfortable with seeing the effects of Christianity impacting culture, I am adamantly convinced that cultural Christianity is a providential byproduct of conversion, not a goal that churches should seek directly.<sup>31</sup>

Here is what I mean: when Jesus speaks in Matthew 28:19, he could be using that word “nation” in one of two ways. He could be using it as a collective singular, such that he’s really referring to *the members of all nations*. Matthew does this, for instance, when he writes, “Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him” (3:5). Matthew doesn’t mean the entire city of Jerusalem, or everyone in the region of Judea, was going out to be baptized by John. Rather, a large number of people from the city and the state were seeking baptism. Conversely, Jesus could be treating the word more as a proper singular, as when one says, “Germany declared war on America.” Many post-millennials seem to treat “nation” in the latter way, declaring that the whole country can or should seek baptism. Historically, the church *has* baptized nations, and in turn, nations have identified themselves with the church, even putting kings over the church (see the King of England), but we must ask: Is this what Jesus means? I think not.

There are three challenges with the postmillennial interpretation of Matthew 28:19, and they all they lead to a

misunderstanding of conversion. First, the gender of the Greek words change from the neuter “nation” (*ethnē*) to the masculine “them” (*autous*). This suggests the “them” is personal, as in, members of the nations. This part-of-the-whole rendering interpretation fits with Revelation 5:9, which refers to a final heavenly people “from” all nations. Moreover, it fits with the way disciples are made in the book of Acts. Individuals, not city-states, are converted—even as city-states are impacted by the gospel.<sup>32</sup>

Second, the postmillennial interpretation gives every nation of this world an eternal status, as if to say “Germany” is a baptized disciple and is eternal; “Kenya” is a baptized disciple and is eternal; and so forth. On balance, C. S. Lewis is closer to the truth when he observes, “It [the collective] is mortal; we shall live forever. There will come a time when every culture, every institution, every nation, the human race, all biological life, is extinct, and every one of us is still alive.”<sup>33</sup> Postmillennialism, however, sacralizes the temporary nations of this world—in large part because many postmillennialists see nations as intrinsic to creation and not a result of the fall. Space does not permit that discussion here, but suffice it to say, I am less optimistic that nations should derive their origin story from creation. I would place that story in Genesis 3–11, not Genesis 1–2. If God is making one new man (Eph. 2:15), one household of faith (1 Tim. 3:15), one chosen race, and one holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9–10), then it follows that *from* all the nations (Rev. 5:9) God is creating one eternal people. The new creation restores to

nature what was lost by the fall—namely, the unity of humanity.

Third, if the postmillennial reading of “nations” is correct, we would expect to see such “disciples”—i.e., whole nations—showing up in the rest of the New Testament and asking to be baptized. Instead, the book of Acts shows us people *from* the nations showing up to be baptized. Even more, the book of Acts, that goes to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8), consistently shows this pattern: (1) Spirit-filled churches send out preachers (cf. Rom. 10:13–17), (2) the gospel is preached, (3) individuals are converted, (4) those individuals are baptized, and (5) those baptized individuals form local churches, who in turn (6) send out preachers—repeating the process. Along the way, the gospel turns the world upside down (Acts 17:6); households (Acts 16), academic centers (Acts 17), economies (Acts 19), courtrooms (Acts 21–26), and sinking ships (Acts 27) are just some of the places where Christianity changes culture, but that does not change the fact that *individuals* are converted, baptized, and added to the church. Brick by brick, the temple of God is being built, as every living stone is quarried from the rubble of fallen humanity. In this way, conversion is unmistakably individualistic, even as every new creation is joined to the people of God.

***7. Postmillennialism elevates the royal metaphor of the church over the motherly metaphor for the church, so that the church is insufficiently maternal and overly political.***

Of all the points, this one might be the most important and also the most

difficult to see, as it trades on a thick reading of Psalm 45 as a type of the church. Yet, for those who read this royal psalm with the others, the biblical canon presents a vision of the church as the bride of Christ, who is called to raise the sons of God. Let me explain, as this final point helps us see how postmillennialism negatively impacts day-to-day life in the church.

In postmillennialism, the royal psalms play a key part. As noted above, Psalms 2, 72, 110 are applied to Christ and his rule over all the nations. By extension these same passages are applied to the church, because in Christ what is true of our Lord is true of us. Yet, such spiritual application is too imprecise, since it fails to distinguish between Christ and his bride. As the readers of this journal will happily attest, the roles of husband and wife are not the same. And this fact should be accounted for when applying the Psalms to Christ and the church. In fact, it is striking that, while these royal psalms are applied to the church (cp. Ps. 2:9 and Rev. 2:26–27), few permit Psalm 45 to establish a difference between Christ’s rule over the nations and the church’s rule over the nations. And this is what we must consider:

When we read Psalm 45, which portrays the marriage of the king to his bride, we discover that it clearly speaks of the coming king (Ps. 45:1–9), but it also identifies his bride (vv. 10–17), who in time will be identified as the church (see Eph. 5:32). On this basis, I am presenting Psalm 45 as a corrective to the postmillennialist, who conflates the roles of Christ and his bride because he does not give enough attention to the marital metaphor between

Christ and the church, as he postulates the mission of the church in the world.

Whereas the bride of Christ may be one with Christ by way of spiritual union, she does not possess the same vocation to subdue nations. We should employ royal imagery for Christ's church (see e.g., Psalms 2, 72, 110), but we still must not conflate the roles of bridegroom and bride. Nor should we conflate the mission of the church acting collectively with the mission of the church when considered from the viewpoint of the job its individual members and what Christ calls them to do when scattered.<sup>34</sup> Instead, we should let Psalm 45 inform the church's collective or corporate role:

<sup>10</sup> Hear, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear: forget your people and your father's house, <sup>11</sup> and the king will desire your beauty. Since he is your lord, bow to him. <sup>12</sup> The people of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts, the richest of the people. <sup>13</sup> All glorious is the princess in her chamber, with robes interwoven with gold. <sup>14</sup> In many-colored robes she is led to the king, with her virgin companions following behind her. <sup>15</sup> With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king. <sup>16</sup> In place of your fathers shall be your sons; you will make them princes in all the earth. <sup>17</sup> I will cause your name to be remembered in all generations; therefore nations will praise you forever and ever.

In these verses, we can discern at least three truths for Christ's bride, which inform the mission of the church (collectively) today. First, the bride of Psalm 45 forgets and forsakes her people and her father's house (v. 10). Like Ruth, she identifies herself with the

king of Israel and his people. No longer does she serve her own nation; instead, she comes and bows before her Lord and pledges her allegiance to him and him alone.

Second, the bride enters the presence of her lover in worship. Instead of being oriented towards the fields (like the King), the bride is oriented towards her husband. In festal garments and accompanied by her bridesmaids, she enters the presence of her king. The church does this every time she gathers to worship (Heb. 12:22–24).

Third, the bride receives the children born in her midst and these offspring will be the ones who will impact the nation.

Put together, the picture of the King's bride is that of a beautiful helper, and not proxy warrior. As befitting Adam and Eve in the Garden, the church's collective vocation is different from Christ's. Whereas Christ has regal and military authority to subdue and rule all nations, the church has the primary calling to be fruitful and multiply, a task that complements Christ's dominion over the earth, but a mission that is distinct nonetheless.<sup>35</sup> Put differently, while the church is given a rod of iron to rule the nations (Rev. 2:26–27), this ruling authority cannot be understood without translating military might into evangelistic zeal (see Eph. 6:17)—evangelistic zeal which results in children (Ps. 110:2–3), not just corpses (Ps. 110:5–7).<sup>36</sup>

Changing keys in the New Testament, we discover that every child of God must be born again individually, but born in Christ. Accordingly, as Psalm 45:16–17 indicates, the bride's

orientation is towards Zion where her Lord is enthroned; her occupation is not towards the nation of her fathers. This means the bride of Christ is to raise his children, so that they would grow up to be princes in all the earth. Significantly, the individual children, not the gathered church, are then the royal heirs and the ones who will impact the nations. This is a subtle but significant distinction.<sup>37</sup>

Whereas postmillennialists would have the church collectively disciple the nations collectively, Psalm 45 suggests a church distinct from the nation, raising up children who will in turn go out on behalf of God their Father. In short, the role of the church as mother (collectively) is to raise the children of God. As every member of the church is then a royal heir, the church has the responsibility to teach newborn Christians, whether young or old, how to walk as heirs of the kingdom. Thus, the gathered church must disciple kings, judges, and other rulers of this earth. But she must also disciple peasants, poets, and police officers. Collectively, the church is the royal embassy of Christ, but because she is the bride of Christ, not Christ himself, she is not called to go forth into the world conquering. That role is left to the bridegroom. Instead, in keeping with her feminine identity, the bride is to care for, nourish, and instruct the children given to her.<sup>38</sup>

In this way, the church does possess a royal function, but critically Christ's royal authority leads the bride to teach her children, not coerce her enemies. In other words, the church is a mother nursing her children on the milk

of God's Word, so that these children can go into the world, walking in truth and ruling in the power of the Spirit. While the church is not commissioned to disciple the kings of the earth, she is called to disciple the children of God, some of which will be earthly rulers. Others will be artists, authors, advocates, and architects, to take only a sampling. In each case, the church is responsible for discipling these children of God, so that when they paint, write, adjudicate, or build, they are doing so in ways that reflect the wisdom and righteousness of God.

This is how the church influences the world.

It is less a matter of cooperate coercion, and more a matter of strategic dispersion, that disciples of Christ bring the wisdom and grace of God into all creation. Truly, this conception of the *gathered church* as Christ's bride and the *scattered church* as Christ's army needs further development, but I close my time with Psalm 45 to say that for all the ways postmillennialism calls the church to Christianize the nations, it missteps unless it considers the nurturing character of the church.

Now, in a day when the church has been feminized, this is a dangerous proposition, and one that is liable to misunderstanding. In our egalitarian age, the church is not suffering so much from want of feminine traits, but masculine. Still, if we are going to rightly divide the word of truth, we need to see how the metaphors of the church work together. And I can think of no better way to put the masculine military images of God's children together with the feminine motherly

images of Christ's bride, than to look to 2 John 1. In that passage, John identifies the church as the "elect lady," and the children of God as "her children." He rejoices in the church gathered and scattered, and our political theology needs to include both aspects.

Today, as many pastors have neglected to train their church members in public theology, postmillennialists offer a masculine vision for advancing the kingdom of God. But this is where they go too far. Instead of appreciating the typology of Mother Zion as applied to the church, they have militarized the church as an instrument of warfare. Again, this metaphor has biblical foundations, and it is a helpful corrective to any church that refuses to equip and send out disciples into the public square. Still, Scripture presents the gathered body as a nurturing community where the Word of God is read, preached, taught, sung, and applied to all areas of life. Accordingly, when the church fulfills its calling to make disciples, it will teach its members everything Christ has commanded. And this includes sending those disciples into the world to wage war against the darkness.

Practically then, the church must maintain its status as bride and mother, even as it remains a military outpost that sends its children to do battle in various places and positions in the world. Postmillennialism, because it does not attend sufficiently to Psalm 45, makes national transformation the one-step plan for evangelistic dominion. But this is the problem. The mission requires two steps.

The first step is preaching the gospel and making disciples who will be nurtured and instructed in the church. This is the mission of the church. Then, and only then, the second step is sending individual disciples out to do good works and declare the good news. The second step is what changes counties, states, and nations. And it is a necessary extension of Christianity, one that is often neglected by those who ignore discipling church members with principles for public theology.

Still, even if churches—postmillennial or otherwise—instructs disciples to bring light into the darkness, this does not guarantee success. Instead, the elect lady and her children will be met with success *and* opposition. Christ has promised to build his church (Matt. 16:18) *and* he has promised to return to save her (Heb. 9:28). But he has also promised opposition (John 15:18-25) and many tribulations (Acts 14:22). In the midst of success and suffering, therefore, the church must be a nurturing mother who makes and matures disciples. At the same time, until Christ, the King, comes and establishes his kingdom on the earth, individual Christians must go into the world preaching the good news and doing good works.

In that two-step plan, we can have great optimism, that Christ will be with us until the end of the age, and he will come again to make all things new. Still, until he returns to judge the nations, we do not have the promise that every nation will be converted, disciplined, or Christianized. That is not what the bride of Christ is called to do. That is what Christ will do! And until he

does it, we are to pray fervently for the kingdom to come (Matt. 6:10), just as we are to cry out for the Lord himself. Marantha! (1 Cor. 16:22).

## A Final Appraisal

All in all, I conclude my reservations with realistic optimism. Christ is reigning, and he will accomplish his purpose on earth as it is in heaven. But that purpose, in my estimation, is best seen in the beautification and building up of the church in the midst of nations, not a final golden era among the nations, where all the nations are made Christian by the church's influence.

Could I be wrong? Perhaps. Postmillennialism is generally not espoused in church confessions, and as was noted in the introduction, its nomenclature and terms have developed through the centuries. Still, for all the positives that can be seen in postmillennialism, I am not yet convinced from Scripture that postmillennialism is the best reading of Scripture.

I am thankful for the postmillennialists that I know, but I also think they have too much optimism for the renovation of nations so long as the seed of the serpent dwells on the earth. The gospel is powerful and impels us to preach the Word to all nations. But such power needs to be exercised and understood according to the New Testament, and especially in light of the stipulations of the new covenant and the purposes for the bride of Christ.

In my final assessment, postmillennialism rises on the back of a faulty understanding of the biblical covenants. And thus, for those convinced

that Baptist ecclesiology and progressive covenantalism are the best interpretations of Scripture, we must ultimately be less than optimistic about postmillennialism, even if we find help from the teachings of faithful postmillennialists.

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1. Daniel G. Reid et al., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

2. Richard Gaffin sharpens the confusion of terms when he observes that a century ago, scholars like Geerhardus Vos, an amillennialist by today's nomenclature, spoke only of "premillennialism" and "postmillennialism." See his "Theonomy and Eschatology: Reflections on Postmillennialism," in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (ed. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 197–202.

3. Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1999), 10.

4. These six points are found in the section entitled, "What Postmillennialism Is" (*ibid.*, 190–94).

5. Jesus's parable of the weeds and the wheat (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43), in contrast to the parables of the mustard seed and leaven (Matt. 13:31–33), would be one of the places I would go to temper postmillennialism enthusiasm.

6. Wilson is a literary pugilist, whose writings have stirred up controversy in many arenas, especially among Baptists. Reflecting on the writing that has done so much to advance postmillennialism, his prose is equal parts piercing and provocative. For those looking for a strong man to follow, they have in Wilson a captain. That said, his language, especially in pre-pandemic days, was sometimes

*immodest and at other times downright vulgar. Such language invited criticism, to which Wilson responded years ago in his primer on biting language. See his A Serrated Edge: A Brief Defense of Biblical Satire and Trinitarian Skylarking (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003). Personally, I have found his post-2020 material generally helpful and not plagued by his older use of language, but readers should tread carefully. Amidst the honey of his words, there is also barbed wire. Wilson likes it this way, but not everyone has a magnet to extract the steel from the sugar. For that reason, those who read Wilson should exercise care, especially knowing that floating in his amber ale are seeds of theonomy, mere Christendom, Federal Vision, and salty language—to name a few.*

7. *To understand postmillennialism today requires appreciating what its proponents offer. Many dismiss postmillennialism without understanding or recog*

8. *Iain Murray, The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2014).*

9. *Joseph Boot is from the UK and recently he has pastored in Canada. He is the founder of the Ezra Institute. His book is entitled, The Mission of God: A Manifesto of Hope for Society (London: Wilberforce Publications, 2016).*

10. *As with every eschatology, extremists ruin the whole batch. Full preterism is a heresy that teaches Christ returned in A.D. 70 with the destruction of the temple. It is a heresy because it denies the future, bodily return of Christ.*

11. *For a clear, biblical summation of the view, see Keith Mathison's biblical-theological introduction (Postmillennialism, 53–159).*

12. *On this see, Peter J. Leithart, The Kingdom and the Power: Rediscovering the Centrality of the Church (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1993).*

13. *The source of these claims is Michael McVicar, Christian Reconstruction: R. J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015), 144–50 (Falwell and the Religious Right), 165–70 (homeschooling), 210–13 (Schaeffer). Cf. Crawford Gribben, Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America: Christian Reconstruction in the Pacific Northwest (New York: Oxford, 2021), 64–66, who also shows how Rushdoony influenced the leading Dispensational thinkers of the Moral Majority.*

14. *In a shocking diary entry dated December 1, 1981, Rushdoony laments, “Read Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Manifesto, another book using some of my material, with phone calls for citations, with no mention of me: for most writers I am useful but unmentionable!” (cited in McVicar, Christian Reconstruction, 211).*

15. *Ibid., 144–45.*

16. *Ibid., 197–201.*

17. *See, for instance, R. J. Rushdoony, “Theology of the Land.” For a better reading of the Law-Covenant and its ethical application today, see Stephen J. Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics,” in Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies (ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker; Nashville: Baker Academic, 2016), 215–33.*

18. *On this approach to reading Scripture, see Peter Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).*

19. *By this, I do not mean postmillennials deny typology. Rather, I am challenging their interpretive principles. Admittedly, this is a challenge that goes beyond the scope of this article.*

20. *Douglas Wilson describes himself as a General Equity Theonomist.*

21. For a full discussion of the church and its mission, see Jason S. Sexton and Stanley N. Gundry, *Four Views on the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), especially the chapters by Jonathan Leeman and Peter J. Leithart.

22. As history shows, there are postmillennials whose focus was evangelizing the nations, yet as postmillennialism is closely associated with theonomy, it is worth noting the national emphasis of many postmillennials.

23. The comparison between Jesus and Cyrus is found in Isaiah 45–53, where the first servant restores Israel to Promised Land, but doesn't provide forgiveness and peace (Isa. 48:22). By contrast, the greater Servant, will die for the sins of his people and bring them perfect forgiveness and everlasting peace (Isa. 52:13–54:17).

24. Church history does possess examples of Baptist postmillennialists (e.g., Andrew Fuller, A. H. Strong, and B. H. Carroll), but on balance, this combination of Baptist ecclesiology and postmillennial eschatology is covenantally inconsistent.

25. Significantly, the *Second London Confession* (1689) excises this section of *Westminster Confession*.

26. For a political theology with a distinctive Baptist ecclesiology, see Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Church as Embassy of Christ's Rule* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

27. Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2022), 218.

28 *Ibid.*

29. Even when redemption is promised to the nations in places like Isaiah 13–23, that salvation is mediated through the (gospel) promises made to Israel.

30. I concur with Richard Gaffin, when he identifies his most “substantial reservation”

with postmillennialism as the presence of suffering in the world (“Theonomy and Eschatology,” 210). He documents the many passages (e.g., Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 4:7; Phil. 3:10) that stress the suffering of the church in the present age (*ibid.*, 210–18), and he concludes that the New Testament does not promise ultimate victory—not before the return of Christ.

31. Admittedly, some postmillennialists also put conversion (and revival) as the necessary precursor to Christendom. But where I differ is in the exegetical outworking of Matthew 28:18–20 and the book of Acts.

32. Again, some may protest that state churches or Christian nations take time, and that church history proves that when the church inhabits a land long enough, it will produce national change. Perhaps, but such an argument comes from a logical imposition on the book of Acts, not a direct exposition.

33. C. S. Lewis, “Membership,” in *Fern-Seeds and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity* (Fontana, 1975), p. 14.

34. On this distinction, see Jonathan Leeman, “Soteriological Mission,” in *Four Views of the Church's Mission*, edited by Jason Sexton (Zondervan, 2017); and Jonathan Leeman, *What Is the Church's Mission* (Crossway, 2022).

35. On the way that “be fruitful and multiply” relates to and enables the command to “subdue and rule,” see Christopher Ash, *Married for God: Making Your Marriage the Best It Can Be* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 29–46. While it may take some work, the relationship between husband and wife in creation serves an important role in understanding the Christ-church relationship in the new creation context of the household of God.

36. More completely, the military idea of evangelism in Ephesians 6 harkens back to Isaiah 59–62, where imagery of the Spirit, the armor, priesthood, and marriage are joined

together. Cf. David Schrock, Royal Priesthood and the Glory of God, *Short Studies in Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 91–94.

37. To be clear, in the new covenant, it is the Spirit, not the church who gives birth to eternal life (John 3:3–8).

38. To say that gathered church has a feminine identity, does not for a moment deny qualified male elders or mute the role distinctions between men and women. It is simply acknowledging how the church gathered is receiving from her Lord the blessings of his kingdom; the church is not achieving for him his kingdom.



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# Relating Moses's Law to Christians

by Jason DeRouchie

**W**hen the New Testament speaks of God's "law," it almost always refers to Moses's law or law-covenant. This law is one expression of God's eternal law, which grows out of his unchanging, righteous character. The eternal law manifests itself in different institutional and covenantal forms through the timeline of redemptive history. Indeed, those institutional and covenantal changes mark off one era of redemptive history from another. For example, God's command for the first couple not to eat from the tree of knowledge pertaining to good and evil reveals the outworking of his eternal law at that moment, but it doesn't directly bind us today. We, thus, can't just say, "God's law is eternal, so let's apply that Garden command directly to us." Rather, we need to do the tough work of figuring out how or in what sense such a law would apply.

The same principle applies to the Mosaic law, which clarified the way in which God's eternal law was to govern ancient Israel at that particular

time in history. The law through Moses was distinctive from anything that governed previous generations, and God gave it to ancient Israel and not to every nation on earth. For Christians today, the question then becomes: How does Moses's law apply to believers today when so much has changed with Christ's coming, not least of which is that we are part of the new covenant and not the old? With a simple alliteration, Brian Rosner has captured three principles that clarify the Christian's relationship to the Mosaic law: *repudiate, replace, and reappropriate*.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Biblical Authors Repudiate the Mosaic Law-Covenant

Through his written code, Yahweh called Israel to holiness (Lev. 20:26; cf. 19:2; 20:7; 21:8). But Israel was stubborn, rebellious, and unbelieving (Deut. 9:6–7, 23–24; 29:4), which would ultimately result in the old covenant's destructive end (31:16–18, 27–29). Paul, therefore, noted that the Mosaic law-covenant bore a ministry of “death” and “condemnation” (2 Cor. 3:7, 9; cf. Rom. 7:10). While “the law is holy” (Rom. 7:12; cf. 2:20), “the law is not of faith” (Gal. 3:12), meaning that the age of the Mosaic administration was characterized not by faith but unbelief.<sup>2</sup> By God's purposes, the Mosaic law multiplied transgression (Rom. 5:20; Gal. 3:19), exposed sin (Rom. 3:20), and brought wrath (4:15) to show that “one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (3:28; cf. Gal. 3:10; Jas. 2:10).

Christians repudiate the Mosaic law-covenant. As the author of

Hebrews declared: “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete” (Heb. 8:13). “The law made nothing perfect” (7:19), but in Christ, we find a “better hope” (7:19), a “better covenant” (7:22; cf. 8:6), “better promises” (8:6), “better sacrifices” (9:23), “better possession” (10:34), a “better country” (11:16), a “better life” (11:35), and a “better word” (12:24).

## 2. Biblical Authors Replace Moses's Law with the New Covenant Law of Christ.

The grace and truth Jesus Christ brings supersedes the grace God bestowed through the Mosaic law (John 1:16–17). Christ has broken the condemning and controlling power of the law, such that Paul can say of believers, “You are not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14).

Moses knew that Israel's system of worship was merely symbolic, which suggests that it would become obsolete when shadow moved to substance (Exod. 25:9, 40; Zech. 3:8–9; 6:12–13). In Christ, the substance has come (Col. 2:16–17; Heb. 9:11–12). Furthermore, Moses affirmed the need for a better covenant—one in which Yahweh would accomplish for Israel something better than the Mosaic covenant era. The law could not give life (Gal. 3:21), weakened as it was by the flesh (Rom. 8:3).

Moses anticipated a day when God's people would listen to the voice of the new prophetic covenant mediator (Deut. 18:15) and God would cause his people to love him with their all (30:6, 8). The prophets equally longed

for the day when God would teach every member of the multi-ethnic, blood-bought community (Isa. 54:13), when he would write his law on their hearts (Jer. 31:33) and cause them to walk in his statutes (Ezek. 36:27). These hopes are all realized today through the church (John 6:44–45; Rom. 2:14–15, 25–29; Phil. 3:3).

As Christians, our “release from the law” (Rom. 7:6), in part, means that the Mosaic law is no longer the judge of God’s people’s conduct.<sup>3</sup> The age of the Mosaic law-covenant has come to an end in Christ, so the law itself has ceased from having a determinative role (2 Cor. 3:4–18; Gal. 3:15–4:7).<sup>4</sup> As a written legal code, not one of the 613 stipulations in the Mosaic law-covenant directly binds Christians (cf. Acts 15:10; Gal. 4:5; 5:1–12; Eph. 2:14–16). Instead, Christians are bound by the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:20–21; Gal. 6:2), which is summarized in the call to love our neighbor (Jas. 1:25; 2:8, 12).

Today, the guiding authority for Christians are Christ’s words brought through his apostles (i.e., the New Testament). Fulfilling Moses’s prediction of a prophetic covenant mediator, God declared of Jesus in Moses’s sight, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!” (Matt. 17:5; cf. Deut. 18:15). Everyone who hears Christ’s words and acts on them is wise (Matt. 7:24–27), and the call to make disciples includes teaching others to obey Christ’s teaching (28:19–20). His instructions through his apostles now provide the essence for all Christian instruction (John 16:12–14; 17:8, 18, 20; 2

Thes. 2:15). The early church “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42), for the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). Christians are part of the new covenant, not the old, and so they are bound to Christ’s law, not Moses’s law.

### **3. Biblical Authors Reappropriate Moses’s Law through Christ**

While Moses’s law doesn’t legally bind Christians, it remains indirectly authoritative, profitable, and instructive for believers through Christ’s mediation (cf. Rom. 4:23; 13:9; 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). Because Jesus fulfills various laws in different ways, we must consider each law in view of Christ’s work. While the New Testament only addresses a small number of Old Testament laws, its examples guide our handling of other related commands or prohibitions and illuminate each law’s lasting significance.

To illustrate Moses’s law’s lasting significance, consider Jesus as the lens through which the law must be interpreted (fig. 1). Some laws are unchanged before and after Christ, whereas others hit the lens and get “bent” in various ways. We find that Jesus’s coming maintains (with and without extension), transforms, and annuls various laws. Let’s consider these categories briefly.

- *Maintains (no extension)*: When fulfilling Moses’s prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft,

- coveting, and the like (e.g., Exod. 20:13–17), Christ maintains the law’s essence without any extension from the old to new covenants (Matt. 15:18; 19:17–21; cf. Rom. 13:9). Obeying such laws would have looked the same in both eras.
- *Maintains (with extension)*: When fulfilling Moses’s charge not to muzzle an ox while it is threshing (Deut. 25:4), Christ’s work extends the principle’s application to include paying wages to ministers (1 Cor. 9:8–12; 1 Tim. 5:17–18; cf. Matt. 10:10). Such extensions often occur in laws where their instruction includes cultural details that are different from our own; in such instances, we heed Jesus’s words at the end of the parable of the good Samaritan and “do likewise” (Luke 10:37), though working out the principle in a new way.
  - *Transforms*: When fulfilling laws like Yahweh’s charge to observe the Sabbath (e.g., Deut. 5:12–15) or Moses’s directions on capital punishment (e.g., Deut. 22:22), Christ transforms. On the one hand, he secures sustained rest for his followers and calls them to receive it (Matt. 11:28–12:8), and on the other hand, his work leads to applying the charge to “purge the evil from your midst” to excommunication within the church (1 Cor. 5:13).
  - *Annuls*: When fulfilling Moses’s laws about unclean food (e.g., Lev. 20:25–26), Christ annuls them, declaring all foods clean (Mark 7:19; cf. Acts 10:14–15; Rom. 14:20). But though he rescinded the diet restrictions, we still benefit from the commands by considering what they tell us about God and how they magnify Jesus’s work.

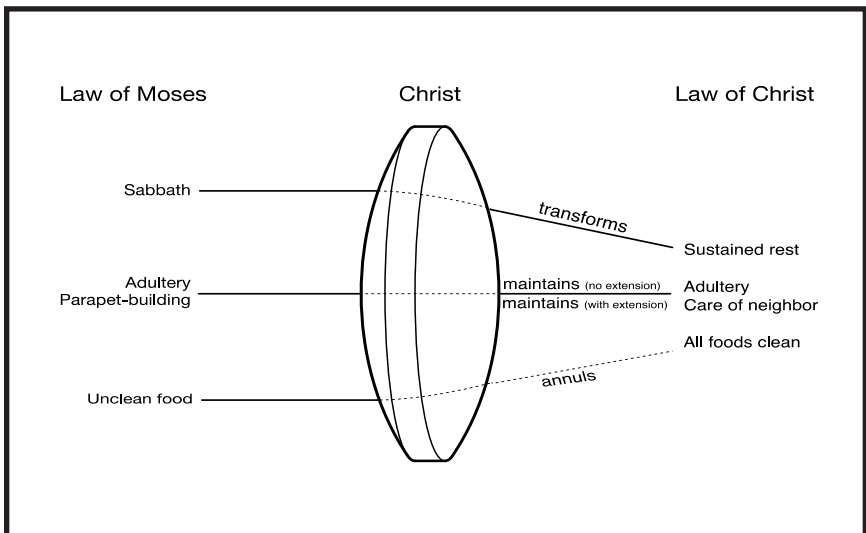


Figure 1. The Law’s Fulfillment through the Lens of Christ<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

When viewing the Old Testament through the lens of Christ, *everything* operates as Christian Scripture written “for our instruction” (Rom. 15:4; cf. 4:23; 1 Cor. 10:11). We access and apply Moses’s law only through Christ and in view of the apostles’ teaching, which together ground and sustain the church (Acts 2:42; Eph. 2:20; cf. Matt. 7:24–27; 17:5; 28:20; John 16:12–14; 17:8, 18, 20; 2 Thes. 2:15; Heb. 1:1–2).<sup>6</sup>

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1. Brian S. Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God, NSBT 31* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 208–209, 217–22.

2. Jason S. DeRouchie, “Question 34: How Does Galatians 3:12 Use Leviticus 18:5?,” in *40 Questions about Biblical Theology*, by Jason S. DeRouchie, Oren R. Martin, and Andrew David Naselli, *40 Questions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2020), 327–37; Jason S. DeRouchie, “The Use of Leviticus 18:5 in Galatians 3:12: A Redemptive-Historical Reassessment,” *Them* 45.2 (2020): 240–59.

3. So also Douglas J. Moo, “The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses: A Modified Lutheran View,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland, *Counterpoints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 343; cf. 375.

4. Moo, “Law of Christ,” 359.

5. I thank my student Benjamin Holvey who initially inspired this lens illustration.

6. For more on this redemptive-historical approach to a Christian’s relationship to Old Testament law, see David A. Dorsey, “The Law of Moses and the Christian: A Compromise,” *JETS* 34 (1991): 321–34; Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1991), 251–86; Moo, “Law of Christ,” 317–76; Tom Wells and Fred G. Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media), 77–160, esp. 126–27, 157–60; Daniel M. Doriani, “A Redemptive-Historical Model,” in *Four Views on Moving beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors, *Counterpoints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 51–56, 75–121, 205–9, 255–61; Jason C. Meyer, *The End of the Law: Mosaic Covenant in Pauline Theology*, *NAC Studies in Bible and Theology* 7 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009); Jason C. Meyer, “The Mosaic Law, Theological Systems, and the Glory of Christ,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2016), 66–99; Thomas R. Schreiner, *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law, 40 Questions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010); Rosner, *Paul and the Law*; William W. Combs, “Paul, the Law, and Dispensationalism,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 18 (2013): 19–39; Stephen J. Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2016), 215–33.



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# Section Four

# Four Critiques of Theonomy from Three Perspectives

# A Presbyterian Perspective: The Intellectual and Sociological Origins of the Christian Reconstructionist Movement<sup>1</sup>

by Ligon Duncan

**I**t is not our primary purpose here to provide analysis, but to describe and define, and to supply a preliminary sketch of the theoretical and environmental origins of the Christian Reconstructionist movement. First, we will explain specifically what Christian Reconstruction is. Second, this paper offers an initial suggestion of the intellectual and sociological origins of the Reconstructionist movement.<sup>2</sup>

## **What is Christian Reconstructionism?**

Broadly speaking, a reconstructionist is “a Christian who believes it is his or her responsibility to challenge the anti-Christian character of society and culture. The reconstructionist sees it as an obligation to seek to change society in ways that will bring it into conformity with the teaching of Scripture.”<sup>3</sup>

To further specify, we may quote popular Reconstructionist author Gary DeMar who says:

Reconstructionism is a distinctive blending of certain biblical doctrines. They are (1) personal regeneration, (2) the application of biblical law to all areas of life, and (3) the advance of the already-present kingdom in history through the preaching of the gospel and the empowering of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

Individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds and ecclesiastical communions are influenced by and committed to these ideals, from conservative Roman Catholics to Episcopalians to Presbyterians to Pentecostals. Arminian and Calvinist, charismatic and non-charismatic, high Church and low Church traditions are all represented in the broader umbrella of Reconstructionism (often in the form of the “Christian America” movement).

### *Names or Labels*

Not surprisingly then, many labels are associated with the Christian Reconstruction movement. It has been called: “Dominion Theology,” “Theonomy,” “Christian Reconstruction,” or merely “Reconstructionism” among other things. Oftentimes these labels are employed more or less interchangeably (by both those within and without the movement). Nevertheless, each of them point to a distinctive element of Reconstructionist theory, elements not held to by all who are influenced by the movement. “Dominion” intimates the reconstructionist belief that the cultural mandate (Gen. 1:26) obligates all Christians to work for the bringing

of human society under the dominion of God’s Word. “Theonomy” which simply means “God’s law” indicates the belief that all of the non-ceremonial Old Testament civil code is meant to be obeyed by all nations. “Reconstruction” betokens the conviction that American society and public policy are in a desperate state, salvageable only by a radical effort to bring the nation in line with norms of Scripture.

### *Types and Groups*

In light of this exegesis of various labels used in the movement it becomes apparent, for instance, that one may be a Christian reconstructionist without being a “theonomist” (though not vice versa). Hence, there are two major types or classes of reconstructionists: theonomic and non-theonomic. T. David Gordon is absolutely correct when he says:

As socioreligious phenomena, Theonomy and Christian Reconstruction are closely related. The individuals involved in the one are ordinarily involved in the other. However, theologically and religiously they can be distinguished. Christian Reconstructionists exist in a variety of forms and are ordinarily united in their belief that the Western world, and especially the United States, has departed from the Judeo-Christian ethical basis that once characterized its public discourse, with devastating results. Positively, Reconstructionists wish to see the United States return to a more biblical approach, or even a more *Judeo-Christian* approach, to the issues of civil life. Theonomy is more specific than this, though it does not disagree with it. Theonomy wishes to see every nation conform its civil practices to

those revealed in the Mosaic legislation. Thus, Theonomy is more comprehensive than Reconstruction (theoretically concerned that all nations observe the Mosaic legislation) and much more specific about the legislation that it believes is to be observed. Theonomy does not wish merely a return to a biblical ethic, or a Judeo-Christian ethic, but to the ethic of the Sinai covenant.<sup>5</sup>

It is important, however, to note that the intellectual origins and leadership of the movement emanate from the “theonomic reconstructionists.” Even within this more narrowly defined group we find significant differences of emphasis and opinion in the writings of Rousas J. Rushdoony (The Chalcedon Foundation), Gary North (Institute for Christian Economics), and Greg Bahnsen (Southern California Center for Christian Studies). Nevertheless, it is from these sources that the ideology of the movement has flown.

## Theonomic Christian Reconstructionism

A theonomic reconstructionist may be succinctly and fairly defined as “someone who believes that none of the non-ceremonial law of the Old Testament is set aside in the New and that all people, rulers and ruled alike, are under obligation to follow such law personally, and to enact it where appropriate in legislation.”<sup>6</sup>

Christian Reconstructionism is a theoretically *positivist*, *fundamentalist*, *Calvinist* response to the moral-political forces unleashed by modernity in late twentieth-century United States. That is, Reconstructionism views all

legitimate law as divine *positive* law (or an application thereof) and thus rejects natural law and social contract theory. It is also positivistic in its insistence on Scripturally-derived social, political, and economic theory (since it asserts that there is no true knowledge apart from the Bible).<sup>7</sup> It is *fundamentalist* in its stress on the necessity of vital personal religion and biblical inerrancy. And it is *Calvinist* in its insistence on the sovereignty of God. To define the rationale behind these beliefs and the implications of them is a little more difficult.

## People and Books

To answer in detail the question “what is [theonomic] Christian Reconstruction,” it may be useful to note some of the movement’s<sup>8</sup> leading authors. Rousas John Rushdoony is the father of the movement.<sup>9</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen is the best-known exegetical proponent of Reconstruction. Gary North appears to be the most prolific of the Reconstructionist authors (though he is certainly not unique in his prodigious production, for the movement has evidenced a number of extremely fruitful writers). He has devoted his talents to popularizing the movement (and in so doing has shown an inclination to considerable displays of verbal pyrotechnics!) and to developing the economic implications of the thesis, among other things.

Other authors who are actively involved in promoting the movement include David Chilton, Gary DeMar, and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.<sup>10</sup>

Three books, in particular, may be noted for their influence and notoriety.

First, there is Rushdoony's seminal *Institutes of Biblical Law*, which is of the moment an early reference work for the movement.

Second, Bahnsen's *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, may be identified as the standard exegetical presentation of the Reconstructionist position on the role of the Law in the Christian life (his *By This Standard* serves as a more popular treatment of the same subject and *No Other Standard* as a detailed response to his critics).

Third, we may mention David Chilton's *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators* (written in response to Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*). Unlike the two previous volumes, this tome is not integral for providing the theological rationale of the movement but is mentioned because it achieved some renown on college and seminary campuses. It is a rather typical example of Reconstructionist rhetoric and reflects the Reconstructionists' desire to formulate a right-wing alternative to more liberal evangelical social ethics.

### *The Christian Reconstructionist Agenda*

Before looking at the rationale behind the distinctive tenets of Reconstructionism, it will be appropriate for us to consider a few aspects of their program. First, Reconstructionist writing champions the present-day relevance and applicability of Old Testament civil ethics and shows strong antipathy for theological systems which do not. Much of its polemic has been directed at the evangelical movement known as Dispensationalism because

of its insistence on an exclusively "New Testament ethic." Reconstructionism is in large measure a response to this movement on the one hand, and to mainstream Liberal views of Old Testament ethics (in which the Old Testament is dismissed as primitive, sub-Christian, even anti-Christian, and at any rate irrelevant to contemporary Christian ethics) on the other.

Second, reconstructionists are challenging evangelicals, who have tended to be isolationists since the 1920s and 1930s, to reengage in social ethics. They are laying emphasis on the church's "salt and light" functions in society and calling the church to repentance for her neglect of these God-given duties. In this call for Christian political and social action Reconstructionism is heralding a message which has been and is being sounded in many quarters of evangelical Christianity.

Third, Christian Reconstructionism is determined to expose what it calls "the myth of neutrality." Following the presuppositional epistemology of Cornelius Van Til, the reconstructionists argue that no one can approach a field of knowledge neutrally, objectively, or a-religiously. We must approach all studies with either theistic or anti-theistic premises. There is no other alternative, for claimed neutrality or objectivity is actually negation. This view of knowledge obviously necessitates a distinctively Christian view in every field of human educational enterprise (including economics, law and politics), which for the reconstructionists means an explicitly Scripturally derived view.

Fourth, in keeping with the previous point, Reconstructionism is attempting to make a systematic and exegetical connection between the Bible and the conservative ideology of limited government and free market economics.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Gary North has written volume after volume deriving principles of economics from his studies of the Pentateuch.<sup>12</sup>

Fifth, Reconstructionism has sharply questioned the legitimacy of State-financed education and has been a major factor in the rise of the Christian school movement. According to North, “The government schools are established as a humanist religion aimed at stamping out Christianity.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, one of Rushdoony’s early books was a critique of state education entitled *The Messianic Character of American Education* (1963). North candidly sets forth his view of the proper Christian agenda in our current societal situation:

We must use the doctrine of religious liberty to gain independence for Christian schools until we train up a generation of people who know that there is no religious neutrality, no neutral law, no neutral education, and no neutral civil government. Then they will get busy in constructing a Bible-based social, political, and religious order which finally denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, and most controversially, the reconstructionists advocate the implementation of the Mosaic penal sanctions in modern society. Let it be said that, contrary to much criticism of Reconstruction, there is a good deal of discussion about the manner of

application of the case law in a different nation-state context. That is, most reconstructionists argue that we must make allowances for the circumstances and the conditions in the modern nation-state as we apply the Mosaic casuistry. However, this very willingness to discuss flexible applications of the case law actually detracts from the popular appeal of Theonomy, which lies in its (apparently) straightforward biblicism and simple theological solution to complex socio-economic and political situations.<sup>15</sup>

What would a “reconstructed” America look like, K.L. Gentry suggests the following elements of a theonomic approach to civic order:

1. It obligates government to maintain just monetary policies. . . [thus prohibiting] fiat money, fractional reserve banking, and deficit spending.
2. It provides a moral basis for elective government officials. . . .
3. It forbids undue, abusive taxation of the rich. . . .
4. It calls for the abolishing of the prison system and the establishing a system of just restitution. . . .
5. A theonomic approach also forbids the release, pardoning, and paroling of murderers by requiring their execution. . . .
6. It forbids industrial pollution that destroys the value of property. . . .
7. It punishes malicious, frivolous malpractice suits. . . .
8. It forbids abortion rights. . . . Abortion is not only a sin, but a crime, and, indeed, a capital crime.<sup>16</sup>

## The Origins of Reconstructionism

When one speaks of the philosophical and sociological origins of Reconstructionism, one may give the impression that a covert argument is being manufactured against the claims of the Reconstructionist movement to be biblical in its foundation. I am anxious to avoid so ambitious a project in the following surmise. The aim is more to detect influences on how leading Reconstructionists have read Scripture, and why they have focused on or emphasized certain things.

### *Philosophical: Kuyperian/Van Tillian Calvinism*

Abraham Kuyper's development of Calvin's thought and formulation of a distinctively Christian approach to education and society has exercised formidable influence on twentieth-century Calvinism. Post-Kuyperian Calvinism has thought in an emphatically "worldviewish" fashion, that is, there is a regular stress on thinking and living Christianly in all areas of life. This pattern of thought was decisive in the so-called Dutch school and influential upon Dooyeweerd and Van Til in turn. Kuyper argued for an over-arching philosophy of life resting upon God alone as the epistemological foundation. "There is not an inch in the whole of temporal life which Christ, as Lord of all men, does not say, 'Mine,'" said Kuyper.

Van Til took up and refined Kuyper and Dooyeweerd's thinking. One of his customary emphases was that there is no such thing as neutrality. A person

cannot be neutral about God, nor can he be neutral in his thinking or living. There are only two options: for or against, God-centered or man-centered. Van Til said: "There is no alternative but that of theonomy and autonomy." Van Til meant that in the sphere of human thinking and behaving one has only two options: God's way or self's way.

The combination of Kuyper's concern for a distinctly Christian approach to the whole of life, and Van Til's insistence that one is always either theonomous or autonomous, when applied to the area of civil law and government provided a critical platform for the theonomic theory as we shall illustrate later.

### *Theological: An Evangelical Reform Movement*

Theologically, Christian Reconstructionism may also be viewed as a reaction (and in the author's opinion, a well-meaning, but misguided, overreaction) to four prevalent tendencies in American Evangelicalism, and to what most traditional Christians would regard as general Western social decadence.<sup>17</sup> First, Reconstructionism constitutes a challenge to *the widespread peripheralization of the Old Testament* in forming the Christian mind *in the sphere of personal and social ethics*. The peculiar view of biblical history taught in many evangelical churches reduces the Old Testament to a shadowy, pre-Christian, even sub-Christian form of the New Testament, rather than the very foundation of God's revelation. Hence, the Old Testament

is valued only for end-time prophecy, moral tales, types of Christ, and if its teaching is not re-confirmed in the New Testament, it is regarded as outmoded. Reconstructionism is deliberately contradicting this pattern.

Second, Reconstructionism wishes to rebuff *the general evangelical tendency to disengage from societal responsibilities*. The sacred/secular dichotomy and the suspicion of any form of “social gospel” has led most fundamentalist-influenced church members to abandon any sustained or regular attempt to impact government and society. This continues to be the norm today, with the exception of so-called “family issues” like abortion, school prayer, home-schooling, “family values,” and homosexuality, but even then rarely is a Christian voice heard except in protest. Theonomy wants to dump the sacred/secular dichotomy for a Kuyperian view of vocation and explore the long-ignored civic “salt-and-light” responsibilities of Christians.

Third, Reconstructionism is a reaction against *the tendency to (totally) subjectivize and individualize the Christian faith*. There is, of course, a vital subjective side to the Christian faith as all Christians would agree. The Puritans, for instance, would have called this “experimental religion” while Roman Catholics call it “spiritual formation” and it is an essential element to vital Christianity. If it is not there, faith is dead. But when personal piety is substituted as a part for the whole, it becomes an “ism.” In other words, when Christianity is reduced to purely individual,

personal spirituality (and this has been a characteristic error in much evangelicalism) an important aspect of historic Christianity is being disregarded or lost. The Reconstructionist movement wants to redress this imbalance (though it seems overly non-experiential at times) and remind the Christian of the outward demands of true Christian piety.<sup>18</sup>

Fourth, Reconstructionism is a response to *the anti-law spirit which pervades Christian circles* where cheap-grace teaching is the norm. No one who has followed the Lordship controversy, even at a distance, can doubt that antinomianism has achieved almost confessional status in Dispensational circles. In many churches, any suggestion that Christians have an obligation to keep the Law is considered an attack on the Pauline teaching on grace. Theonomy challenges the church to return to Reformational teaching on the grace of law, the role of the law as standard in the Christian life, and the consequent relevance of Old Testament law to Christian ethics.

These four trends are readily apparent in American Evangelicalism in general and particularly in churches which have been influenced by the theology of Dispensationalism, with its emphasis on the antithesis between law and grace (in an unfortunately eccentric form), its curious version of the history of redemption, and its peculiar eschatology. Theonomy is, among other things, a rebuttal of Dispensationalism.<sup>19</sup>

## The Fundamental Distinctives of Reconstructionism

### *Presuppositionalism*

Now, having given some preliminary background information on Christian Reconstructionism and having suggested a rationale for its development, we turn to a consideration of the distinguishing characteristics of Reconstruction. The following three distinctives reflect a depiction which is promoted by Reconstructionist authors themselves and not by the misunderstandings of their critics.<sup>20</sup> First, a commitment to the Presuppositionalism of Cornelius Van Til is essential to the theonomic thesis.<sup>21</sup> The importance of this is found in the rejection of the idea of natural law and especially in the espousal of the concept of non-neutrality. Popularly speaking, in the ethical sphere we do not have seven options, or five options, or three options. We may do one of two things. We may be “autonomous” or “theonomous.” We make up our own law or obey the law of God. Either self or God is legislating. Those are the only options.

So when a Reconstructionist asks other Christians the questions, “How should a society be governed?” or “What kind of laws are best for the society?,” he goes on to say to them “you only have two options. You may follow man’s plan and man’s law, or you can follow God’s plan and law.” Then the Reconstructionists inquires: “And where does one find God’s will for society expressed? Why in the Bible, of course! Just read your Old Testament and you will find God’s perfect

law for all human societies recorded in the law of Moses.”

### *Postmillennialism*

Second, postmillennial eschatology plays a significant role in driving theonomic ethics.<sup>22</sup> Without diverting into a lengthy discussion of the particular brand of postmillennialism prevalent in Reconstructionist circles, suffice it to say that eschatology is of first importance to theonomic authors<sup>23</sup> and to the defense of the thesis from attacks at critical points. This is a major point of contention with the Reconstructionist’s evangelical antagonists, the Dispensationalists. Hence, Reconstructionist presses crank out a steady stream of popular and academic treatments of postmillennial and preterist eschatology.

Among the areas in the theonomic thesis where postmillennialism plays an important role are: 1) challenging prevalent Christian eschatological pessimism (in both premillennial and amillennial circles) which robs an important motive force for Christian societal labor in the here and now; 2) addressing Christian preoccupation with the heavenly consummation of Christ’s kingdom (or an earthly millennium) which diverts focus from the present responsibilities and blessings of kingdom life; and 3) explaining why the Reconstructionist agenda will not have to resort to the use of force to see its hopes for the nations realized. Often the Reconstructionist is accused of being anti-democratic and of plotting to impose his societal vision on the unwilling masses. However, because of his postmillennialism,

he can explain that the nations will be willingly reconstructed as the gospel itself advances.

### *Transformational Worldview (embracing theonomic ethics)*

Third, what might be called a “macro-transformational worldview” is essential to Theonomy. The terminology of “reconstruction” and “dominion,” common to theonomic literature, comes from this idea. The Reconstructionists are arguing for impacting the *structures* of society (government, economic system, educational system, etc. [hence, *macro*-transformational worldview]) with the law of God. In the words of Rushdoony, “as the new chosen people of God, the Christians are commanded to do what Adam in Eden and Israel in Canaan failed to do. One and the same covenant under differing administrations still prevails. *Man is summoned to create the society that God requires*” (italics mine).<sup>24</sup> The Christian’s calling to be a transformer of society is what Rushdoony is accentuating, here and elsewhere.

Now, of course, the idea of “transformation” is not unique to Reconstructionism. It is standard in Reformed theology as a quick review of the writings of Calvin, Knox, Dabney, Henry, Schaeffer and others will reveal. Every believer has been given the charge to be salt and light in society. Reformed theology has always taken those salt and light functions seriously. Whether the Reconstructionists are disproportionate in their emphasis on societal (as opposed to personal) transformation is, of course, open to question.

This same concern for societal impact as part of every Christian’s vocation is echoed in Bahnsen’s writings where he stresses that this involvement and transformation must entail the supreme criterion of God’s law. He writes:

The Christian’s ethical responsibility to the law of his God extends beyond the simple personal observation of those stipulations. More than just obeying God’s commandments personally, the Christian is expected to promote the keeping of God’s law (and every detail thereof).<sup>25</sup>

Elsewhere, he adds: “Christian involvement in politics calls for recognition of God’s transcendent, absolute, revealed laws as a standard by which to judge all social codes.”<sup>26</sup>

So far, about all that has been argued in the above quotations is that the Christian has social as well as personal obligations which are entailed in his sanctification, and that God’s law provides the touchstone by which his civic involvement is to be evaluated.<sup>27</sup> The eccentricity of the Reconstructionist program for transformation is found in its appeal to the Old Covenant judicial case law as binding for the New Covenant era nation-state (hence, it is a “transformational worldview *embracing theonomic ethics*”<sup>28</sup>). For example, Bahnsen says:

We have observed that a distinctively Christian position with respect to law and politics will call for promoting of the comprehensive Gospel advocated by the Reformed Faith—a Gospel which has political implications because Christ has established God’s

kingdom (with its influence in every area of life) and now rules as the King of Kings over all mankind. . . . Study of Scripture has shown that God's will for public justice and politics has been revealed in the permanent standards of God's law. Therefore, Christians ought to work to persuade others of their obligation to the commandments of God, *including the civil magistrate of his duty to enforce the penal sanctions of God's law against criminal activity in society* (emphasis mine).<sup>29</sup>

Reconstructionism's particular version of transformationalism is linked to both its presuppositional and post-millennial commitments. It is easy to see how one could argue that if there is no such thing as "natural law" (in the Calvinian sense<sup>30</sup>), and if there are only two ultimate sources of law (God or self), and if God intended the Old Testament case law as "a model of social justice for all cultures,"<sup>31</sup> and if Christ is going to return after a golden age on earth characterized by godly rule and peace, then surely the kingdom in the millennium will be ruled on the basis of God's own revealed law in the Old Testament (including case law and attendant penal sanctions), and Christians should be actively working to bring about in their own countries observance of the law which God intended for all nations and which He will establish in the millennium.

#### *Highlights of the Theological Justification of Theonomic Ethics*

These three distinctives are identified by Theonomists themselves as essential to their position. However, the last one (a transformational worldview

embracing "theonomic ethics") entails at least five propositions necessary for its own justification. What are "theonomic ethics?" Theonomy simply mean's "God's law." So what is unique about the Reconstructionist approach to it? "God's law *in exhaustive detail*" is a battle cry for the movement.<sup>32</sup> What exactly does a Theonomist mean by that and what is its significance?

These queries may be answered by recourse to Bahnsen's case for Theonomy. Key points of his argument may be briefly outlined as follows. First, the law of God (in its entirety) is binding in the New Covenant as well as the Old. Second, there is no explicit Scriptural recognition of the common distinction between the moral and civil law. Third, there are two types of law in the Mosaic code: moral and restorative. What has traditionally been called the civil law is part of the moral. This is justified by the identification of an "underlying rationale" in God's law. Fourth, the restorative (or ceremonial) has been confirmed by Christ and therefore is no longer kept by believers. The moral law remains perpetually binding, including the case laws and attendant penal sanctions (though not necessarily retaining their precise wording). Fifth, the fact that civil law is still binding is confirmed by New Testament citation of case law as authoritative for the New Covenant era. Therefore, the Christian ought to be obedient to the Old Covenant civil laws, encouraging others to obey the civil law, and working in one's own country to realize the enactment of the Old Covenant civil code (with appropriate modifications) as part of the law of the land. Hence, the appeal

to “the abiding validity of God’s law in exhaustive detail” means for Bahnsen that the moral law is not really kept until the Mosaic civil code (which is part of that moral law) is honored.<sup>33</sup>

In order to elucidate the main points of the above-outlined justification of the theonomic theory, it will be profitable to survey and critique five more important assertions in Bahnsen’s argument. After which, we will offer a concise summarization of the essential marks of a Theonomist.

### Esposal of Twofold Division of the Law (or the Unity of the Law)

Reconstructionists identify the most significant distinction between Old Covenant laws as twofold: moral and ceremonial. Historically speaking, this means they functionally deny the traditional Reformed threefold division of the law (moral, civil, and ceremonial; cf., *WCF* 19:3-5) while espousing a twofold division (moral and ceremonial, or restorative).<sup>34</sup>

Theologically, they identify all non-ceremonial Old Covenant law with the moral law (summarized in the ten commandments), constituting it as a unity. Hence, if one accepts this identification, and grants that the moral law remains authoritative in the New Covenant era, so also must one grant the enduring validity of all other non-ceremonial law. This is very important to the theonomic “exegetical” argument. Bahnsen says:

The most fundamental distinction to be drawn between Old Testament laws is between *moral* laws and *ceremonial* laws. . . . This is not an arbitrary or ad hoc division, for it manifests an

underlying rationale or principle. Moral laws reflect the absolute righteousness and judgment of God, guiding man’s life into the paths of righteousness; such laws define holiness and sin, restrain evil through punishment of infractions, and drive the sinner to Christ for salvation. On the other hand, ceremonial laws—or redemptive provisions—reflect the mercy of God in saving those who have violated his moral standards. . .<sup>35</sup>

He goes on to say elsewhere, “The *ceremonial law* can be seen to have sub-divisions: (1) laws directing the redemptive process therefore *typifying Christ*. . . and (2) laws which taught the redemptive community its *separation from the unbelieving nations*. . .”<sup>36</sup> He continues, “The *moral law* of God can likewise be seen in two subdivisions, the divisions having simply a literary difference: (1) general or summary precepts of morality. . . and (2) commands that specify the general precepts by way of illustrative application. . .”<sup>37</sup>

It should be noted that this is a critical point to Bahnsen’s exegetical argument for the continuing validity and binding authority of the Mosaic civil legislation in the New Covenant era. If Bahnsen’s thesis is not sustained at this point his entire proposal fails, even if he were able to support every other major *locus*. It is also built on weak evidence. The importance, may I say, the genius, of this point is that Bahnsen attempts to link the civil ordinances to the moral law in such a way that any evidence for the continuing validity of the moral law in the New Covenant era becomes an argument in favor of the continuing validity of the civil code. Thus, standard Reformed arguments

for the abiding authority of the moral law are marshalled by Reconstructionists as material to buttress their distinctive position.

However appealing Bahnsen's argument is here, it is not insurmountable. First, it may be observed, his argument is descriptive rather than exegetical. Though he chastises "latent antinomians" for "multiplying distinctions and qualifications which are not enumerated in God's Word"<sup>38</sup> his own categories are based not on explicit Scriptural testimony but on what he calls an "underlying rationale or principle." In other words, his classification of "moral" and "ceremonial" is determined by his (however plausible) speculation on the purpose for which God gave particular laws.

Second, it should be noted that the designation "ceremonial law" is not employed in the Bible, nor is there anything like a comprehensive list of what might fall into such a category of laws. Is it as easy to distinguish civil and ceremonial law in the *Torah* as Bahnsen seems to suggest? Yet Bahnsen's argument assumes and proceeds on a readily identifiable set of "ceremonial laws." How does he recognize these? By his assessment of their character, not by exegetical directive. What is the basis of the category "ceremonial law" then? It is determined descriptively. Even then, crucial questions remain. For instance, grant Bahnsen's descriptive distinction and answer the question "Is ceremonial law *amoral*?" For an interesting treatment of Old Testament civil law which does not avoid the complexities of categorization see Christopher J.H. Wright's *Living as the People of God*.<sup>39</sup>

Third, though he insists that the New Testament allows for no distinction between moral and civil laws, the fact is that the New Testament does indeed make much of the distinction between the Old and New Covenant structure of the kingdom of God. Under the Old Covenant the institutional form of the kingdom of God was the nation-state of Israel. The New Covenant institutional form of the kingdom of God is the church (which is non-national and trans-national in its embodiment). This shift provides an important, simple, and obvious rationale for the expiration of the judicial law. The civil law of Israel (as the application of God's eternal standards to a particular situation in the history of his kingdom) has now (in the progress of his redemptive economy) passed away with the demise of that state (in its unique role as earthly representative of the rule of God) and the advent of a superior institutional expression of God's rule.

Fourth, Bahnsen criticizes those who distinguish between moral, civil, and ceremonial law on the basis that they are arguing without positive biblical warrant for a threefold distinction. However, as we have already observed, he cannot offer any positive biblical warrant for his own argument for the twofold moral/ceremonial distinction. He identifies these categories by his hypothesis on their function and purpose (in a way not dissimilar to those who identify a classification of moral, civil, and ceremonial law) yet accuses his opponents of holding a position without positive scriptural justification.

### Hermeneutic of Assumed Continuing Validity

A fundamental hermeneutical principle, frequently repeated by the Theonomists, is that if the New Testament does not explicitly abrogate a law, then it is still in force. It is reminiscent of standard Reformed argumentation for the continuing validity of the moral precepts of the Mosaic code but also assumes the peculiar Reconstructionist two-fold distinction in the law. Bahnsen puts it this way: “We should presume that the Old Testament standing laws continue to be morally binding in the New Testament unless they are rescinded or modified by further revelation.”<sup>40</sup>

In order to support this argument, he spends a great deal of time in exegesis of Matthew 5:17 arguing that the word “fulfilled” there is to be taken with the force of “confirmed.”<sup>41</sup> According to Bahnsen, Christ has “confirmed” the entire law of the Old Testament and hence anything not personally fulfilled by Christ on behalf of the believer is still required of the faithful in the New Covenant period. In other words, though Christ’s saving work has made obsolete the ceremonial code,<sup>42</sup> Jesus’s words in Matthew 5:17 are taken to prove his confirmation of the believer’s duty to keep the civil law (as part of the moral law). Bahnsen’s exegesis is directly opposed to the dispensational formula here (“if an OT command is not repeated in the NT, it is no longer binding”), and probably derives from that conflict. Hence, we observe that this axiom is the inverse of the dispensational premise of dealing with Old Testament law. Whatever positive or negative response one has to Bahnsen’s principle, it can

be granted him, and his case for the binding authority of the case law still remains inconclusive—if *his argument for the twofold division of the law is not conceded to be compelling*. In other words, if one grants Bahnsen his argument on Jesus’s “confirmation” of the law, and his hermeneutic of continuing validity, and yet continues to hold to a threefold rather than a twofold division of the law, then all Bahnsen’s argument proves is the continuing validity of the moral law. His argument cannot be sustained apart from the rectitude of his twofold division.

At this point, we may say in passing, that Bahnsen’s case is often dependent upon a sort of fundamentalist, proof-texting approach to exposition (not unlike some of the dispensational exegesis to which he is responding). He finds no passage which specifically identifies a class of civil laws in the Mosaic code and so he postulates that no such thing exists. He finds no explicit New Testament abrogation of such a class of civil laws and, again, decides that the civil code must still be in effect.

Meanwhile, he manages to ignore a great weight of inferential scriptural evidence both for the existence of such a class of laws and its subsequent termination. Examples of this include: the obvious socio-governmental character of parts of the Mosaic code, the unique historical and redemptive-historical circumstances in which the civil code was given to Israel, the accommodational character of the legislation,<sup>43</sup> the change in the institutional form of God’s kingdom from Old Covenant to New, the demise of the nation-state of Israel, and the peculiar New Testament

pattern of case law application (which we will review later).

Of course, this wooden approach to interpretation does not prevail consistently but only when he attempts a defense of the peculiar portions of his thesis. For instance, take the matter of his approach to the Mosaic ceremonial ordinances. The ceremonial law, as a class, is not explicitly abrogated in the New Testament. The passages that Reformed theologians (including Bahnsen) rely on to prove the abrogation of ceremonial law in the New Covenant era refer to particular cases in which Christ abrogated or fulfilled specific ceremonial ordinances: unclean food laws (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:15), and tabernacle furniture and ritual typology (Hebrews 9:1-14). Bahnsen and Reformed theologians in general argue from the abrogation of a specific ceremonial ordinance to the abrogation of a class of ceremonial ordinances (assuming, all along, that such a class exists). Such an argument is legitimate and very much like the argument of Reformed theologians for the existence and subsequent termination of a class of civil laws. Bahnsen employs it when arguing for the confirmation of the ceremonial law but decries it when it is used to argue for the abrogation of the Mosaic civil code.

#### **Appeal to New Testament Citation of Mosaic Case Law**

One argument which is employed to show (in contrast to the ceremonial code) that the civil laws of Israel are still binding on Christians is drawn from the New Testament's authoritative citation of Mosaic case law.

Theonomists assert that the New Testament appeal to the Old Testament case law proves that Old Testament case law is normative for the civil magistrate in the Christian era. Bahnsen says:

There is abundant evidence that the New Testament authoritatively cited and applied these case-law illustrations to current situations. To use examples mentioned above, the New Testament echoes the Old Testament law in prohibiting incest (1 Cor. 5:1), homosexuality (Rom. 1:26-27, 32), defrauding employees (Mark 10:19), and muzzling the ox as he treads (1 Tim. 5:18).<sup>44</sup>

Now, the fact that the New Testament applies case law is no surprise. The question is *how* it applies the case law. For instance, in one of the examples which Bahnsen cites in the quotation above (1 Timothy 5:18), Paul applies a civil law statute clearly intended for enforcing responsible treatment of domestic animals to the question of the church providing an equitable salary for a minister! This raises a very serious question. On Bahnsen's hermeneutical principles, how can the New Testament authors legitimately do that? How can they apply a case law patently intended for the state of Israel to an issue concerning the church?

One possible explanation entails recognizing that the New Testament authors had a profound understanding of the difference in the institutional form of the Old Covenant community (nation-state of Israel) and New Covenant community (church). Without going into the debate about Old and New Covenant church-state relations, at the very least, it can be said that under the

older dispensation, the church was established by and closely tied to the nation-state whereas under the new dispensation, the church is trans-ethnic and trans-national.<sup>45</sup> This external, structural, administrative change may find witness in the New Testament's modified application of civil case law to the ecclesiastical community.

Whatever the case may be, it is clear (even from this brief discussion) that mere appeal to the fact that the New Testament cites Old Testament case law does not provide, of itself, any positive evidence for Bahnsen's case. Indeed, the New Testament's employment of case law seems to provide *prima facie* evidence against the views of Theonomy. It always applies the Old Testament civic legislation to ecclesiastical issues and never even hints that Christians ought to seek a civil fulfillment for the peculiarly Mosaic case statutes.<sup>46</sup>

Non-Arbitrary, non-Circumstantial Design of the Old Testament Case Law

Fourth, Reconstructionism postulates that Old Testament case law was not merely intended for the particular circumstances of Israel. In other words, they were not *ad hoc*—meant simply for a definite stage and circumstance of redemptive history. For example, Bahnsen says:

God's revealed standing laws are a reflection of his immutable moral character and, as such, are absolute in the sense of being non-arbitrary, objective, universal, and established in advance of particular circumstances (thus applicable to general types of moral situations).<sup>47</sup>

One could affirm this whole quotation, with the exception of the

word "universal" (if one understands Bahnsen's usage of it) and still reject Bahnsen's thesis. His basic argument is this: because the civil law of Israel is non-arbitrary, objective, and universal, it cannot be exclusively intended for the situation of ancient Israel. Therefore, the civil laws must be applied today.

Now let us grant that the civil law reflects the character of God and that the civil law of Israel was non-arbitrary. Even if we concede these points, the intimation that God did not take into consideration the particular and temporal needs and circumstances of the nation-state of Israel is mystifying. The classical Reformed view differs from Bahnsen at this point. The Theonomist says that the civil law is neither arbitrary nor circumstantial. The general Reformed consensus holds that the civil law was not arbitrary, but was circumstantial. If this latter view is correct, then there may be things peculiar to the Mosaic code which are inappropriate for the modern nation-state.

This is an area where Theonomy, in gross violation of biblical patterns and common sense, is ignoring the context of the giving of the law to the redemptive community of the Old Testament. This constitutes an approach to the nature of the civil law very different from Calvin and the rest of the Reformed tradition, which sees the civil law as God's application of his eternal standards to the particular exigencies of his people.

**Mosaic Case Law a Model of Social Justice for All Cultures**

Fifth, and following on the last point, Theonomy asserts that the Old

Testament case law is a model of social justice for all cultures, including the penal code. To quote Bahnsen again: “The civil precepts of the Old Testament (standing ‘judicial’ laws) are a model of perfect social justice for all cultures, even in the punishment of criminals.”<sup>48</sup> This point [the continuing validity of Mosaic penology] is clearly important in the Reconstructionist ideology. It has also occasioned some of the most vehement reactions of non-Theonomists. Abusive *ad hominem* and sensationalism have reigned in most responses to this issue, hence a more restrained approach and thorough reply is still needed.

Without question, none should underestimate the value of having God’s own revealed applications of his eternal character and the principles of his moral law to the civil situation in Israel. These laws may indeed give us guidance in making equitable laws and even suggesting appropriate punishments.<sup>49</sup> Calvin and the Puritans acknowledged this, as has the whole of the Reformed tradition in general. However, we must not forget that the circumstances in God’s redemptive purposes may have dictated both the form and even the content of the case law at certain points. This Calvin, and the Puritans following him, clearly recognized.<sup>50</sup>

### **Nine Marks of a Christian Reconstructionist (Theonomist)**

What, then, qualifies a person to be a Reconstructionist? How do you identify one? We will summarize the preceding discussion by pointing to

nine distinctive marks of a Theonomic Reconstructionist. First, the Theonomist opposes a dispensational/antinomian view of the law in Christian life.

Second, the Theonomist endorses presuppositionalism (especially in its rejection of natural law and emphasis on non-neutrality).<sup>51</sup>

Third, the Theonomist is postmillennial in his eschatological platform.<sup>52</sup>

Fourth, the Theonomist espouses a Kuyperian transformational worldview, emphasizing the law as the Christian’s tool of dominion.

Fifth, the Theonomist argues that the civil law is a sub-set of the moral law.

Sixth, the Theonomist insists that the Old Testament civil case law is normative for the civil magistrate and government in the New Covenant era.

Seventh, the Theonomist maintains, on principle, that the state is obligated to apply the Old Testament case laws’ penal sanctions.

Eighth, the Theonomist asserts that it is the Christian’s duty to obey and work for the enactment of the Old Testament civil law and its penal sanctions in the modern nation-state.

Ninth, the Theonomist is willing to label as antinomian (or latent antinomian) fellow Christians who do not share his particular views of the present-day application of the Mosaic code, because indifference to the theonomic thesis is impossible.

### **Conclusion**

This preliminary sketch of Reconstructionism has revealed a number of identifiable traits of and influences on the movement. For instance,

1) Reconstructionism is sub-category of Calvinism. One may be a Calvinist and not be a Reconstructionist, but one may not be a Reconstructionist and not be a Calvinist (consistently). Reconstructionism borrows heavily from the Calvinistic legacy not only in its high view of Scripture, but also in its views of Church-State relations, and the complementarity of law and gospel.

2) Reconstructionism is heavily indebted to Kuyperian (and/or Dooyeweerdian) thinking about common grace and antithesis. The Reconstructionists' "worldly-minded Calvinism" draws strongly on nineteenth and twentieth century Dutch Calvinist philosophical traditions, notwithstanding points of contact with older British precedents.

3) In terms of redemptive historical approach, Theonomists tend to stress continuity of redemptive history more or in a different way than have mainstream Calvinists.

4) Reconstructionism also rejects the older Reformed views of divine natural law and promotes a positivist view of law.

5) A tendency to supralapsarianism and mono-covenantal thought can also be found in Reconstructionist circles. That is, Theonomists are predisposed to "high Calvinism" in their view of the decrees but also to deny (wittingly or unwittingly, explicitly or implicitly) important aspects of classical, federal, bi-covenantal theology. There is much evidence of a reticence to speak about a covenant of works/covenant of grace framework, and even a hesitance to talk about distinctive stages in the covenant of grace.

6) Reconstructionists are inclined to downplay or deny (theoretically and/or functionally) "common grace insights" in the Christian's formation of a distinctively Christian approach to his culture. Theonomists are suspicious of general evangelicalism's exaltation of general revelation over special revelation, and its frequent capitulations to unbiblical patterns heralded as wisdom gleaned from God's revelation in nature and providence.

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*1. In the early 1990s Theonomic Christian Reconstructionism was still a thing in parts of the conservative confessional Reformed world. As a young seminary professor at RTS (where Greg Bahnsen taught for a brief time back in the 1970s) I encountered students who were attracted to its teachings. So, as part of my duty to teach Pastoral and Social Ethics for the seminary, I studied the issue, and lectured and wrote materials on the topic. Over time the interest in and attraction to Theonomy died down with North American Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, and I really didn't anticipate it ever picking up steam again. However, a number of factors have conspired to make this an issue again. So, this paper, originally written in a different time and situation (presented to the Social Science History Association Atlanta, Georgia, U.S., Saturday, October 15, 1994), may prove helpful to some of us*

*now, as we address this issue in our congregations, and our circles of ministerial fellowship. I will, perhaps, at some point attempt to update my discussion of this matter. I am happy, though, that 9Marks has seen fit to make it available again to faithful pastors seeking to fulfill their function to expound sound doctrine and guard the deposit of the truth.*

*2. Some of the content of this paper was presented in original form as a lecture at the Free Church of Scotland College, Edinburgh, Scotland in May 1990, and in a revised form ex tempore and memoriter at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Greenville, South Carolina in April, 1992.*

*3. R. Nash, Great Divides (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993), 157.*

*4. The Debate Over Christian Reconstruction (Fort Worth: Dominion, 1988), 62.*

*5. T.D. Gordon. "Critique of Theonomy: A Taxonomy." Westminster Theological Journal 56 (1994): 23.*

*6. Paul Helm, review of House Divided: The Break-up of Dispensational Theology, by G.L. Bahnsen and K.L. Gentry, Jr, The Banner of Truth 329 (February 1991): 29. Of course, technically speaking, not even the ceremonial law is "set aside," according to Bahnsen. Rather, it is "confirmed" or "fulfilled" by Christ and therefore is not to be performed by the individual believer. For a discussion of this point see Greg L. Bahnsen, Theonomy in Christian Ethics, 2nd ed., (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984), 207-216, esp. 207, 213 and 215. K.L. Gentry, Jr, offers this more popular (and ambiguous) definition: "A 'Reconstructionist' is one who holds to the applicability of God's Law to modern society and government, while holding at the same time to the postmillennial hope that promises that Christianity will win the world to Christ through the gospel. . .," God's Law in the Modern World (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1993), 11.*

7. See the quote from Cornelius Van Til in North's (ed.) *Theonomy: An Informed Response*, viii.

8. Of course, as we have already noted, even the theonomic reconstructionists are not homogeneous and so one must be careful to avoid "pigeon-holing" or treating one author as if he held to all the positions advanced by another. Greg Bahnsen, for instance, would not concur with certain views held by Rousas John Rushdoony (see G.L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy*, xix). All of the authors mentioned however share in common an optimistic eschatology, the commitment to work for the implementation of Biblical law in modern society and the willingness to be identified with Reconstructionism as a distinct movement within the Reformed community.

9. For an insider's version of the movement's history see G. North "Intellectual Schizophrenia," 1-40, and *Theonomy: An Informed Response* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), ix-xx, and 15-23.

10. A brief bibliography of theonomic literature and related non-theonomic material is included at the end of the paper.

11. See North, "Intellectual Schizophrenia," 11.

12. See North's *The Dominion Covenant: Genesis* (Tyler, TX; Institute for Christian Economics, 1982/7); *Moses and Pharaoh: Dominion Religion vs. Power Religion* (Tyler, TX; Institute for Christian Economics, 1985); *The Sinai Strategy: Economics and the Ten Commandments* (Tyler, TX; Institute for Christian Economics, 1989); and *Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus* (Tyler, TX; Institute for Christian Economics, 1989); and also Ray Sutton's *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant* (Tyler, TX; Institute for Christian Economics, 1987).

13. North, "Intellectual Schizophrenia," 19.

14. North, "Intellectual Schizophrenia," 25.

15. For instance, Gentry asserts that "having a revealed and objective standard takes the guesswork out of righteous living," *God's Law in the Modern World*, 69. This seemingly

straightforward view applied to the arena of modern socio-governmental ethics undoubtedly holds great appeal to evangelical Christians long trained in a Bible-based ethic. What kind of laws should we have in our country? "Well, just thumb through the Pentateuch" is the Theonomist's response. It looks simple but when more difficult and detailed issues are raised the apparent simplicity begins to break down. Can the State make laws not found in the Law of Israel? If so, on what positive exegetical basis? How are the case laws to be applied? The enthusiastic debates within Reconstructionist circles on the proper application of certain of Israel's laws belie their claims that *Theonomy* simplifies the work of civic legislation.

16. Gentry, *God's Law in the Modern World*, 61-64.

17. For an estimable, suggestive, and more extensive discussion of the sociological impetus behind Reconstructionism, see John Muether, "The Theonomic Attraction," in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Academie/Zondervan, 1990), 245-259.

18. Bahnsen makes this clear when he says: "The Christian is remiss if he, retreating into a quietistic, pietistic ecclesiology which will not give God's directives to the world, refuses to heed the whole law of God with its extra-personal, extra-ecclesiastical content." *Theonomy*, 36. Elsewhere he comments: "All Christians must do whatever they can to facilitate the keeping of God's law in his society. If the believer simply accepts the antinomian situation surrounding him without any recourse, he has willingly subordinated himself to the Satanic power and direction of that environment." *Theonomy*, 477.

19. Bahnsen complains that "fundamentalism's dispensational approach to the Scripture and its parenthesis view of the church was tied to a withdrawal into individualistic, reactionary moral rules which produced, in overall cash value, socio-political impotence. . ." *Theonomy*, 11. See also *Theonomy*, 19-22 and Bahnsen and Gentry, *House Divided: The*

*Break-Up of Dispensational Theology* (Fort Worth: Dominion Press, 1989).

20. I draw these distinctives directly from Greg Bahnsen who enumerated the “fundamental distinctives of Christian Reconstructionism” as “a transformational worldview embracing theonomic ethics, postmillennial eschatology, and presuppositional apologetics” in the foreword to Gary DeMar’s *The Debate Over Christian Reconstruction* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press/Atlanta: American Vision, 1988), xvi. It should be further added that there may be those who identify themselves with the stated objectives of the Reconstruction movement yet disavow one or more of these distinctives. Nevertheless, the denial of any one of these elements compromises the integrity of the thesis. Reconstruction can neither be substantiated nor defended apart from these basic axioms.

21. As will be indicated later, there are some who openly reject Van Tillian apologetics and epistemology who yet call themselves Reconstructionists. Nevertheless, this seems to this writer (and to many Reconstructionists!) to be a real inconsistency. For instance, Van Til’s denial of traditional Reformed opinions of natural law is fundamental to his system and is a distinctive of the Theonomic/Reconstructionist view of civil law. Indeed, Van Til’s view seems to necessitate Reconstructionism (or, at least, something like it). So, for a non-Van Tillian to adopt Reconstructionism is to adopt a Van Tillian solution to an issue which is not a problem in a non-Van Tillian system. Most non-Van Tillians (of whatever stripe) agree that all law is not divine positive law, and that there exists divine natural law in this universe which may adequately provide a moral rationale for human civil structures without recourse to a Mosaic special revelational foundation. Hence, there is no need for a non-Van Tillian to adopt Theonomy in order to avoid the charge of favoring “autonomy.”

22. We will note later that there are many Reconstructionists who do not identify

themselves as postmillennialists. We are not arguing the fact of their existence by asserting the essential role of postmillennialism to Reconstructionism. We are arguing that their position is untenable and incoherent apart from postmillennialism.

23. See for instance, Gary North’s *Millennialism and Social Theory* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).

24. R.J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 4.

25. *Theonomy*, 475.

26. G.L. Bahnsen, *By This Standard* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), 346.

27. Of course, Bahnsen’s terminology (“every detail thereof”) implies the inclusion of judicial case law statutes as part of God’s absolute, perpetual, societal requirements. This constitutes the peculiarity of the Reconstructionist thesis, as will be shown below.

28. This is Bahnsen’s phrase, see DeMar, *Debate over Christian Reconstruction*, xvi.

29. *By This Standard*, 285-286.

30. See for instance, Calvin’s *Institutes*, trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.20.16, 2:15.04. The role of natural law in Calvin’s political thought is, of course, a hotly debated issue. For a cool survey and restrained conclusions on the matter, see William Klempa’s “Calvin on Natural Law” in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 72-95.

31. *By This Standard*, 347.

32. Note Bahnsen’s chapter title “The Abiding Validity of the Law in Exhaustive Detail,” *Theonomy*, 39.

33. Bahnsen explains in his introduction: “In the pages that follow, my concern will be to show from God’s Word that the Christian is obligated to keep the whole law of God as a pattern of sanctification and that this law is to be enforced by the civil magistrate where and

how the stipulations of God so designate [emphasis mine].” *Theonomy*, 34.

34. Of course, most Reconstructionists do not intend to positively deny the Westminster Confession’s threefold division but do so by neglecting to understand the historical origins of the Assembly’s threefold formulation, ignoring the context of 19:4 (see phraseology of 19:4 and cf., 19:3), abstracting the meaning of “general equity” from its historic legal and theological context, and failing to appreciate the biblical, theological genius of the Assembly’s categorization.

35. *By This Standard*, 135.

36. *By This Standard*, 136.

37. *By This Standard*, 137.

38. *Theonomy*, 310.

39. C.J.H. Wright, *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1983). See also Wright’s *God’s People in God’s Land* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

40. *By This Standard*, 345-346.

41. *Theonomy*, 52-72.

42. *Theonomy*, 213.

43. See for instance, John Murray’s comments on Mosaic legislation on divorce in *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 57.

44. *By This Standard*, 138.

45. Of course, to borrow Murray’s phrase, there is “a relative contrast in absolute terms” here.

46. Dan G. McCartney observes: “Not once in the New Testament is the civil aspect of the Old Testament law applied to the civil

authority as an ideal.” From “The New Testament Use of the Pentateuch” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, 145.

47. *By This Standard*, 346.

48. *By This Standard*, 347.

49. Charles Colson has taken a cue from the OT case law sanctions in his arguments for restitution, community service sentences, and prison reform.

50. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.20.16 (2:1504-1505); see also Patrick Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1869), esp. 94-134.

51. The author is well aware that there are persons who openly identify themselves as reconstructionists who are (emphatically) not Van Tillian presuppositionalists in their epistemology. I here assert only that this is inconsistent, and that theonomic reconstructionists are correct in their assertions of the significance (indeed, the necessity) of Van Tillian presuppositionalism to the motivation, coherence, and justification of the theonomic reconstructionist thesis.

52. Again, one is acutely aware of the host of people who are associated with Reconstructionism who are non-postmillennialists (the most common being those who identify themselves as “optimistic amillennialists”!), nevertheless my inclusion of this point recognizes the crucial is/ought distinction. It does not follow that what is, necessarily ought to be. The thesis is crucially dependent on postmillennialism far beyond the “reward of duty” motivation.



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# A 1689 Baptist Perspective: Confessionalism and Theonomy

by Justin Perdue

**A**s a pastor, I am greatly concerned about theonomy and its fallout.

Theonomy asserts that the judicial laws of the Mosaic covenant are normative for all geopolitical entities, whether directly (reconstructionists)<sup>1</sup> or in an adapted fashion (general equity theonomists).

This broadens the mission of the church to include building a Christian society by establishing the Mosaic judicial code or an updated version of it. It burdens the saints with a weight they were never meant to bear. Trusting in Christ and living “peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Tim. 2:2) doesn’t cut it. Following Jesus requires transforming the culture and the civil government.

As a result, theonomy obscures the gospel—the forgiveness of sins, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, and the guarantee of eternal life on account of him alone. Wherever theonomy wins the day, these truths get fuzzy, or at least downplayed.

Pastors must therefore engage theonomy with robust biblical and theological arguments. My aim in this article is to do so from a confessional Baptist's perspective. Confessional Baptists hail from the Puritan stream of the Reformed tradition.<sup>2</sup> Our theology, piety, and practice are articulated in the Second London Confession of Faith (2LCF).<sup>3</sup> And our doctrine defends against theonomy in at least three ways. First, confessional Baptist doctrine maintains a threefold division of the law, as well as a distinction between moral and positive law. Second, it affirms the historic covenantal framework of Scripture but upholds the uniqueness of the new covenant as the establishment of the covenant of grace. Third, its view on the sufficiency of Scripture, two-kingdoms doctrine, the mission of the church, and the Christian as pilgrim runs counter to the assertions of theonomy.

### **Threefold Division of the Law and the Distinction Between Moral and Positive Law**

Confessional Baptist theology maintains a threefold division of the law, as well as the distinction between moral and positive law, neither of which square with theonomy. I begin here because Protestants of various stripes can agree here, most notably Baptists and Presbyterians.

#### *Threefold Division of the Law*

Chapter nineteen of the 2LCF presents the threefold division.<sup>4</sup> It begins with the moral law and asserts that it was written into creation and man's

heart. It was summarized in the Ten Commandments, which the Lord gave Moses on two stone tablets. And it is universally binding for all mankind:

1. God gave to Adam a Law of universal obedience, written in his Heart, and a particular precept of not eating the Fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; by which he bound him, and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it; and endued him with power and ability to keep it.
2. The same Law that was first written in the heart of man, continued to be a perfect rule of Righteousness after the fall; and was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in the Ten Commandments and written in two Tables; the four first containing our duty towards God, and the other six our duty to man.

Next, the confession explains the ceremonial law. It contains many typological ordinances that prefigure Christ, as well as various instructions of moral duties. The ceremonial laws were fulfilled and abrogated by Jesus:

3. Besides this Law commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel Ceremonial Laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth divers instructions of moral duties, all which

Ceremonial Laws being appointed only to the time of reformation, are by Jesus Christ the true Messiah and only Law-giver who was furnished with power from the Father, for that end, abrogated and taken away.

Finally, the confession points to the judicial or civil law. God gave it to the nation of Israel, and it expired when that nation-state, under the old covenant, ceased to exist. It is now the principles of general equity (i.e., general justice) in the judicial law that are of value.

4. To them also he gave sundry judicial Laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any now by virtue of that institution; their general equity only, being of moral use.

Reconstruction theologians, however, advocate for a twofold division of the law: moral and ceremonial. Greg Bahnsen writes,

The most fundamental distinction to be drawn between Old Testament laws is between moral laws and ceremonial laws. . . This is not an arbitrary or ad hoc division, for it manifests an underlying rationale or principle. Moral laws reflect the absolute righteousness and judgment of God, guiding man's life into the paths of righteousness; such laws define holiness and sin, restrain evil through the punishment of infractions, and drive the sinner to Christ for salvation. On the other hand, ceremonial laws—or redemptive provisions—reflect the mercy

of God in saving those who have violated his moral standards.<sup>5</sup>

As others have noted, the conflation of the moral law and judicial law is a critical exegetical argument for theologians. Bahnsen collapses them wholesale. "The moral law of God can. . . be seen in two subdivisions, the divisions having simply a literary difference: (1) general or summary precepts of morality. . . and (2) commands that specify the general precepts by way of illustrative application."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the judicial law of Israel *is* the moral law, just illustratively applied. This is how he and other theologians argue for the continually binding nature of the judicial law.

### *Moral Law and Positive Law*

Why can't we collapse the moral and civil law into one category, as Bahnsen does? Doing so overlooks the further distinction between the moral law (sometimes referred to as natural law) and positive law. The moral law is a property and reflection of God's immutable character. Both nature and Scripture reveal it, meaning it's written onto people's consciences and is clarified by Scripture (see Rom. 1:18–20; 2:12, 14–15a).

Consider again the Second London (ch. 19):

2. The same Law that was first written in the heart of man, continued to be a perfect rule of Righteousness after the fall; and was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in the Ten Commandments and written in two Tables; the four first containing our duty towards God, and the other six our duty to man.

Also:

5. The moral Law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof, and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator who gave it: Neither doth Christ in the Gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.<sup>7</sup>

Positive law, on the other hand, is different. It is posited by decree or kingly fiat and is tethered to its covenantal context. Such laws are not inherently moral but become moral by virtue of who is doing the asking. For instance, it is not inherently moral to refrain from eating a piece of fruit from a tree or to circumcise a newborn boy. These things are not written onto the conscience, as such. Rather, such commands only become moral when, in a particular time or place, God or someone authorized by God commands them. What's crucial to recognize is, Israel's ceremonial and judicial laws were all positive laws. Israel would not have known these ceremonial or judicial laws if God had not revealed them.

Samuel Renihan helpfully explains the distinction between moral and positive:

Among the laws by which God governed Israel, there are two basic kinds. Israel was governed by moral laws and by positive laws. . . Moral laws transcend transcription. They are known by nature, though suppressed by fallen nature. God delivered the moral law to Israel, summarized in the Ten Commandments. In addition to moral laws, God gave positive laws to Israel. Positive laws are added laws, additional laws. These

laws are not morally right or wrong in and of themselves. Circumcision, how to build the tabernacle, which animals to sacrifice for which sins, and what foods you can or can't eat are positive laws. They were added by God to Israel's covenantal obligations. Every covenant has its own positive laws that govern the people of that covenant, like the trees in Eden. The moral law and the positive laws of Israel governed the people. That was their function. Israel's positive laws are often split up into two groups: the civil law, and the ceremonial law.<sup>8</sup>

### *Pulling All of This Together*

To summarize this first broad objection to theonomy: the moral law binds all humankind to God's standards. The ceremonial law of the Mosaic covenant, on the other hand, was fulfilled and abrogated by Christ; it binds no one any longer. Similarly, the judicial law of the Mosaic covenant ceased to be binding when the nation of Israel (under the old covenant) ceased to exist.

As such, the structure of the kingdom of God on earth changed from the old covenant to the new. Its institutional form under the old covenant was Israel. Its institutional form under the new covenant is the church. Israel was a geopolitical entity. The church is not. Rather, it spans the globe and includes people from every tribe, language, people, and nation. This significant change provides a simple rationale for the expiration of the Mosaic judicial law.

To be sure, Israel's judicial law offers abiding value to Christians today because God's moral law is the basis for many of those laws. These are matters of general equity. The phrase "general

equity” in both the Westminster and Second London Confessions refers to what is inherently moral in the judicial law and is for the determination of general justice broadly. What doesn’t appeal to Christians today are the matters of *particular equity*, which pertained only to the people of Israel in the land of Canaan—for example, the division of land, provision of a kinsman redeemer, the regulation of polygamy, particular rules of property and inheritance, requirements for resting fields, and so forth.

### **Covenant Theology (1689 Federalism)**

A Confessional Baptist’s version of covenant theology, also referred to as 1689 Federalism,<sup>9</sup> is also incompatible with theonomy.

#### *An Overview of 1689 Federalism*

Let me give a 30,000 overview of 1689 Federalism. In eternity past, the Triune God established the *covenant of redemption*. The Son would be the covenant head of an elect people, whom he would secure by becoming a man to represent men, keeping the Mosaic law (moral, ceremonial, and civil), satisfying the law’s penalty on the cross, rising to conquer sin and the curse, and drawing those people by his Spirit to live with him forever in a new heaven and a new earth.

God then made a *covenant of works* with Adam in the garden of Eden. Adam, also a covenant head, could earn blessedness and life for himself and his posterity, or he could

earn death through disobedience. He earned the latter.

God therefore made a covenant with Noah, which promised to sustain creation and its cultural activities, including procreation, and to provide a mechanism for securing retributive justice, so that God the Son could accomplish salvation.

To that end, God established a *covenant of grace*, by which Jesus would freely grant salvation to all who receive him by faith. The covenant was *promised* in Genesis 3:15. It was *explained* and *revealed* in and through the covenants with Abraham, Israel, and David. And it was *established* and *accomplished* through Christ and the *new covenant*.

These three covenants with Abraham, Israel, and David together comprise what the Bible calls the old covenant, as in,

Old Covenant = Abrahamic Covenant + Mosaic Covenant + Davidic Covenant

Further, the old covenant was typological. It served concrete purposes in its era of redemptive history, but it also pointed to something greater and other. God promised Abraham a people, a land, and, most pointedly, a seed, who is Christ. God gave the law of Moses to govern, regulate, and guide the people of Israel; yet the law’s first and most significant use is to show human beings our sin and drive us to Christ, who kept the law for us.<sup>10</sup> God promised David that he would have a son whose kingdom would be established forever (2 Samuel 7:12–16). He then told David’s son, Solomon, that he and his offspring would represent the nation of Israel (1 Kings 9:4–7).

This principle of representation or covenantal headship runs throughout Scripture. Adam represented the human race in the covenant of works. The Davidic king represented the people under the old covenant. And Christ represents his people in the new covenant, which fulfills all the promises of the old. He is the servant by which many would be accounted righteous (Isa. 53:4–6, 11b). He is the righteous branch raised up for David who will save Judah and Israel (Jer. 23:5–6). He both sat on David’s throne and offered the Levitical offering (Jer. 33:14–18).

Thank God for Jesus Christ! He fulfilled the entire old covenant, as promised by the prophets and affirmed by the book of Hebrews. Jesus reversed Adam’s curse and fulfilled the requirements of the Mosaic law, including the ceremonial law—the priesthood, the sacrificial system, all of it.

### *What about the judicial law?*

What about the judicial law? On the one hand, God gave those laws to govern a particular people in a particular place at a particular time for a particular purpose. They should have made Israel unique and attractive, causing the surrounding nations to say, “If only we had a God like Yahweh.” On the other hand, the people of Israel were disobedient and stiff-necked, and the Lord gave them the judicial law to restrain them and protect the line of promise until Christ came.

The judicial elements of the Mosaic law also pointed typologically to the kingdom of Christ and the eschatological purposes of God. A couple of examples make this point. First, the

promises of curses and blessings for disobedience and obedience in Deuteronomy 28 were temporally true and significant for Israel,<sup>11</sup> but they also point to God’s righteous judgment at the end of the age. Second, the Mosaic covenant threatened the death penalty for much more than the Noahic Covenant, which limited punishments to the standard of retribution.<sup>12</sup> For example, one would be executed for adultery or breaking the Sabbath. Why? Because the Mosaic punishments were typological. They showed the gravity of sin against God’s moral law, and, again, they pointed to the severity of God’s righteous judgment at the end of the age for all who have not trusted Christ.

The Mosaic judicial law was specific and circumstantial. It was specific insofar as it had a narrow scope of sustaining Israel in Canaan as it moved toward the birth of Christ. It was circumstantial insofar as it only applied to that era of redemptive history. Israel served a purpose. So did its judicial laws. Christ is the fulfillment of both. We don’t need to draw straight lines from Canaan to California. In fact, we can’t.

Theonomy misunderstands all this, including the judicial law’s specific and circumstantial nature. Instead, it wants to apply the judicial elements of the old covenant. It fails to recognize that the judicial laws of the Mosaic covenant were uniquely fitted to the nation of Israel under the old covenant. Once Christ fulfilled the old and established the new, the uniquely situated old covenant judicial laws were no longer needed.

### *The newness of the new covenant*

Theonomy also fails to recognize the newness of the new covenant. The new covenant is better than the old, says the book of Hebrews.<sup>13</sup> Jesus is “the guarantor of a better covenant” (Heb. 7:22); “it is enacted on better promises” (Heb. 8:6; also 8:13; 9:15).

One covenant of grace may unite all of Scripture. Yet significant discontinuity occurs between the old and new covenants.<sup>14</sup> This point is critical for any attempt to carry old covenant paradigms into the new covenant era.

Specifically, we should not carry over positive laws—ceremonial or judicial. Positive laws are tethered to their respective covenants, and the positive laws of the Mosaic covenant are not binding under the new covenant.

In these ways, theonomy is prone to the error of naked biblicism. It appeals to chapter and verse to make its argument, but it forsakes a sound overarching hermeneutic. So the rhetoric from theonomists goes something like, “It’s either God’s law or man’s law. Which are you going to choose?” Of course, we choose God’s law. But we choose God’s law rightly understood in the context of biblical revelation. Theonomy misunderstands the biblical covenants and therefore misunderstands and misapplies God’s law.

### **A Confessional Perspective**

Confessional Protestantism is distinct within the broader Protestant tradition. This is especially true in the United States.<sup>15</sup> A confessional perspective on the sufficiency of Scripture,

two-kingdoms doctrine, the mission of the church, and the Christian as pilgrim runs counter to the assertions of theonomy. I will consider each.

### *The Sufficiency of Scripture*

Theonomists often appeal to the sufficiency of Scripture to contend for the continually binding nature of the Mosaic judicial code. The argument goes something like this:

God has given us everything we need in his Word, including the principles by which civil government should function. In fact, through Israel, God himself engaged in the project of civil government. His Mosaic Covenant stands as his perfect and inspired take on civil government for all nations. It’s his blueprint for statecraft. Will we go with God’s law or man’s?

This is a misguided understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture, as understood by the confessions. The 2LCF affirms that the Holy Scriptures provide us “Man’s salvation” and “Faith and Life.” Yet it also affirms that “there are circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church common to human actions and societies; which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.” God has not revealed everything there is to know about everything in the world, even in matters concerning the worship of God and the government of the church. If that is true in the church, how much more so in civil society?

A right doctrine of Scripture's sufficiency affirms that God's Word is sufficient for his purposes in giving it. Outside of those purposes we must look to the light of nature.<sup>16</sup>

### *Two-Kingdoms Doctrine*

A Reformed understanding of two-kingdoms doctrine<sup>17</sup> serves as a safeguard against theonomy. It helps us understand God's rule over the world and over the church.

According to this doctrine, the Noahic covenant establishes God's *common kingdom* by which God sustains creation and its cultural activities, like procreation and justice. At the same time, God's covenant of grace establishes his *redemptive kingdom*. Christians live in both kingdoms along with non-Christians, but only God's people live in the redemptive under the covenant of grace. As David VanDrunen writes,

Through the church, [Christians] are citizens of heaven even now. This church—God's redemptive kingdom in the present age—has a distinct membership, faith, worship, and ethic. Its way of life displays a counterculture to the cultures of this world. The church awaits the coming of Christ as a day of glorious consummation when the bride will see her bridegroom face-to-face as she is ushered into the wedding banquet of the Lamb.<sup>18</sup>

The redemptive kingdom of the church and the common kingdom of the world are not coterminous. Many, however, mistake God's rule in one sphere for his rule in another. God rules the whole world, no doubt. But

his rule over the redemptive kingdom differs from his rule over the common kingdom.

Theonomy, however, blends these two kingdoms together. A common assertion amongst theonomists is that we are fulfill the mandate that was given to Adam, as if the two kingdoms are one. This "Dominion Theology" in effect denies the covenant of works, collapsing it into the covenant of grace.

Yet only the second Adam, Jesus, can accomplish what the first Adam failed to accomplish. We don't just pick up where the first Adam left off and usher in the new creation and redemptive kingdom through our cultural activities. The new creation has Jesus as its guarantor, and he is the one who will bring it about. To be clear, God has left us with a range of cultural responsibilities and callings, and we do demonstrate and exemplify what the life of the redemptive kingdom looks like as we work within the common kingdom. But, again, that common kingdom work does not produce the redemptive kingdom. Only making disciples does.

As Jesus said before Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews" (John 18:36). The zeal to rebuild Christendom or establish Christian geopolitical entities on earth may be sincere, but it is misplaced. God has work for Caesar to do since Caesar remains under God's common rule. And Christians, insofar as they have a hand in Caesar's work as voters or elected office holders, should seek to help Caesar rule by God's common kingdom

standards. Governments can make the church's redemptive work harder or easier. Still, the church collectively does not finally depend on Caesar or any powers he possesses to usher in Christ's redemptive kingdom.

### *The Mission of the Church*

Theonomy tends to redefine the mission of the church to include adopting civil governments, enforcing the old covenant judicial code, building a Christian society, and Christianizing the nations.<sup>19</sup>

The new covenant, however, gives the church a narrower mission. We have a mandate, but it's not dominionistic. Rather, Christ commands the church to preach the gospel and rightly administer the sacraments for the salvation of God's people. He promises to build his church through Word and sacrament, through the preaching of law and gospel, through the ordinary means of grace.

The 2LCF observes that the grace of faith which saves souls "is ordinarily wrought by the Ministry of the Word; by which also, and by the administration of Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, Prayer and other Means appointed of God, it is increased, and strengthened" (14.1, On Saving Faith).

Establishing civil laws by the judicial law of Moses will not rectify the soul problem each human faces. Only the Holy Spirit can do that work in the hearts of men. Theonomists will agree with the necessity of the Spirit's work. Yet they fail to reason consistently when it comes to the institutional church's mission.

### *The Christian as Pilgrim*

The Christian life is a pilgrimage. We're sojourners and exiles in this world, and we face thousands of spiritual dangers, with trials and temptations on every side. We have been promised a homeland, but we are not there yet. So we need nourishment, sustenance, and protection, which is what the ministry of the church provides.

This posture runs counter to the ethos and emphasis of theonomy, particularly reconstructionist theonomy. It reasons as if we could turn Babylon into Jerusalem. Yet our calling is not to turn Babylon into Jerusalem. We surely invite people into our heavenly city through evangelism, and we should live out the life of the heavenly city both together and in the midst of Babylon. Yet our nations are Babylon and will be until Christ returns and removes the curse. Therefore, we concern ourselves with the ministry of Word and sacrament and living peaceful and quiet and ordinary lives in the covenant community of the church.

Through us and sometimes in spite of us, Christ will build his church. He will save his people. And one day, we will *receive* a kingdom. We will see the activities and products of human culture destroyed and re-created, things to which we contributed and participated. The Father will give us the kingdom, welcoming us into the holy city, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:2).

In the meantime, we acknowledge that we are "strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a

homeland.” We “desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:13–16). After all, “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14).

## Conclusion

Confessional Baptist theology disputes theonomy in three areas. First, it maintains a threefold division of the Mosaic law, as well as a distinction between moral and positive law, which demonstrate that the judicial law of Moses no longer binds any geopolitical entity.

Second, confessional Baptist covenant theology—particularly 1689 Federalism—teaches that Moses’s judicial law represents a unique era of redemptive history. The nation to which the judicial law was given served its purpose in God’s economy of redemption by bringing the promised offspring of Abraham. It follows that the judicial laws themselves have also served their purpose.

Third, a confessional perspective on the sufficiency of Scripture, two-kingdoms doctrine, the mission of the church, and the Christian as pilgrim run counter to the teaching and the ethos of theonomy.

*it touches upon the duty of civil magistrates has not been altered in any systematic or fundamental way in the New Testament. . .” He continues, “We must recognize the continuing obligation of civil magistrates to obey and enforce the relevant laws of the Old Testament, including the penal sanctions specified by the just Judge of all the earth. As with the rest of God’s law, we must presume continuity of binding authority regarding the socio-political commandments revealed as standing law in the Old Testament” (2-3). He goes on to say, “It is advocated that we should presume the abiding authority of any Old Testament commandment until and unless the New Testament reveals otherwise, and this presumption holds just as much for laws pertaining to the state as for laws pertaining to the individual” (5). In another volume, Bahnsen writes, “God’s law as revealed in Scripture ought to direct society and the civil magistrate today. A society which is to reflect Christian morality is a society which has the full, distinctive law of God for its direction” (Theonomy in Christian Ethics. 3rd ed., Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2002, xlii). Bahnsen’s concern is to “show from God’s Word that the Christian is obligated to keep the whole law of God as a pattern of sanctification and that this law is to be enforced by the civil magistrate where and how the stipulations of God so designate. That is to say, ‘theonomy’ has a central and irradicable place in any genuinely Christian ethic. . . Theonomy is crucial to Christian ethics, and all the details of God’s law are intrinsic to theonomy” (36).*

*2. The text of the Second London Baptist Confession was written in 1677 and formally adopted in 1689. It was adapted from the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (1658), which was a Congregationalist confession itself adapted from the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), a Presbyterian confession.*

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*1. One of the earliest and most influential voices in the theonomic and reconstructionist movement(s) was Greg L. Bahnsen. In his book *By This Standard: The Authority of God’s Law Today* (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2020), Bahnsen writes the “New Testament does not teach any radical change in God’s law regarding the standards of socio-political morality. God’s law as*

*These three confessions of faith effectively represent the Puritan stream of the Reformed tradition (i.e., the English Reformation), the other stream of the Reformed tradition being the continental stream (i.e., Three Forms of Unity).*

3. *For an excellent consideration of Reformed confessionalism, see R. Scott Clark, Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety and Practice (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008).*

4. *Reformed theologians (along with Thomas Aquinas) have articulated this threefold division of the law. For a good, brief summary, see again "Theonomy: A Theological Critique". More pointedly, in Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, Calvin articulates the threefold division of the law (4.20.15). On the moral law, he writes, "It is a fact that the law of God which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of natural law and of that conscience which God has engraved upon the minds of men" (4.20.16). Regarding the judicial law, having already acknowledged that the judicial laws were taken away, Calvin goes on to say, "For the statement of some, that the law of God given through Moses is dishonored when it is abrogated and new laws preferred to it, is utterly vain. For others are not preferred to it when they are more approved, not by a simple comparison, but with regard to the condition of times, place, and nation; or when that law is abrogated which was never enacted for us. For the Lord through the hand of Moses did not give that law to be proclaimed among all nations and to be in force everywhere. . . ." (4.20.16).*

5. *By This Standard, 97.*

6. *By This Standard, 98.*

7. *The reference here is to Matthew 5:17ff, in which Jesus expounds the moral law to the hearts of men. He turns up the temperature as to what the law requires—at a spiritual level. He, of course, is preaching this as the one who came to fulfill all of the law's requirements in the place of his people.*

8. *Samuel Renihan, The Mystery of Christ, His Covenant, And His Kingdom (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2019), 118.*

9. *1689 Federalism is the oldest view amongst confessional Baptists. On this and all the subject matter regarding Baptist covenant theology, I would strongly commend (in addition to The Mystery of Christ): Coxe, Nehemiah, and John Owen. Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ, edited by Ronald D. Miller, James M. Renihan, and Francisco Orozco (Palmdale, California: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005); and Pascal Denault, "By Farther Steps: A Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist Covenant Theology," in Recovering a Covenantal Heritage, edited by Richard C. Barcellos (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2014), 71-107.*

10. *See Romans 3:19-20, 5:20, 7:13, 9:30-10:4; Galatians 3:19. Jesus also uses the law this way repeatedly in his ministry (e.g., Matthew 5:17ff, Matthew 19:16-26, Luke 10:25-37).*

11. *To argue that God gives life, glory, and prosperity to nations (any nation other than Israel under the old covenant) who enforce and keep his law is a misunderstanding of the biblical covenants.*

12. *It is the Noahic covenant, not the Mosaic, that provides the basis for the function of civil government. The proportionate, retributive justice articulated by the Noahic covenant was "an eye for an eye." If you harm someone physically or financially, the civil authorities should exact an equal and just penalty for the sake of the victim.*

13. This is where 1689 Federalism differs from Westminster Federalism, which understands that the old and new covenants were one covenant under different administrations—in other words, the old and new covenants are the same substance.

14. The Westminster Confession of Faith makes it clear that the one covenant of grace is administered differently in the new covenant and the old (ch. 8; see also ch. 19). Theonomy is not orthodox or confessional by the standards of the WCF. That said, Westminster Federalism possesses inherent pressures toward theonomy that the 2LCF does not. If the covenant of grace is the same substance throughout the old and new covenants, and is similarly administered in the new covenant, then we should expect the laws and paradigms of the old covenant to continue into the time of the new covenant, unless expressly repealed. This

is one of the substantial arguments Presbyterians make for infant baptism.

15. For a historical-theological analysis of confessionalism in America, see D. G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002).

16. I stand with the many folk in the natural law tradition who affirm that the light of nature is what should guide humans in arranging and governing civil societies.

17. For an excellent, accessible treatment of Reformed two-kingdoms doctrine, see David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

18. *Living in God's Two Kingdoms*, 30.

19. While this is true of theonomy, in general, it is especially true of reconstructionist theonomy.



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# A Progressive Covenantal Perspective: Paul and the Tripartite Division of Moses's Law

by Joshua Greever

**T**he question this essay will address concerns the Apostle Paul's perspective on the use of the law of Moses in the Christian life and in civil government. This is a single question with two prongs of application. One prong concerns the Christian life, broadly conceived, and seeks to address the continuing relevance of the law of Moses for new covenant believers. The other prong addresses the continuing relevance of the law of Moses for civil government at all levels (e.g., local, state, federal), specifically whether the law of Moses should be the standard to which Christians should hold their governments accountable and which Christians should promote through their normal legislative processes. At the heart of the question, which inevitably affects both prongs of application, is whether the Bible portrays the law of Moses as divisible into parts or aspects, and if so, which of these parts are now abolished through Christ and which remain in force.

Within the Reformed tradition, it has been commonplace to construe the law of Moses as tripartite, consisting of ceremonial, civil, and moral law. Within this schema, a common view has been that only the moral law remains in force, whereas the ceremonial and civil laws have been abolished. Christians are still bound to obey the moral law but are not obligated to obey the ceremonial or civil laws, the ceremonial being abolished through the definitive work of Christ and the civil being limited in application to the time and place of theocratic ancient Israel.<sup>1</sup> However, within this tradition, some have stressed that only the ceremonial law has been abolished and that, in addition to the moral law, the civil law remains in force today, whether maximally in the details of its legislation or minimally in its principles of justice. This latter approach is associated with the label “theonomy,”<sup>2</sup> which in some of its manifestations has roots in the Reformed tradition, had a heyday in a particular form in the late twentieth century,<sup>3</sup> and within some circles is apparently increasing in influence today.<sup>4</sup>

In view of this variegated tradition, I will argue that it goes astray essentially in its conception of the law as tripartite. Paul did not conceive of the law of Moses as tripartite but as a fundamental unity, which as a whole was abolished by Christ and replaced by the new covenant. No part or aspect of the law of Moses remains in force in the new covenant era since Christ fulfilled it and rendered it obsolete. This does not require that Paul rejected *any* continuing relevance of the law of Moses—after all, he continued to cite it

positively—but only that the law of Moses no longer functioned as covenantal law for God’s people but instead exemplified God’s righteousness and wisdom within a particular era of redemptive history. The tripartite view of the law, in obscuring its fundamental unity, fails to reckon with the planned obsolescence of the entire law within redemptive history. As a result, it does not rightly perceive the abiding relevance of the law of Moses to the Christian life and civil government.

The argument for this thesis will unfold in three stages. First, I will address Paul’s negative statements concerning the law, which evince the abolition of the entire law. Second, I will address Paul’s reappropriation of the law as an example of God’s righteousness and wisdom. Finally, I will show that in Paul’s reappropriation of the law, he applies it to new covenant believers, not the civil government. Of these three stages in the argument, the first is foundational since it concerns whether the law of Moses is tripartite. The second stage of the argument addresses the proper use of the law in the new covenant era. The final stage, which builds on the others, addresses those to whom the law of Moses can be properly applied today, whether the church or the civil government.

## **The Abolition of the Entire Law of Moses**

Paul viewed the law of Moses as indivisible because it was inherently bound up with the old covenant, the whole of which Christ abolished, having brought it to its intended end. In Paul’s

negative statements concerning the law of Moses, there is no indication that only some aspects of the law were abolished whereas others remained covenantally binding. Rather, Paul repeatedly claims that Christians are not under the law but are free from it. The old covenant's stipulations do not function anymore as covenantal authority for God's people.

### *The Meaning of "Law" in Paul's Letters*

To understand Paul's treatment of the law of Moses, the issue must be set in its covenantal context. The word for "law" in Paul's letters is νόμος (*nomos*), and almost every occurrence in the Pauline corpus refers to the law of Moses.<sup>5</sup> Hence, Paul's treatment of the "law" isn't a commentary on every kind of legislation—not even divine law in its entirety—but the specific and particular legal code given by God to Israel at Mt. Sinai.<sup>6</sup>

Paul's use of the term νόμος probably owes to the influence of the LXX, תורה which strongly preferred νόμος as the translation of the Hebrew term (*Torah*). The word תורה refers to instruction, and in its Mosaic context refers to the stipulations of the Sinai covenant.<sup>7</sup> Hence, as a translation of the term νόμος in the LXX and Paul should be understood to refer to the legislation of the Sinai covenant. It was not simply legislation, but legislation within a covenantal framework. The law code was equivalent to covenantal stipulation; the commands or individual stipulations within the law code filled out the content of the love and faithfulness Israel was required to have and hold

for God. Obedience to the commands of the law was an expression of Israel's love and loyalty to the God of the covenant.

The point thus far is that the legislation at Sinai was indivisible from the covenant that framed and gave rise to it. It is illegitimate to divorce the Sinai covenant from its legal content, since the former is the basis for the latter, and the latter gives expression to the former. Hence, the term νόμος in Paul's letters can be translated as "law-covenant," since it refers to the law code of the Sinai covenant. Any discussion of Paul's view of the law of Moses must therefore take into account the law's inseparability from the Sinai covenant. If in Paul's theology the Sinai covenant is deemed obsolete, so must its law code.

### *The Meaning of "Under the Law" in Paul's Letters*

The phrase "under the law" (ὑπὸ νόμον, *hypo nomon*) in Paul's letters also suggests that Christians are free from the entire law of Moses. In the Pauline corpus the phrase appears in eleven verses, mostly in Romans and Galatians.<sup>8</sup> The law in view is the law-covenant of Moses, despite the absence of the Greek article modifying νόμος.<sup>9</sup> What does Paul mean when he speaks of a person or group being "under the law"? Given the lexically predominant referent of νόμος as the Sinai covenant's legislation, to be "under the law" refers to being "under the Sinai covenant's legislation."<sup>10</sup> To be "under" a law-covenant is to be a member of that covenant community, to be obligated to do and keep that

specific covenant's stipulations. Some have stressed that "under the law" means to be "under the curse of the law" or "under the dominion of sin,"<sup>11</sup> and Paul can certainly align the law closely with sin and death (esp. cf. Rom. 6:14–15; Gal. 3:22–23). Nevertheless, this is not the formal meaning of the phrase but rather a function of the impotence of the Sinai law-covenant. Perhaps the clearest instance of this is Galatians 4:4, where the Son of God was born "under the law." Surely Paul did not mean that God's sinless Son was born under sin's dominion! Rather, Jesus was born and grew up under the stipulations of the old covenant and, as a man, was obliged to keep its commands.

Not once does Paul claim that Christians are still "under the law" in any sense. Christians are not "under the law" but "under grace" (Rom. 6:14–15). Christians have been redeemed from a life "under the law" and adopted as God's sons (Gal. 4:4–5). In the new covenant era, to live according to the Spirit is to be free from a life "under the law" (Gal. 5:18). In these texts, Paul never indicates that Christians are still obligated to keep parts of the law of Moses but not others. Attempts to show otherwise read implicit qualifications into the text and fail to observe what Paul actually says of the law as a whole, not simply its ceremonies.<sup>12</sup> Paul's consistent distancing of Christians from a life "under the law" indicates they are free from the obligation to do and keep the stipulations of the Sinai covenant.

### *The Temporality of the Law in Paul's Letters*

In Pauline perspective, God intended the law of Moses as a whole to be temporal and provisional, not eternal and final. From the standpoint of redemptive history, God never intended the Sinai law-covenant to be everlasting and definitive. Rather, its goal was to instruct and prepare Israel for the arrival of the Messiah. For our purposes, this point can be adequately demonstrated through a brief survey of Romans 9:30–10:4; 2 Corinthians 3; and Galatians 3:15–4:7.

In Romans 10:4 Paul calls Christ "the end of the law." The word "end" (*τέλος*, *telos*) can refer to the goal or culmination of something, and such a meaning fits well in the Romans context. In Romans 9:30–10:4 Paul utilizes the metaphor of a race. Israel was running the race of law-pursuit but did not arrive at the finish line, whereas the Gentiles, though not pursuing the law, received the victor's award of righteousness by faith (9:30–31). Israel didn't finish the race because they "stumbled" over the stone of faith in Christ (9:32–33) and instead sought to establish their own righteousness (10:1–3). Using the race metaphor, Paul says the law had a finish line—a *τέλος*—and the finish line was Christ himself, whose arrival would bring the law to its intended conclusion and usher in the eschatological age of righteousness (10:4).<sup>13</sup> The law of Moses pointed to Christ, and when Christ arrived, the law—not just the legalistic misuse of it<sup>14</sup>—came to its proper end.

Paul makes a similar argument in 2 Corinthians 3, in which the

law-covenant of Moses is called “old” (*παλαιός*, *palaios*, 3:14) in contrast with the “new” covenant, the latter of which Paul was a minister.<sup>15</sup> The old covenant had a ministry of glory with Moses as its minister, yet it ultimately was an external ministry of condemnation because it could not overcome Israel’s hardness of heart, which was expressed in their inability to look upon Moses’s shining face (3:7, 13). The covering on Moses’s face showed that the old covenant could not internalize the law and bring the Israelites into the presence of God to behold him with unveiled face (3:14–18). One of the keywords is *καταργέω* (*katargeō*), which occurs four times in the chapter (3:7, 11, 13–14). Initially, it refers to the “fading” glory on Moses’s face (3:7), but then it refers more broadly to the entire ministry of Moses (3:11) and the “setting aside” of the old covenant (3:13), which is “set aside” in Christ (3:14).<sup>16</sup> The transitory glory of Moses’s face depicts the transitoriness of the entire old covenant and its ministry. In 2 Corinthians 3:13–14 we have a parallel with Romans 10:4, for the Israelites were unable to see the “goal” (*τέλος*) of the old covenant, which was to point beyond itself to the coming of the Messiah.

Galatians 3:15–4:7 stresses the limited duration and planned obsolescence of the law to an even greater degree. 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:

- “until the Seed came to whom it had been promised” (3:19)
- “before the faith came we were imprisoned under the law” (3:23a)
- “being shut up until the faith to be revealed” (3:23b)
- “the law was our instructor until Christ” (3:24)
- “when the faith came, we are no longer under the instructor” (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:

- “for as long as the heir is a child” (4:1)
- “until the appointed time set by the father” (4:2)
- “when we were children” (4:3)
- “but when the fulness of time came” (4:4)
- “you are no longer a servant 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).

This quick survey of some key texts in Paul's letters sufficiently clarifies the temporality and provisional nature of the law of Moses. It was never intended to be an everlasting law-covenant but was intended to remain in force only until the coming of Christ. Further, there is no evidence in these texts that Paul thought only a certain part or aspect of the law-covenant of Moses was to be set aside.<sup>17</sup> For instance, Israel's blindness as to the *τέλος* of the law was pervasive, for they failed to see the purpose of the whole law, not just some of its parts (Rom. 9:30–10:4; 2 Cor. 3:13–14). When Paul contrasts the old with the new covenants in 2 Corinthians 3, it is the entire Sinai covenant, not just some of its parts, that is rendered old, set aside, and transcended by the glory of the new covenant. Again, in Galatians 3:15–4:7 the entire law, not only some of its parts, is in view. The whole law was given subsequent to the promises to Abraham (3:17), and the whole law was given on account of transgressions and was mediated by angels (3:19). The whole law functioned to imprison and instruct Israel (3:23–24), and it is therefore the whole law we are no longer under (3:25) and from which we have been redeemed (4:5). The entire Sinai covenant, along with its inseparable legislation, had come to its intended end since the Messiah inaugurated the new covenant.

Given that Paul portrays the whole law as having been abolished, and that he does so without qualification or division of the law into parts or aspects,

the burden of proof rests on those who claim otherwise. The tripartite view of the law, whether applied broadly to the Christian life or, in the case of theonomy, more specifically to civil government, obscures the Scriptural witness regarding the planned obsolescence of the entire Sinai law-covenant. In its zeal to uphold the law of God, the tripartite view dims the glory of the new covenant, in which we find God's final and definitive covenant legislation written on his people's hearts.

### **The Reappropriation of the Entire Law of Moses**

Given Paul's portrayal of the abolition of the entire law of Moses, it is perhaps surprising that he freely reappropriated it.<sup>18</sup> Within the new covenant era, the law of Moses was no longer binding covenantal instruction but retained abiding relevance as an example of God's righteousness and wisdom within the old covenant era. Paul did not reject the law of Moses as useless and irrelevant; after all, its author was God and was therefore instructive for the Christian in the way of righteousness and wisdom (Rom. 7:12; 2 Tim. 3:15–16).<sup>19</sup>

#### *A Sampling of Paul's Positive Use of the Law*

That Paul retained a positive use of the law to instruct is evident from a sampling of texts in which he cites the law in support of his teaching. In Romans 13:9 Paul cites four commandments from the second table of the Decalogue and says Christians fulfill them when they love one another. He

positively cites the fifth commandment in enjoining children to obey their parents (Eph. 6:2).<sup>20</sup> Of chief importance for Paul is the love command, which is summarily articulated in Leviticus 19:18 (Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14). He cites the law of not muzzling the ox in support of the need to provide material sustenance to apostles and elders in their ministry (1 Cor. 9:9; 1 Tim. 5:18 = Deut. 25:4). Moreover, even when he doesn't cite the law explicitly, it is probable that the principles of the law informed Paul's teaching on issues such as generous giving (2 Cor. 9:7 = Deut. 15:10), sexual ethics (Rom. 1:27 = Lev. 18:22; 20:13), the right treatment of workers (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1 = Lev. 25:43, 53), and the discernment of innocence and guilt (2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19 = Deut. 19:15). Paul even applies the pleasing aroma from the Levitical food offerings to depict how Christian holiness pleases the Lord (Eph. 5:2; Phil. 4:18 = Exod. 29:18 et al.). That Paul used the law of Moses in support of his teaching to primarily Gentile Christian churches shows that Paul saw the old covenant as still instructive *in some sense* for new covenant believers, even though those new covenant believers were not under that former covenant.<sup>21</sup>

So, in what sense is the old law-covenant still instructive for believers today? Does the law's remaining relevance to instruct Christians prove the tripartite view, particularly that the moral law remains in force? 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.

A second observation is that Paul distances new covenant believers from the law by claiming that they “fulfill” (*πληρώω, plērōō*) the law instead of “doing” (*ποιέω, poieō*) and “keeping” (*φυλάσσω, phylássō*) the law. In the LXX the ordinary verbs used to depict the relationship between Israel and the law were *ποιέω* and *φυλάσσω*—Israel was to “do” and “keep” the commandments.<sup>22</sup> However despite Paul's frequent mention of the law of Moses, as well as his willingness to use these verbs to depict the obligation of those under the law to keep it (cf. Rom. 10:5; Gal. 12:5:3; 6:13), he almost never says Christians “do” or “keep” the law.<sup>23</sup> An instructive parallel is 1 Corinthians 7:19, where Paul stresses the importance of “keeping the commandments of God”

(τήρησις ἐντολῶν θεοῦ, *tērēsis entolōn theou*), yet excludes circumcision from those commandments which Christians should keep.<sup>24</sup> Since circumcision was the entrance rite into a life of obedience to the laws and customs of Moses (Acts 15:5; Gal. 5:3), Paul's exclusion of circumcision from the commandments suggests the commandments Christians should keep aren't coextensive with the commandments of Moses.

Instead, Paul stresses that Christians "fulfill" (πληρῶω) the law. What the law required is fulfilled in Christians because of the accomplished work of Christ (Rom. 8:4), and when Christians love one another, they fulfill the love of neighbor command that summarized the social ethic of the old covenant (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14; cf. Lev. 19:18). The notion of fulfillment includes elements of continuity and discontinuity with regard to the law of Moses. On the one hand, that Paul urges Christians to do the very thing Leviticus 19:18 enjoined Israelites to do shows the goodness of the law of Moses, and that the summative ethic of the new covenant—love—is essentially identical to that of the old. On the other hand, that Paul teaches Christian fulfillment of the law suggests that the Christian's relationship to the stipulations of Moses is different from that of ancient Israel, for it shows the law from the perspective of its completed and accomplished reality through Christ. That Christians "fulfill" the law suggests both the goodness of the law of Moses and the covenantal distance Christians have in relation to it—a distance the tripartite view diminishes.<sup>25</sup>

### *A Balanced Approach: 1 Corinthians 9–10*

A nice example of Paul's balanced approach to the law of Moses is found in 1 Corinthians 9–10, in which Paul cites the law of Moses positively yet distances himself from the obligation to keep it.

In 1 Corinthians 9:9 Paul cites Deuteronomy 25:4 in support of the idea that an apostle has a right to "worldly/fleshly things" (9:11). He specifically locates the teaching "in the law of Moses" (9:9), which serves as a basis (γάρ, *gar*, 9:9) for his point. That Paul cites Deuteronomy 25:4 for support shows he thinks it still instructs new covenant believers and is useful for wisdom.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 10:1–13 Paul reminds the Corinthians of Israel's idolatry in their wilderness wandering. He twice states that Israel's story occurred as an "example" (τύποι/τυπικῶς, *typoi/typikōs*) for Christians (10:6, 11), and that it was recorded in writing "for our instruction" (10:11). Even though the Exodus narrative of Israel's wilderness wandering isn't the Sinai covenant's legislation per se, Paul's description of Israel's wilderness experience around Mt. Sinai as "for our instruction" aptly describes his approach to the law in general.<sup>27</sup> From these examples, it is clear that Paul retained a positive use for the law of Moses in its ability to instruct Christians.

Nevertheless, 1 Corinthians 9:20–21, occurring in the same context, strikes another tone, for it distinguishes between the law of Moses and the law of God.<sup>28</sup> In 1 Corinthians 9:20 he

ministered “to those under the law,” which refers to adherents to the old law-covenant (primarily Jews). Paul immediately clarifies that he himself was not under the law, but he could keep those regulations for the sake of the gospel. Additionally, he ministered “to those apart from the law” (9:21), which probably refers to Gentiles who did not adhere to the old covenant’s stipulations. While ministering to those, Paul lived as one free from those stipulations. His freedom relative to the stipulations of the old covenant speaks to those stipulations as *adiaphora* for Paul; at this stage of redemptive history, Paul was under no obligation to adhere to them as covenantal legislation. But Paul’s freedom from obligation to the law of Moses didn’t entail freedom from moral norms or any covenantal obligation, for Paul immediately clarifies that he was not “apart from the law of God, but in the law of Christ.” Fascinatingly, Paul distinguished between “the law of God” and the “law of Moses”; he was obligated to the former but not the latter. Further, he was not free from covenantal obligation—after all, he was “in the law of Christ,” probably a reference to the new covenant, with Christ set in contrast to Moses.<sup>29</sup>

To summarize Paul’s balanced approach in 1 Corinthians 9–10, Paul can speak positively of the law-covenant of Moses. It can still be an authority for Christian ethics (9:9) and an instructor for Christian righteousness (10:11). Since the law of Moses exemplified God’s law at an earlier stage in redemptive history, it still has the ability to confirm and make explicit for the Christian the righteousness and

wisdom of God. At the same time, the old law-covenant doesn’t obligate the Christian as such but is now *adiaphora*, for the Christian isn’t under that covenant. What the Christian is obligated to obey is the law of God, which in this redemptive era instructs climactically and definitively through the lens of Christ’s new covenant and is grounded in the character of God and the created order.<sup>30</sup> As Brian Rosner has argued regarding Paul’s use of the law, the law was still “a critical and formative source for his moral teaching. . . . Rather than reading the law *as law*, Paul reads it *as wisdom* for living, in the sense that he has internalized the law, makes reflective and expansive applications, and takes careful notice of its basis in the order of creation and the character of God.”<sup>31</sup>

### **The Law of Moses Applied to Christians, Not the Government**

Thus far I have argued that Paul stressed the abolition of the whole law of Moses, not just parts of it, and that he reappropriated the whole law of Moses as indicative of God’s righteousness and wisdom in a previous redemptive-historical era. The argument thus far has addressed the tripartite view of the law and has found it wanting in its conception of the ceremonial, civil, and moral aspects of the law. At the same time, the tripartite view rightly recognizes the ongoing instructive value of the law of Moses within the new covenant era. What remains to be seen is the manner in which Paul applies the reappropriated law, whether to the Christian life

or civil government. Specifically, the focus of this section will be on *who it is* that the law of Moses instructs. *To whom* does Paul think the law of Moses still speaks? *For whom* in the new covenant era was it written? I will suggest that Paul applied the law's instruction to new covenant believers, not civil government. When the law of Moses is cited for its moral instruction, Paul consistently has in view Christians; he never applies the law of Moses to civil magistrates. This section thus overturns theonomy's core holding, i.e., that the law of Moses, particularly the civil law, is the standard for civil government at all levels.

### *The Law of Moses Applied to Christians*

Paul consistently applies the law of Moses to new covenant believers. In Romans 13:8–10, he applies some of the Decalogue and Leviticus 19:18 to the church of Rome, urging them to love one another. Paul calls the entire churches of Corinth and Ephesus to heed the law's teaching regarding not muzzling the ox (1 Cor. 9:9; 1 Tim. 5:18; cf. Deut. 25:4). It is the entire church at Ephesus that Paul urges to remember the Deuteronomic principle of needing two or three witnesses to uphold an accusation of wrongdoing (1 Tim. 5:19; cf. Deut. 19:15). Paul urges specifically children in the church to render Christian obedience to their parents, in keeping with the fifth commandment (Eph. 6:2; cf. Exod. 20:12). In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul explicitly states that the account of Israel's wilderness generation occurred "for our sake" (10:6) and "was written for our

instruction, on whom the ends of the ages has arrived." The "instruction" (*νουθεσία, nouthesia*) found within the law was intended ultimately for "us," believers belonging to the eschatological, new covenant era.

1 Corinthians 5 gives a particularly instructive example of how Paul applied the law of Moses to the church. The problem in the Corinthian church was that there was some man who was having sexual relations with his "father's wife" (5:1). Instead of rebuking the man and calling for him to repent, the Corinthians were not only tolerating this behavior but even boasting about it (5:2a, 6a). In response, Paul urged the church to exact the punishment of excommunication, which he reiterates several times in the chapter:<sup>32</sup>

- "Remove the one who did this from your midst" (5:2)
- "Hand over such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (5:5)
- "Cleanse out the old leaven" (5:7)
- "Let's feast not with the old leaven" (5:8)
- "Do not associate with the sexually immoral" (5:9)
- "Do not associate with or even eat with such a one" (5:11)
- "Should you not judge those inside?" (5:12)
- "Send away the evil one from among yourselves" (5:13)

Paul's response is instructive, for it shows how in the new covenant era Paul can still apply the civil law of Moses to the church, albeit in a distinct way due to the advent of the new covenant.<sup>33</sup> The specific sin of sexual

immorality—especially of the incestuous kind depicted in 1 Corinthians 5—was punishable by death in ancient Israel (cf. Lev. 18:11; 20:11). In the new covenant, old covenant capital punishment has become excommunication and disfellowship from the church.<sup>34</sup> While there are obvious differences between the application of the civil law in theocratic Israel and the reappropriation of the civil law in the new covenant, the point here is to note the similarities: Paul applies the civil law of Moses to the church, not the Corinthian magistrates. LXX-Leviticus 18:29 calls for the “destruction” (ἐξολεθρεύω, *exoletreuō*; cf. LXX-Lev 20:17) of the offender, which is similar to the result Paul intends for the man at Corinth (ὀλεθρος, *olethros*, 1 Cor. 5:5). Similarly, LXX-Deuteronomy 17:7 calls Israel to remove the offender from their midst, a command Paul echoes in 1 Corinthians 5:13.<sup>35</sup> Paul gives no indication that the church was to bring the man before the Corinthian magistrates but directs the church to deal with it themselves. Perhaps one could object that Paul didn’t seek punishment from the Corinthian magistrates because they were pagans and had no interest in pursuing biblical justice.<sup>36</sup> But this objection fails to consider Paul’s consistent demarcation in 1 Corinthians 5–6 between those inside the church and those outside (1 Cor. 5:12; 6:1, 6); the church has a specific responsibility and authority to judge one another, a responsibility and authority that the civil magistrates lack.

Paul’s application of the law of Moses to the church isn’t farfetched since, as mentioned above, the law of Moses

is covenant legislation and both Israel and the church represent different but related covenant communities. The Israel-Christ-church paradigm intrinsic to Pauline ecclesiology—in which Christ fulfills the promises to Israel and the church shares those promises in Christ—explains the ease with which Paul sees the law of Moses as retaining moral instruction for Christians.<sup>37</sup> After all, “we are the circumcision” (Phil. 3:3), “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16), the “one new man” (Eph. 2:15), God’s treasured possession (Titus 2:14; cf. Exod. 19:5), and God’s dwelling place (2 Cor. 6:16; cf. Lev. 26:11). Since it is new covenant believers who specifically have a share of the covenant *promises* God made to Israel, it is fitting that Paul would enjoin specifically new covenant believers to reappropriate the *legislation* of that covenant.

### *The Law of Moses Not Applied to Civil Government*

In contrast to the church, Paul never applies the Sinai covenant promises or legislation to civil government, since civil government—and more broadly civil society—is not a redeemed covenant community. Perhaps one could object that since Paul wrote his letters to churches or individual Christians and not to emperors or civil magistrates, his failure to apply the law of Moses to civil government is hardly surprising; naturally, Paul would seek the law’s application to his intended audience, not to another audience. This objection sees rightly that the occasional nature of Paul’s letters dictated the content of those letters; we don’t

have everything Paul could say about specific topics.<sup>38</sup> Further, we should remember the dictum that “the absence of evidence doesn’t entail the evidence of absence.” However, this objection ultimately fails because on at least two occasions Paul provides his basic expectations for civil magistrates; in neither of them does he draw from or allude to the law of Moses, nor does he draw conceptual parallels between Israel’s theocracy and civil governments. Rather, he gives indications that civil magistrates are under a moral standard different from that stipulated in the law of Moses.

The two texts are Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Timothy 2:1–3.<sup>39</sup> In Romans 13:1–7 Paul states that civil magistrates have been instituted by God and exist to reward the good and punish evildoers. In order to fulfill this, magistrates must have the ability to distinguish between the good (τὸ ἀγαθόν, to *agathon*) and the bad (τὸ κακόν, to *kakon*; 13:3–4). But what constitutes the good that a magistrate rewards and the evil that a magistrate punishes? Two clues suggest that the “good” and “evil” Paul has in mind refer to a basic standard of justice and goodness, which accords with natural knowledge, being known through the created order. First, when Paul wrote Romans towards the end of his third missionary journey (probably AD 57), Nero was the emperor of Rome. While not yet as hostile as he would later become towards Christians, Nero was certainly no friend to early Christianity nor was he a paragon of virtue. According to the Roman historians Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio, his behavior was self-aggrandizing and

debauched.<sup>40</sup> Certainly Paul did not think Nero was upholding the law of Moses or even simply the Decalogue. Nevertheless—and this is the second clue—Romans 13:1–7 contains numerous indicative-mood verbs, suggesting that Paul considered Romans 13 to be a reality, even under the reign of Nero. God truly institutes authorities like Nero (13:1–2), and Nero truly rewarded the good and punished evildoers (13:3–4). The indicatives don’t require that Nero did so perfectly, only that he did them truly and to some degree. Both clues—the historically impious Nero and the Romans 13 indicatives—suggest that the “good” and “evil” Paul had in mind wasn’t identical to the Sinai covenant legislation but expressed a basic standard of good and evil in keeping with natural law and the created order, which even a pagan emperor like Nero could protect, promote, and enforce through the use of the “sword” (13:4).

The second text where Paul lays out briefly his expectations for civil magistrates is 1 Timothy 2:1–3. Here Paul urges the Ephesians to pray “for all people, for kings and all those in authority.” The purpose of the prayer—marked by a *ἵνα* (*hina*) clause—is “that we might lead a tranquil and peaceful life in all piety and godliness.” The terms “tranquil” (ἡρεμος, *ēremos*) and “peaceful” (ἡσυχίος, *hēsychios*) connote a quiet, undisturbed, and orderly life.<sup>41</sup> The implied ideal for which Christians should pray and to which magistrates should strive to achieve and maintain is a situation in which Christians are able to live without fear of persecution and with the freedom to live in godly ways.

This ideal situation is “good and acceptable before God our Savior” (2:3). The precise laws or policies in order to achieve such a situation Paul does not lay forth, and Christians can disagree on these matters in good conscience. Nevertheless, Paul’s minimal expectation for civil magistrates is that they enforce and abide by laws that would allow Christians a basic freedom of religion. At the same time, he gives no indication that in order to achieve such a situation, civil magistrates must abide by the law of Moses. 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.<sup>42</sup>

This brief survey of Paul’s application of the law of Moses shows that he consistently applies it to the church that through Christ typologically corresponds to old covenant Israel. On the other hand, 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.<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that Paul would be unhappy if a magistrate became a Christian (e.g., Acts 26:28–29), and ideally legislative bodies will enact and enforce laws that are increasingly just and good. But the standard of justice and goodness to which those laws should conform is one distinct from the covenantal legislation at Sinai.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has shown that, from the evidence from Paul’s letters, the tripartite view of the law of Moses cannot explain adequately Paul’s negative and positive statements concerning the law. Negatively, Paul taught that Christ had brought the entire law of Moses to an end, not just certain parts or aspects of it. Positively, he also reappropriated the entire law of Moses—not just the moral law—as illustrative of the wisdom and righteousness of God. Finally, in its reappropriated form, Paul consistently applied the law of Moses to the new covenant community, not the civil government—a fitting application due to the covenantal correspondence between the old and new covenant communities. Paul’s negative and positive approach to the law clarifies that he considered the law a fundamental unity with a particular function in redemptive history. The tripartite view of the law, in its variegated forms, fails to grasp the law’s unity and thus obscures its redemptive-historical function.

Further, we have seen that a tripartite view of the law is not required to uphold a standard of morality for the Christian life or the civil government. With regard to civil government in particular, sometimes theonomists are concerned that if the law of Moses is removed as the basis for civil legislation, effectively there will be no standard of morality and we will have societies based on “the sinful and foolish speculations of human beings.”<sup>44</sup> But as shown above, this fails to grasp the manner in which Paul cast his moral expectation for civil magistrates

in light of the created order. Indeed, Christians must call their governments to pursue and maintain a divinely-given, objective standard of morality. But Paul did not hold forth the law of Moses as this standard; instead, he located it in that which every human being shares by virtue of their participation in the created order.<sup>45</sup> This is also not to say that the law of Moses cannot provide an example for civil legislation, but only that those laws are not binding on civil government today.<sup>46</sup> Paul's approach to the law of Moses does not necessitate a standardless basis for morality and civil government.

Finally, it should be reiterated that the only hope for societal transformation is through the gospel of the new covenant, the heralding of which is the mission of the church, not the civil government. As a result, there are necessary limits on what Christians can expect and require a civil government to accomplish.<sup>47</sup> The responsibility of the civil government is to provide a place in which the church can fulfill its mission; the civil government and the church have complementary but not identical missions. The theonomic approach to the law confuses and conflates these missions. Rightly analyzing Paul's teaching concerning the abolition and reappropriation of the law of Moses for the new covenant community clarifies and distinguishes the complementary missions of the church and the civil government.

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1. E.g., John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; *The Library of Christian Classics* 21; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2:1502–05 (4.20.14–16); Westminster Confession of Faith 19.2–5 (though there is debate as to whether the “general equity” called for by WCF 19.4 is theonomic; see S. B. Ferguson, “An Assembly of Theonomists? The Teaching of the Westminster Divines on the Law of God,” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* [eds. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], 315–49); Willem A. VanGemeren, “The Law Is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel* [ed. Wayne G. Strickland; Counterpoints; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999], 53–55.

2. John Haverland (“Theonomy: What Have We Learned?” *Ordained Servant* 4.2 [April 1995], 30) provides a clear definition of theonomy: “[T]heonomy holds that God's Word is authoritative over all areas of life, that within Scripture we should presume continuity between Old and New Testament principles and regulations until God's revelation tells us otherwise, and that therefore the Old Testament law offers us a mode for sociopolitical reconstruction in our day, and that this law is to be enforced by the civil magistrate where and how the stipulations of God so designate.”

3. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century theonomy's main proponents were Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1973); Gary North, *Dominion and Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987); and Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley, NJ: The Craig Press, 1979); *idem*, “The Theonomic Reformed Approach to Law and Gospel,”

in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland; *Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999)*, 93–143. Though differing from one another in some respects, these proponents argued stringently for the ongoing validity of the civil law of Moses for civil government. For a history of this movement in America, see Michael J. McVicar, *Christian Reconstruction: R. J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015)*.

4. One of the versions of theonomy trending today among some pastors is given the label “general equity theonomy,” which tends to resist the more maximalist theonomic approach of Rushdoony and Bahnsen and offers a more minimalist approach that finds the principles of the civil law to remain in force, at least in the event that the original applications of that law in ancient Israel no longer apply in modern societies. For a defense of “general equity theonomy” at a popular level, see Eric Luppold, “Defending Theonomy (Part 1)” [cited 8 August 2022], <https://podcasts.strivingforeternity.org/programs/governed-by-god/s2e17-defending-theonomy-part-1/>; Lamb’s Reign Media (Cross and Crown Radio) [cited August 8 2022], <https://www.lamsreign.com/search?q=theonomy>). For recent popular criticisms of theonomy, see 9Marks, “On the Appeal and the Errors of Theonomy (with T. David Gordon)” [cited 29 July 2022], <https://www.9marks.org/conversations/episode-147-on-the-appeal-and-the-errors-of-theonomy-with-t-david-gordon/>; Andrew Walker, “American Culture Is Broken. Is Theonomy the Answer?” [cited 29 July 2022], <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/theonomy/>; Timon Cline, “What Theonomy Gets Wrong About the Law” [cited 29 July 2022], <https://mereorthodoxy.com/theonomy-gets-wrong-law/>.

5. Douglas J. Moo (A Theology of Paul and His Letters: The Gift of the New Realm in Christ [Biblical Theology of the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021], 424): “More than 90 percent of the occurrences of *nomos* in Paul refer to the Mosaic law.” Besides the law of Moses, Paul can use νόμος to refer to the Pentateuch (Gal. 4:21b) or (possibly) a “principle” (Rom. 3:27; 7:21; 8:2). For a brief discussion on this point, see *ibid.*, 424–25.

6. This point, while basic, is often forgotten in discussions surrounding the “law of God,” and the result is that the specific legal instruction God gave to Israel at Sinai is treated as his definitive and everlasting legal instruction for the world.

7. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown–Driver–Briggs–Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979)*, 435–36; William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (Leiden: Brill, 1988)*, 388.

8. Rom. 6:14–15; 1 Cor. 9:20 (4x); Gal. 3:23; 4:4–5, 21; 5:18.

9. The absence of the article in Greek does not necessarily make a noun indefinite. Rather, in cases in which the noun is definite from its referent in the context—in its respective Pauline contexts νόμος has the established referent of the law of Moses—the absence of the article places the emphasis on the quality of the noun (in this instance, the legislative quality of the old law-covenant). See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996)*, 244–47, who applies this also to anarthrous objects of prepositions.

10. Rightly Brian S. Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God (New Studies in Biblical Theology 31; Downers*

Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 47–59, though he notes (rightly) that in some instances the phrase connotes something negative because being under the old covenant was bound up with sin.

11. For “under law” as “under the dominion of sin,” see Bahnsen, “Theonomic Reformed Approach,” 106–07. Douglas Moo (“The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses: A Modified Lutheran View,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel* [ed. Wayne G. Strickland; Counterpoints; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999], 366) suggests it refers to being under the power or regime of the law.

12. On 1 Corinthians 9:20, Bahnsen (“Theonomic Reformed Approach,” 107–08) claims Paul must have had only the ceremonial law in mind since Paul wasn’t free to break the Decalogue. In response, perhaps Paul had in mind primarily his adherence to the Jewish food laws and calendar when describing his ministry among the Jews, but if so, that is only because those elements were some of the most recognizable evidences of a life “under the law,” not because the phrase “under the law” itself admits any limitations or divisions within it.

13. There is no small debate over whether the term τέλος means “end” or “goal,” but the race metaphor captures both senses (rightly Jason C. Meyer, *The End of the Law: Mosaic Covenant in Pauline Theology* [NAC Studies in Bible and Theology; Nashville: B&H, 2009], 211).

14. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (“The Law As God’s Gracious Guidance for the Promotion of Holiness,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel* [ed. Wayne G. Strickland; Counterpoints; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999], 180–88) suggests Israel stumbled due to a legalistic misuse of the law, and that therefore the moral law remains in force today, provided it is used rightly. The problem with this view, inter alia, is that it interprets Paul’s citation of Leviticus 18:5 in

Romans 10:5 as a misguided proof-text in the mouths of his interlocutors, not as something Moses himself taught. Kaiser’s approach to the problem of the law is often found among theonomists as well (e.g., Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, 305, 735–38).

15. The word νόμος does not occur in 2 Corinthians 3, with the term “covenant” (διαθήκη, *diathekē ē*) being primary. Nevertheless, Paul still is reflecting on the old covenant’s accompanying legislation (τὸ γράμμα, *to grammā*, 3:6), particularly the Decalogue as the legislation written on “stony tablets” (3:3).

16. Grammatically, in 2 Corinthians 3:14 it is the face covering, not the old covenant, that is the probable subject of καταργεῖται, for the metaphor is of someone unable to see because they have a veil keeping them from seeing the glory of Christ (cf. 3:15). Nevertheless, given the contrast in the context between the old and new covenants and their corresponding ministers in Moses and Paul, what is “set aside” ultimately is the entire old covenant and its ministry.

17. Contra Bahnsen (“Theonomic Reformed Approach,” 103–08), who consistently interprets Paul’s negative portrayal of the law as simply a statement of the abolition of the ceremonial aspects of the law.

18. In using the word “reappropriate,” I am indebted to the manner in which Rosner (Paul and the Law) speaks of Paul’s continuing positive use of the law for Christians.

19. It should be noted that the question of this section is not whether Paul considered Christians free from all moral norms. His letters clearly state otherwise, evincing a concern for righteousness and a life pleasing to the Lord (e.g., Rom. 12:1–2; Eph. 4:17–5:14). Rather, the question concerns whether Paul retained any use of the law of Moses to instruct the Christian in righteousness.

20. Philip S. Ross (From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Threefold Division of the Law [rev. ed.; Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2010], 341) thinks Paul's citation in Ephesians 6:2 "is hard to interpret in any other way than as an immediate call for obedience to the fifth commandment."

21. For a detailed study on the extent to which Paul relied on the OT, including the law of Moses, to construct ethics for his predominantly Gentile churches, see Brian S. Rosner, Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5–7 (Biblical Studies Library; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

22. They especially appear frequently in LXX-Deut., as the following sampling from LXX-Deut. 5–11 indicates: LXX-Deut. 5:1; 6:1–3, 16–18, 24–25; 7:11–12; 8:1, 6, 11; 10:13; 11:1, 8, 22, 32. But they also appear in other texts, such as LXX-Exod. 19:5; 23:22; 24:3, 7; 35:1; LXX-Lev. 18:3–5; 26:2–3, 14–15.

23. Romans 2:13–14, 26 are the only possible exceptions to this point, and these verses are much debated. The debate surrounds whether Paul is speaking hypothetically of an individual's obedience to the law (e.g., Douglas Moo, The Epistle to the Romans [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 148–53; John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968], 72–78) or of genuine Gentile Christian obedience (Thomas R. Schreiner, Romans [2nd ed., BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018], 128–33; S. J. Gathercole, "A Law unto Themselves: The Gentiles in Romans 2:14–15 Revisited," Journal for the Study of the New Testament 85 [2002], 27–49). It should also be noted that the relevant occurrences of φυλάσσω in 1–2 Timothy do not refer to keeping the law of Moses per se (cf. 1 Tim. 5:21; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14), though 1 Tim. 5:21 perhaps suggests a close link between Paul's commands

and the principles found in the law of Moses since the former is grounded in the latter in the previous verses.

24. See also 1 Timothy 6:14 for the collocation of τηρέω (tēreō) with ἐντολή (entolē).

25. Rightly Moo, "Law of Christ," 359; contra Ross, From the Finger of God, 339–41.

26. Similarly, Roy E. Gane, Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 144–46.

27. Similarly, Rosner, Paul and the Law, 185.

28. Rightly H. Wayne House and Thomas D. Ice, Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse? (Portland: Multnomah, 1988), 11

29. Rightly Moo, A Theology of Paul, 136. In 1 Corinthians 9:21 there is a close relationship between the law of God and the law of Christ in this era of redemptive history. The "law of God," grounded in God's own character, probably is a broader category that encompasses divine instruction at different eras in redemptive history, including in the created order. The "law of Christ" is the law of God as seen in the definitive and final new covenant legislation, with Christ as its mediator and lawgiver. Thus, the new covenant is not at odds with divine instruction, nor does it overturn those moral norms grounded in God's character and in the created order.

30. This does not entail Moo's view that says Christians "are bound only to that which is clearly repeated within New Testament teaching" ("Law of Christ," 376). Nor does it entail Bahnsen's competing view that "[w]e should presume that Old Testament standing laws continue to be morally binding in the New Testament, unless they are rescinded or modified by further revelation" ("Theonomic Reformed Approach," 142; similarly, Rushdoony, Institutes of Biblical Law, 654). Rather, it entails interpreting the law of Moses in light of the biblical metanarrative of creation, fall,

redemption, and new creation (rightly Stephen J. Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course Between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies* [eds. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker; Nashville: B&H, 2016], 226–28). For a good example of how to construct Christian ethics with a view to the biblical metanarrative, see Iain Provan, *Seeking What Is Right: The Old Testament and the Good Life* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020). This is a more objective and satisfying approach than that of Gene (Old Testament Law, 197–218), who considers the Sinai legislation as still in force if the purpose for which the law was given remains.

31. Rosner, *Paul and the Law*, 204 (italics original).

32. James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation According to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 116 rightly notes that the commands to remove the man (1 Cor. 5:2) and purge the evil one (1 Cor. 5:13) form an inclusio, establishing a common referent for the similar verbs in the entire pericope.

33. There are elements of continuity and discontinuity regarding the punishment. On the one hand, excommunication clearly is not identical to capital punishment. On the other hand, excommunication is a kind of death—or at least a pronouncement that one is spiritually dead—and thus shares some similarities with the old covenant punishment. This combination of continuity and discontinuity makes best sense if the new covenant is seen as a genuinely new covenant that fulfills the promises of the old covenant. LXX-Leviticus 18:8 has the very phrase “the wife of your father” (γυναικὸς πατρός σου, *gynaikos patros sou*; cf. 18:11), which is virtually identical with 1 Corinthians 5:1.

34. This point is recognized by many Pauline scholars. Contra Rushdoony (Institutes of Biblical Law, 399), who understands the “destruction of the flesh” to refer to physical death, and that the act of handing the man over for such was the church’s pronouncement of the Levitical death sentence on the man. According to Rushdoony, if ancient Corinth had been a godly society with godly magistrates, the man would have been executed.

35. 1 Corinthians 5:13b differs from LXX-Deut. 17:7 only in the form of the verb used: ἐξαρῆς (1 Cor. 5:13: ἐξάρσατε) τὸν πονηρὸν ἐξ ὑμῶν αὐτῶν (*exareis [exarate] ton ponēron ex hymōn autōn*). Moreover, that Paul has the Deuteronomic stipulation of community removal in mind is clear, for as Rosner has noted (*Paul, Scripture, and Ethics*, 69), the five Deuteronomic texts where purging is stipulated (Deut. 17:3, 7; 19:1

36. E.g., this objection is registered by Rushdoony (Institutes of Biblical Law, 399).

37. For an explication of the Israel-Christ-church relationship, see Brent E. Parker, “The Israel-Christ-Church Relationship”, in *Progressive Covenantalism*, 39–68.

38. Rightly J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 23–36.

39. Of course, numerous texts exhibit Paul’s concern that Christians live properly towards outsiders (e.g., Col. 4:4–5; 1 Thess. 4:11–12; 1 Tim 3:7; Titus 3:1–2).

40. Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.1–15.74; Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, 6.1–57; and Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 62.1–63.21.

41. See Walter Baur, Frederick William Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 439 (ἥρεμος), 440–41 (ἡσύχιος); Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones,

*A Greek-English Lexicon (9th ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 778 (ἡρεμος), 779 (ἡσυχίος).*

42. *To clarify, I am not saying that the entire Decalogue summarizes, clarifies, or republishes natural law. Rather, some of the Decalogue—particularly some of the prohibitions in the second table—resemble natural law and thus appear, not surprisingly, in other ancient and modern law codes.*

43. *Contra Rushdoony (Institutes of Biblical Law, 654–56), who claims God’s covenant law is for all peoples and nations, whether they know it or not.*

44. *Bahnsen, “Theonomic Reformed Approach,” 116; cf. Rushdoony, Institutes of Biblical Law, 10.*

45. *Additionally, the Noahic covenant probably is something like a charter for civil governments today since (1) it isn’t a redemptive covenant per se, (2) it is a covenant God made with creation, (3) its minimalistic stipulations*

*specifically are meant to counter the effects of the fall in the post-diluvian age; and (4) its stipulations are fundamentally protective so that humanity can fulfill the dominion mandate. For a discussion of this, see Jonathan Leeman, Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ’s Rule (Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 206–08; and idem, “Baptists in Babylon: On the Role of Politics in Modern Baptist Life,” in Explorations in Baptist Political Theology (eds. Thomas Kidd, Paul Miller, and Andrew Walker; Nashville: B&H, 2023), forthcoming; House and Ice, Dominion Theology, 130–31. As for the use of natural law in Reformed ethics, see Stephen J. Grabill, Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics (Emory University Studies in Law and Religion; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).*

46. *Similarly, Provan, Seeking What Is Right, 39; Ross, From the Finger of God, 300–06.*

47. *Leeman, Political Church, 261–70.*



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# A Progressive Covenantal Perspective: Theonomy and Moses's Law

by Jason DeRouchie

**T**his article considers theonomy as an alternative proposal to how Moses's law relates to Christians.<sup>1</sup> It first tackles the tripartite division of the law (moral, civil, and ceremonial) and then critiques three vital tenets for theonomy: its understanding of how Christ fulfilled the law, its understanding of the nature of Christ's kingdom, and its understanding of church-state relations.

## **Assessing the Threefold Division of the Law**

Historically, Protestants have often made distinctions between three kinds of laws when considering the contemporary importance of Moses's instruction:<sup>2</sup>

- *Moral laws* are those fundamental ethical principles that are eternally applicable, regardless of the time or covenant.

- *Civil laws* relate to Israel’s political and social structures and supply case-specific applications of the moral law in Israel’s context.
- *Ceremonial laws* are those symbolic requirements related to Israel’s religious rituals and cult worship that find their typological end in Christ.

Many covenant theologians believe the “moral laws” alone (most clearly exemplified in the Ten Words) remain legally binding on Christians today, whereas the “civil” and “ceremonial” laws are time-bound and no longer applicable.<sup>3</sup> For example, Michael Horton writes,

Civil laws. . . are obviously in force only so long as the theocracy itself exists. Ceremonial laws. . . are similarly “canonical” only as long as the theocracy stands. . . [B]ut the moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, is inscribed on our consciences by virtue of our being created in the image of God. . . While the civil and ceremonial laws pertain exclusively to the theocracy and are no longer binding, the moral law is still in force.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, theologians assert that because civil laws are situational applications of the moral laws they too carry over through Christ and should guide both the church and the state.<sup>5</sup> As Rousas Rushdoony asserts: “Every aspect of the Old Testament law still stands, except those aspects of the ceremonial and priestly law specifically fulfilled by the coming of Christ, and those laws specifically re-interpreted in the New Testament.”<sup>6</sup> And again, “It is a serious

error to say that the *civil law* was also abolished, but the *moral law* retained. What is the distinction between them? . . . It is clearly *only* the sacrificial and ceremonial law which is ended because it is replaced by Christ and his work.”<sup>7</sup>

Both the covenant theology and theonomy approach to the threefold division of the law celebrate Christ as the antitype, substance, and end of all Old Testament shadows (Col. 2:16–17; Heb. 8:5–7) and that his coming alters some laws more than others. They also recognize that the laws tagged “moral” are those that Christians “keep” (Rom. 2:26) or “fulfill” (13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14; 6:2) in a fashion most similar with their old covenant function.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, neither model satisfies the biblical testimony concerning the nature and lasting significance of Moses’s law. Furthermore, as will be developed below, Scripture treats *all* the law as a single entity, *all* the law to be moral in nature, and *all* the law to have devotional benefit for believers.<sup>9</sup> After addressing these three issues, we will overview some additional problems with theonomy.

### *The Bible Treats the Law as a Singular Entity*

The Old Testament distinguishes types of laws based on content (i.e., criminal, civil, family, cultic/ceremonial, and compassion laws). In this framework, the call to love was always considered more foundational than ritual (e.g., Deut. 6:5; 10:12; 1 Sam. 15:22–23; Isa. 1:11–17; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; Mic 6:8). At times, people applied the law in new ways (1 Chr. 15:12–15 with Num. 7:9; Deut. 10:8; 2 Chr. 30:2–3

with Num. 9:9–13), adapted it to new contexts (2 Chr. 29:34, 36 with Lev. 1:5–6; 2 Chr. 30:17–20; 35:5–6 with Exod. 12:21), or even developed it further than was previously observed (2 Chr. 8:12–15; 29:25–30). There are even instances where God did not hold people guilty though they failed to fulfill ceremonial obligations (Lev 10:16–20) or engaged in ceremonially unlawful activity (1 Sam. 21:3–6; cf. Lev. 22:10; Matt. 12:4).

Nevertheless, the Old Testament never distinguishes moral, civil, and ceremonial laws in the way the threefold division proposes. Leviticus 19, for example, shows little distinction between laws for it mixes calls to love one's neighbor (vv. 11–12, 17–18) with various commands related to family (vv. 3a, 29), worship (vv. 3b–8, 26–28, 30–31), business practice (vv. 9–10, 13b, 19a, 23–25, 34b–36), care for the needy and disadvantaged (vv. 9–10, 13–14, 33–34), criminal and civil disputes (vv. 15–16, 35a), and ritual matters (v. 19b). Moses made no attempt to elevate certain laws over others.

Following the Old Testament prophets before him (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:22; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8), Jesus did distinguish “weightier” and “lighter” matters of the law (Matt. 23:23; cf. 9:13; 12:7). Yet when he confronted hypocrites who were willing to tithe on their spice rack but unwilling to engage in the more difficult tasks of “justice and mercy and faithfulness,” he emphasized, “These you ought to have done, *without neglecting the others*” (23:23).

Furthermore, whether addressing the law's repudiation, replacement, or reappropriation, the New Testament

regularly speaks of the whole law as a unit. Paul says, “The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and *any other commandment*, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Rom. 13:9). The call to love neighbor synthesizes not just a group of moral laws but every commandment, which would include *both* the proposed civil and ceremonial legislation.<sup>10</sup> Jesus also spoke broadly when he asserted, “Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19). There is no special categorizing of laws here. Paul stressed that the whole “law” brought curse to all (Gal. 3:10), that in Christ we are no longer under the law-covenant as a guardian (3:24–25), and that “every man who accepts circumcision . . . is obligated to keep the whole law” (5:3). James also noted, “Whoever keeps *the whole law* but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (Jas. 2:10).

The New Testament repudiates *all* the Mosaic law-covenant, sees *all* Moses's law replaced with Christ's law, and reappropriates *all* Moses's law as revelation of God's character, as a pointer to Christ, and as a guide for Christian living. Scripture does not teach the threefold division of the law.

## *All Laws Are “Moral” and Most Are Culturally Bound*

Theonomists are correct to note that the so-called “civil” laws illustrate moral principles working their way out in Late Bronze- and Iron-Age culture.<sup>11</sup> To this we can add that the so-called “ceremonial” laws demonstrate ethical or moral elements through symbolism. For example, Israel’s sacrificial system testified to Yahweh’s holiness and mankind’s depravity (e.g., Lev 9:1–7). Similarly, when Israel distinguished themselves from their neighbors through dietary restrictions (e.g., 11:44–45; 20:25–26), they pointed to Yahweh’s holiness, which was a loving act to pagan peoples.

Those holding to the threefold division of the law count the Ten Words as the premier example of “moral law,” yet even they contain many culturally bound features:<sup>12</sup>

- The prologue identifies Israel as a people Yahweh redeemed from slavery in Egypt (Deut. 5:6), and this element also grounds the call to rest in the Sabbath command (5:14–15).
- The idolatry command assumes a religious system including carved images (5:8).
- The Sabbath command presumes the context of ancient Near Eastern bond service, geographicaly limited animals, and cities with gates (5:14); its use of “sojourner” (= Hebrew *gēr*) (5:14) implies the existence of the politically defined nation of Israel.

- The command to honor one’s parents directly points to the existence of the nation of Israel in the land of Canaan (5:16).
- The coveting commands assume a people acquainted with ancient Near Eastern bond service and with animals common in the Mediterranean world (5:21).
- The commands principally address household heads who enjoy wives, children, household servants, and property—all of which point to Israel’s patricentric society.<sup>13</sup>

This list should caution those who want to distinguish “civil” or “ceremonial” laws from “moral” because of their temporal boundedness.

## *Christians Should Benefit from All Old Testament Laws*

Most theologians holding to the threefold division of the law affirm the lasting value of *all* Scripture. However, the moral, civil, and ceremonial distinction has moved many laypeople to see Exodus’s Book of the Covenant (Exod. 21–23) or Leviticus’s instructions as having little lasting Christian relevance.

Yet Jesus and Paul reaffirmed the prohibitions against reviling parents (Matt. 15:4; cf. Exod. 21:17) and leaders (Acts 23:5; cf. Exod. 22:28), Paul drew pastoral insight from the instructions on temple service (1 Cor. 9:13–14; cf. Lev. 6:16, 26; 7:6), and Peter called believers to holiness *because* God called for it in Leviticus (1 Pet. 1:15–17; cf. Lev. 19:2). “All Scripture. . . is profitable” for Christians (2 Tim. 3:16), and we align most closely with the Bible’s

testimony when we emphasize how loving our neighbor fulfills *every* commandment of the law and how all the law still matters for Christians, though not all in the same way.

The old covenant law is not the Christian's legal code, but it was still written *for us* by portraying God's character and values, by directing our eyes to Jesus, and by clarifying how deeply and widely love for God and neighbor should consume our lives. Every commandment counts.

### **Additional Problems with Theonomy**

The term *theonomy* ("God's law") commonly refers to one of two overlapping systems of thought related to the lasting value of Moses's law: Christian reconstructionist theonomy and general equity theonomy. The difference between the two systems is one of degree, for both stress that God defines justice most clearly through Moses's law and that these principles of justice should guide both the church and society today. Those adopting the title of reconstruction usually focus more on the society over the church, whereas those employing the title of general equity commonly stress that the church must first be reconstructed according to God's law and then through that influence government.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, both approaches believe that the church and state are to be part of Christ's kingdom on earth.<sup>15</sup>

Associated with names like Rousas Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, and Gary North in the 1980s and 1990s, Christian reconstructionist theonomy

confronts the world's increasing secularization by seeking to fulfill the "cultural mandate" of filling and subduing the earth and taking dominion (Gen. 1:28). It emphasizes that right order in this world will only be realized when all levels of society and government—including nation-states—surrender to Christ's authority by being governed by biblical law. In the words of Gary North and Gary DeMar, "The continuing validity and applicability of the whole law of God, including, but not limited to, the Mosaic case laws is the standard by which individuals, families, churches, and civil governments should conduct their affairs."<sup>16</sup> Christian reconstructionist theonomy seeks "to integrate every aspect of American life into a consistent world view based upon the abiding validity of the Old Testament law in exhaustive detail."<sup>17</sup>

The Christian church has strongly critiqued this movement,<sup>18</sup> yet it is on the rise again under the title of general equity theonomy through teachers like Doug Wilson and Jeff Durbin.<sup>19</sup> Both attempt to diminish the extreme nature of their claims by saying that *all* Christians are "theonomists" of some sort because all Christians believe God's definition of justice informs all spheres of life.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, like the reconstructionists before them, they seek to awaken a religio-political movement that unhelpfully employs the tripartite view of the Mosaic law, stresses too much continuity between the old and new covenants, and fails to distinguish just laws that Christ would approve (which would be appropriate for all nation-states) from a body politic wholly

under Christ's leadership (which will only be realized in the church).

Theonomy teaches that God has only one standard for all governments: the Mosaic Law. Specifically, Moses's moral and civil laws remain directly binding for the church *and* the world's societies, though with some necessary redemptive-historical or contextual progressions. Because Greg Bahnsen sets forth the most scholarly arguments for the theonomic approach, my critiques will confront his claims most directly.<sup>21</sup> However, my criticisms still apply more broadly to all theonomists.

### *Christ Fulfills All Moses's Law, not Just the Ceremonial Parts*

First, Bahnsen says of Moses's ceremonial laws: "The ceremonial observations were stop-gap and anticipatory; Christ and the New Covenant are the *fulfilled reality*. Therefore, all Christians have had the ceremonial laws observed for them finally and completely *in Christ*."<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere he adds:

[The] moral laws of the Old Testament, such as those that forbid adultery or oppressing the poor . . . do not foreshadow the redemptive work of Christ, show us justification by faith, or symbolically set apart the Jews from Gentiles. That the laws pertaining to the priesthood, temple, and sacrificial system do accomplish those ends, however, and are to be considered "put out of gear" by the coming of Christ as demonstrated by the author of Hebrews (esp. chaps. 7–10).<sup>23</sup>

These claims assume that the only discontinuities created in the coming of Christ relate to shadows and substance. Yet Christ does more than serve

as the antitypical substitute sacrifice on behalf of a sinful world (Heb. 9:13–14, 23–28). He is able to "make many to be accounted righteous" and to "bear their iniquities" because he was the "righteous one" (Isa. 53:11; cf. 1 John 1:9–2:2) who perfectly obeyed his Father's will, even unto death (John 5:30; 6:38; 14:30–31; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8). This obedience included his fulfilling Moses's broad teaching and not just his ceremonial instruction (Matt. 5:17; 23:2–3; Luke 24:44; John 8:46).

Speaking of Moses's "moral law," Bahnsen recognizes that "Christ came. . . to atone for our transgressions against those moral requirements (Rom. 4:25; 5:8–9; 8:1–3)."<sup>24</sup> Yet he then attempts to limit Paul's comments about the law's temporary imprisoning power and guardianship (Gal. 3:23–25) to the ceremonial legislation.<sup>25</sup> This will not do, however, for "the law that came 430 years" after "the promises were made to Abraham and his offspring" (3:16–17) and "the law. . . [that] was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come," was the whole Mosaic administration, not just its ceremonial aspects. "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4). A proper Christian approach to Moses's law requires that we see Christ fulfilling *all* the law and not just the ceremonial portions (Matt. 5:17–18).

### *Christ's Kingdom Is Not of This World*

Second, Wilson longs to see America abandon secularism and reconstruct into an ideal "new covenant republic."<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, Bahnsen points to Isaiah's promise that the nations would gather to hear Yahweh's law in Zion (Isa. 2:2–3) in support of his claim that “the Gentiles were obligated to the same moral requirements as the Jews.”<sup>27</sup> But that's not what Isaiah is envisioning. Instead, his vision predicts and anticipates the ingathering of God's multi-ethnic, transformed peoples (i.e., the church of Jesus Christ), who would heed Yahweh's word through his messianic Servant (Isa. 42:4; 50:4, 10; 51:4; 54:13; 55:3; cf. Matt. 12:18–20; 17:5; John 6:44–46). Theonomists fail to appreciate that *the church* and not any modern state stands as the mixed, multi-ethnic “nation” that the Old Testament prophets anticipate God's kingdom people would become (e.g., Jer. 31:36; Mic. 4:7; Ezek. 37:22). This explains why Peter can declare the Christian community to be “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a *holy nation*, a people for [God's] own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Jesus himself seems to stand against any form of political Christian reconstructionism. Consider what he says on the night of his crucifixion to Pilate: “My kingdom is *not* of this world” (John 18:36). Jesus further notes that his followers are to disciple “nations” not as political entities but as individuals whom they can baptize and teach (Matt. 28:19–20; see also the “from” in Rev. 5:9).<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Paul emphasizes that believers' “citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20) and that God has transferred Christians and not governments from “the domain of darkness. . . to the kingdom of his beloved Son”

(Col. 1:13). Our allegiance, therefore, is to Christ's kingdom (Col. 3:1–4). We are resident aliens on earth (1 Pet. 2:11), *freely* subject to human systems even as we recognize our service is to God (2:16).<sup>29</sup>

God created humans in his image, which necessarily calls for love and justice to be part of every human society, government included. Furthermore, the principles of love and justice within Moses's law inform such activities in other salvation-historical periods. But God's new covenant community is international and not associated with any geo-political power or province. Indeed, it is made up of some “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). Christ's kingdom is not yet of this world, but one day it will be when the present order is replaced at the final judgment (Matt. 6:10; Rom. 8:18–25; 2 Cor. 4:17–18; Rev. 5:10). Then and only then will voices from heaven ring forth, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

### *Through Christ, Moses's Law Applies to the Church, Not the State*

Third, Bahnsen stresses that, according to Matthew 5:17–20, Jesus came “to confirm and restore the full measure, intent, and purpose of the Old Testament law.”<sup>30</sup> Yet the theonomists affirmation that Moses's law still bears lasting value fails to appreciate that when Jesus fulfills the Old Testament he not only maintains (e.g., never murder, muzzling an ox) and annuls (e.g., sin offering) various old covenant

“Today the church is God’s “nation,” and only Christ’s return will reconstitute right order on a global scale. This—and no earthly state of the present age—is the church’s hope.”

laws but also transforms others (e.g., Sabbath, capital punishment) *for the church*. Hence, Jesus notes that he, the “lord of the Sabbath,” only gives rest to those who come to him (Matt. 11:28–30; 12:8); in other words, his rest is for the new covenant community and not the world in general. Similarly, Paul applies Moses’s criminal legislation regarding the death penalty (Deut. 22:22) to the church’s excommunication of professing members who refuse to repent of their sin (1 Cor. 5:13); he does not use it to ground the state’s responsibility to bear the sword (Rom. 13:4).<sup>31</sup>

In the Old Testament, through the prophet Amos, Yahweh declared punishments on Israel’s neighbors based on their oppression of others (Amos 1:2–2:3), whereas he condemns Judah for rejecting “the law of the LORD” (2:3) and Israel for profaning his name (2:7) and maligning his house (2:8). The “laws. . . statutes. . . [and] everlasting covenant” that all the earth’s inhabitants have violated, resulting in curse (Isa. 24:4–6), relate *not* to the Mosaic law but to principles of nature (i.e., image-bearing and community justice) associated

with the Adamic-Noahic covenant (cf. Gen. 6:11–12; Lev. 18:26; Zech. 11:10; Rom. 5:12–14). Hence, Paul speaks of the world’s unrighteous people suppressing God’s “truth” (Rom. 1:18), acting contrary to “nature” (1:26), and engaging in all forms of wickedness despite their knowing “God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die” (1:32). Each of these standards points *not* to Moses’s law but to every human’s more fundamental awareness of right and wrong, apart from any special revelation.<sup>32</sup>

Later on in Romans, Paul distinguishes God’s special revelation to Israel from his general revelation to mankind (9:4–5). Or, as he writes in Romans 2: “All who have sinned without the law [i.e., the Gentiles] will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law [i.e., the Jews] will be judged by the law” (2:12). Yet because Israel was Yahweh’s special covenant people, their failure to keep the revealed law proved that all without such a gift would also be under God’s condemnation (3:19). Thus, Israel’s relationship to the law served as a paradigm for the world, but not in the way theologians argue. The “law of Christ” and not the “law of Moses” stands as the direct authority over Christians today, and neither of these laws binds secular governments.<sup>33</sup> Secular government should enact laws that Jesus would approve, for the ruler of every nation-state is “God’s servant for your good. . . an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (13:4). Nevertheless, such figures are not extending Christ’s kingdom on earth. The church alone performs

this role, as it serves God in complete freedom from every world power (1 Pet. 2:11–16).

## Conclusion

Recognizing our world order's increasing brokenness, theonomy rightly seeks God's justice on a global scale and at all levels of the church and state. However, it improperly holds to a threefold division of Moses's law and fails to appreciate the significance of Christ fulfilling all Moses's law and not just the ceremonial parts. It also misses that the church and not any modern state is the locus of Christ's kingdom, which is *not* presently of this world, and it fails to recognize that the New Testament applies Moses's law through Christ only to the church and never to the state. All those made in God's image bear innate value that clarifies types of morality and justice, a picture of which both Moses's law and Christ's law supply. However, Christ's law binds the church alone, and Moses's law relates to Christians only through Christ. Today the church is God's "nation," and only Christ's return will reconstitute right order on a global scale. This—and no earthly state of the present age—is the church's hope.

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1. This article abridges and adapts material taken from chapter 11 of *Delighting in the Old Testament: Through Christ and for Christ* by Jason S. DeRouchie © 2023. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023). Used with permission.

2. For an affirmation of the threefold division of Moses's law, see the Westminster Confession of Faith 19:3–5. These are theological

categories, in contrast to the content distinctions of criminal, civil, family, cultic/ceremonial, and compassion laws that I address elsewhere. Most scholars point to Thomas Aquinas as the first to utilize the threefold division as the basis for discerning continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments; Aquinas stressed the lasting validity of the "moral" law but viewed both the "civil" and "ceremonial" legislation terminated in Christ.

3. Classic covenant theology is a theological system that sees one people of God in both Testaments and views all the historical covenants as progressive expressions of a single covenant of grace. For a brief synthesis of the view, see Benjamin L. Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 139–69 and Michael S. Horton, "Covenant Theology" and "A Covenant Theology Response," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 35–73, 183–200. Some in the classic reformed tradition do not follow the threefold division. For example, Vern Poythress, professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, notes, "No simple and easy separation between types of law will do justice to the richness of Mosaic revelation. . . . The entirety of this Mosaic revelation simultaneously articulates general moral principles and symbolic particulars: it points forward to Christ as the final and permanent expression of righteousness and penal substitution (with moral overtones) but is itself, in that very respect, a shadow (with ceremonial overtones)." Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1991), 283. Similarly, Jerram Barrs, professor at Covenant Theological Seminary, writes,

"These divisions are not hard and fast. For example, many ceremonial laws include moral and civil aspects. Many civil laws include moral aspects. A problematic consequence in this view, if it is held with systematic rigor, is that the beauties of the ceremonial and civil aspects of the law become lost to us during this present age." Jerram Barrs, *Delighting in the Law of the Lord: God's Alternative to Legalism and Moralism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 314.

4. Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 177–78, 180; cf. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 203–36; Philip S Ross, *From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Threefold Division of the Law* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2010).

5. *Christian reconstructionism is a type of Reformed, postmillennial theology that teaches the law as Scripture reveals it (especially Moses's old covenant law) should be used to reconstruct not only the church but all societies in every time. For a brief synthesis of the view, see Merkle, Discontinuity to Continuity, 170–200.*

6. Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Roots of Reconstruction* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 1991), 553.

7. Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law, 3 vols.* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1973), 1:10.

8. Even Christian reconstructionist Greg Bahnsen, who affirms the lasting validity of the old covenant's "civil" legislation, recognizes redemptive-historical and cultural discontinuities between the old and new covenant eras. Greg L. Bahnsen, "The Theonomic Reformed Approach to Law and Gospel," in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland,

*Counterpoints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 100–108.

9. For further reflections on why dividing the law into these categories is not preferable, see David A. Dorsey, "The Law of Moses and the Christian: A Compromise" *JETS* 34 (1991) 329–31; D. A. Carson, "The Tripartite Division of the Law: A Review of Philip Ross, *The Finger of God*," in *From Creation to New Creation: Essays on Biblical Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Daniel M. Gurtner and Benjamin L. Gladd (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 223–36; William W. Combs, "Paul, the Law, and Dispensationalism," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 18 (2013): 26–28; Brian S. Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God*, *NSBT* 31 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 36–37; Jason C. Meyer, "The Mosaic Law, Theological Systems, and the Glory of Christ," in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2016), 87–89; Stephen J. Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics," in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2016), 218–21. For helpful critiques of the Christian reconstructionist approach to the law (also known as theonomy), see William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey, eds., *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991); Douglas J. Moo, "Response to Greg L. Bahnsen," in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland, *Counterpoints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 165–73; Thomas R. Schreiner, *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law, 40 Questions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 223–26.

10. Cf. Douglas Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, NICOT, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 832; contra Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), s.v. Rom. 13:9.

11. See, e.g., the section titled "The Direction of the Law" in volume 1's introductory chapter of Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*.

12. The initial five of these come from Dorsey, "The Law of Moses and the Christian," 330; the last is noted in Daniel I. Block, "'You Shall Not Covet Your Neighbor's Wife': A Study in Deuteronomic Domestic Ideology," JETS 53.3 (2010): 457–58.

13. On the biblical vision of Israel's society being centered on the father as servant leader (i.e., patricentric) as opposed to dominated by a father as self-exalting dictator (i.e., patriarchal), see Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 33–102.

14. For this distinction, see timestamp 7:39–9:38 in Doug Wilson, "Are You a Theonomist?": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lBgUnih2Bs0>. The phrase "general equity" derives from the wording of *The Westminster Confession of Faith* §19.4. Speaking of old covenant Israel, it reads: "To them also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require." Advocates of "general equity theonomy" believe they are simply carrying out the original expressed meaning of the WCF, but many others who affirm the WCF strongly disagree with this application.

15. Rushdoony asserted, "Not only is every church a religious institution, but every state or societal order is a religious establishment.

Every state is a law order, and every law order represents an enacted morality, with procedures for the enforcement of that morality. Every morality represents a form of theological order, i.e., is an aspect and expression of religion. The church thus is not the only religious institution; the state also is a religious institution. More often than the church, the state has been the central religious institution of most civilizations throughout the centuries." Rousas John Rushdoony, *Christianity and the State* (Vallecito, CA: Rose House, 1986), 7. For a similar view, see timestamp 14:15–18:33 in Jeff Durbin, "Theonomy, Biblical Justice, and Church and State": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCpkIsLMuVo&t=6s>.

16. Gary North and Gary DeMar, *Christian Reconstruction: What It Is, What It Isn't* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), 81.

17. Michael D. Gabbert, "An Historical Overview of Christian Reconstructionism," CTR 6.2 (1993): 281.

18. See, e.g., Barker and Godfrey, *Theonomy*; Gabbert, "An Historical Overview of Christian Reconstructionism," 281–301; T. David Gordon, "Critique of Theonomy: A Taxonomy," WTJ 56 (1994): 23–43; Moo, "Response to Greg L. Bahnsen," 165–73; Schreiner, 40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law, 223–26.

19. See, for example, from Doug Wilson, "General Equity Theonomy (Reformed Basics #13)": [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9\\_4KGG2jxLY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_4KGG2jxLY); "Are You a Theonomist?": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lBgUnih2Bs0&t=340s>; from Jeff Durbin: "Theonomy, Biblical Justice, and Church and State": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCpkIsLMuVo>.

20. See timestamp 00:20–00:50 in Doug Wilson, "Am I a Theonomist?": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lBgUnih2Bs0>; and timestamp 3:45–4:45 in Jeff Durbin:

*“Theonomy, Biblical Justice, and Church and State”*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCpkIsLMuVo>.

21. See especially Bahnsen, “The Theonomic Reformed Approach to Law and Gospel,” 93–143; Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media, 2013).

22. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 205.

23. Bahnsen, “The Theonomic Reformed Approach to Law and Gospel,” 104.

24. Bahnsen, “The Theonomic Reformed Approach to Law and Gospel,” 112–13.

25. Bahnsen, “The Theonomic Reformed Approach to Law and Gospel,” 99.

26. See timestamp 4:15–20 and then 5:50–6:45 in “Are You a Theonomist?”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBgUnih2Bs0>.

27. Bahnsen, “The Theonomic Reformed Approach to Law and Gospel,” 111.

28. Jesus highlights this fact by unpacking his call to make disciples of neuter plural “nations” by calling for the church to baptize and teach masculine plural peoples (= “them”) (Matt.28:19–20). Jesus never called his church to make nation-states into disciples.

29. On all these texts, see John Piper, “Politics, Patriotism, and the Pulpit,” *Desiring God: Ask Pastor John*, July 4, 2022: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/politics-patriotism-and-the-pulpit>.

30. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 67; cf. 84.

31. Paul notes that God granted governments the responsibility to execute judgment, even unto death (Rom. 13:4). This fact is built into the fabric of being made in the image of God (Gen. 9:6) and clarifies why the old covenant called for Israel’s government to ensure that the punishment fit the crime (e.g., Exod. 21:23–25; Lev. 24:19–20; Deut. 19:21). Nevertheless, that the government executes criminals today in no way derives from the lasting validity of the Mosaic law.

32. Frank Thielman, *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 169; Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 131–32; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 108.

33. Carson proposes that the category of “moral law” is still helpful if we define it not as that a priori (“before the fact”), unchanging standard of God’s love and justice that stands across all times and cultures and governs our understanding of continuity and discontinuity between the Testaments but as an a posteriori (“after the fact”) reality that the Testaments themselves disclose in relation to “those instructions and laws that change the least across time.” D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew–Mark*, EBC 9, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 177.



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# Section Five

# History, Culture, and Conversations

# Theonomy and Sharia Law

by Matthew Bennett

## What Is Theonomy?

**W**ith increasing rates of moral and cultural decline in the 1970s and 1980s, a group of evangelical writers surfaced who identified themselves as theonomists. These writers wanted Christians to set their sights not just on evangelizing but on Christianizing the nation through the powers of government. The movement, sometimes called Reconstructionism, didn't merely call for laws and structures of governance to reflect Christian values and morality. More remarkably, Reconstructionism sought a Christian state that would implement the civil elements of the Mosaic law—including all Ten Commandments.

Recently, discussions surrounding theonomy have resurfaced. Only now the discussion is more nuanced and refers to itself as general equity theonomy.<sup>1</sup> General equity theonomists rightly give the church a more prominent place in their program than the Reconstructionist did.

“Christian theonomy poses some of the same dangers as an Islamic state.”

They don't tie themselves to the actual stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant as tightly as the Reconstructionists. While they begin with the Mosaic civil law, they argue that these codes cannot be applied directly but need to be adapted to differing historical circumstances.

Nonetheless, both approaches begin with the Mosaic Covenant's civil codes, and they see the church and the state as conduits and facilitators of God's inbreaking kingdom. Wherever possible, the state should enforce the dictates of the church, including what counts as true religion, the Mosaic civil code or adaptations of it, as well as the first four commandments. If loving one's neighbor depends upon loving God, then the government should declare who God is and, by necessary implication, who his people are because they belong to government recognized churches.<sup>2</sup>

Other writers have offered biblical critiques of theonomy—both new and old.<sup>3</sup> My goal in this piece is to focus on the missiological dangers of theonomy, and to do so by comparing it to Islam's use of sharia law. Just as Islam seeks to build Allah's kingdom in this world and so fuses “mosque and state,” so Christian theonomy will undermine the church's ability to distinguish the gospel from the law and Christ's kingdom from Caesar's state.

This perspective derives from my theological convictions and missiological posture, but it also connects with my experiences in countries where Islamic imposition of sharia law has allowed me to observe firsthand some of the problems with theonomy. Of course, Islamic law and biblical law differ in both their origin and their particulars. In contrast with biblical law, Islamic law does not possess divine authorization. Still, Christian theonomy poses some of the same dangers as an Islamic state.

We will look at three specific ways that Christian theonomy might be reasonably compared to Islam's use of sharia law. Then we'll conclude by observing how a Christianized nation would hamstring Christian witness. Perhaps not all proposals for theonomy will struggle to the same degree with the following warnings. Still, I believe these are dangers we all must be aware of as we consider what it looks like to live under Christ's rule and seek the good of our communities.

### **Citizens as Dhimmis**

First, theonomy risks creating a Muslim-like dhimmitude, or second-class citizenship, in a so-called Christian nation.

Islam believes that religious teaching should manifest itself in an Islamic state. This in turn places non-Muslims under Islamic rule into a tenuous relationship with the state. Such has been the case from the early days of Islam to modern-day Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.

At various times, non-Muslims have enjoyed relative tolerance under an Islamic state. Yet the influence of Qur'an 9:29 has a perennial effect in how Islamic law affects the non-Muslim citizen:

Fight those who do not believe in God or the Last Day, and do not forbid what God and His messenger have forbidden, and do not practice the religion of truth—from among those who have been given the Book—until they pay tribute (*jizya*) out of hand, and they are disgraced.

While most contemporary scholars limit what type of fighting binds contemporary Muslims, this verse lays the foundation for the second-class treatment (or worse) of non-Muslims—referred to as *dhimmi*s—living under Islamic governance.

Historically, the concept of *dhimmitude* placed “limitations on whether *dhimmi*s could build or renovate their places of worship; clothing requirements that distinguished the *dhimmi*s from Muslims; special tax liability known as the *jizya*; and their incapacity to serve in the military.”<sup>74</sup> This *jizya* tax for *dhimmi*s, for instance, is a military exemption tax for non-Muslim citizens in an Islamic state. “In the Islamic state, every able-bodied Muslim is obliged to take up arms in *jihad* (i.e., in a just war in God’s cause) whenever the freedom of his faith or the political safety of his community is imperiled.”<sup>75</sup> Since non-Muslims should not be called upon to serve in *jihad*, the *jizya* is a payment they make in order to enjoy the protection of the state. Non-Muslims are not required to fight for Islamic purposes, but they are required to pay for Muslims wielding the sword for religious purposes.

This is just one example. Specific details of how *dhimmi*s are treated varies across different expressions of Islamic governance.<sup>6</sup> Yet even in a relatively benevolent and commercially sophisticated nation like today’s United Arab Emirates, non-Muslim residents possess a lower status than Muslim citizens. Full Emirati citizenship, available only to Muslims, entitles one to an Emirati passport, the right to vote, “family book allowances,” a generous education allowance, access to land and housing opportunities, subsidized electricity and water rates, and other silent benefits like guaranteed employment and loans at preferential terms.

While Christianity may not formally recognize a *dhimmitude* in the same way, theonomy effectively creates one within a Christian state among non-Christian citizens. If government dictates the terms of proper worship, presenting this as a standard by which to judge the uprightness of a citizen, a distinction between Christian citizens and non-Christian citizens necessarily follows. At the very least Christians and non-Christians will enjoy different rights, privileges, and protections as afforded by the state when their religious practices differ. If history is any indication, those differences will extend across other categories of civil liberty as well, such as religious tests for political office, as was common in early America. Even Christians whose convictions differ on how to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy might find themselves out of favor with the state when the state disagrees with their interpretation.

## The State Must Make Binding Theological Judgments

Raising the issue of differing views among Christians regarding the Sabbath brings us to a second point of comparison between theonomy and sharia law: the state must assert competence in making binding theological judgments for the sake of protecting its religion.

In the theonomic program, someone's theological convictions and interpretations must establish the law of the land. But whose? Is it possible to create a broadly Christian or pan-Protestant consensus on Sabbath keeping, honoring father and mother, or criminalizing blasphemy? Or should we assume that the governing authority's laws on these matters will change from administration to administration according to the theological inclinations and denominational preferences of whoever happens to be in power?

If you're a citizen of Malaysia—conveniently—you can download this app on your smartphone created by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia. It will provide you with prayer times for the whole of Malaysia, daily prayers, a list of nearby mosques, as well as theologically acceptable answers to all your religious questions, such as proper head-attire for women. It's true that the guys at 9Marks would only be too happy to answer all your specific questions about fencing the Lord's Table, church discipline, and various points of doctrine, but can you imagine asking a government agency in Washington, DC to address those topics? And giving that agency a

“Christians contemplating the merits of Christian theonomy should wrestle with the danger of endowing the state with the ability to arbitrate theological convictions and punish deviators.”

power of enforcement, just like the Environmental Protection Agency enforces clean water standards?

Once the government is put in charge of doctrine, it will enforce that doctrine even among its own national and religious adherents. This problem bedevils Islamic states. Not only are non-Muslim citizens subject to a second- or third-class status and precluded from participating in aspects of government, Muslim citizens are also scrutinized for adhering to the faith, based on whoever is in power.

The Qur'an emphasizes that there is to be no compulsion in religion (Qur'an 2:256), yet the Islamic state creates a religious body that wields not only theological authority but also the sword and the gavel. A person's standing as a Muslim citizen, therefore, is impacted by his or her theological convictions.

In the early 1990s, on the heels of an Islamic resurgence in Egypt, a Muslim professor named Abu Zeid was denied promotion in a public university due to questions about his orthodoxy. However, due to the influence of sharia

in Egyptian governance, Zeid's penalty for unorthodox teaching was not relegated to his professional life. He was also brought before a court on the principle of *hisba*, which allows for prosecuting Muslims if they pose a threat to Islam.<sup>7</sup> The court decided against Zeid. One of the penalties levied by the court was the order to dissolve his marriage due to the fact that an apostate or heretical man could not be legitimately married to a Muslim woman. Zeid and his wife therefore fled the country. In Muslim state after state, from Indonesia to Algeria, among names Western readers would know like Salman Rushdie to countless others, some version of this story occurs, whereby the government enforces Muslim orthodoxy and prosecutes blasphemy.

In a government established and operated by religious belief, those who wield the sword do so not only to protect or advance national interests, but also to preserve religious conviction. If a Muslim is identified as wavering in their religious convictions, they are not merely dabbling in issues of unorthodoxy. Such a person may be perceived as a threat to the state.

As in Islam, so in Christian theonomy. Christians contemplating the merits of Christian theonomy should wrestle with the danger of endowing the state with the ability to arbitrate theological convictions and punish deviators.

### **Conversion as Treason**

This brings us to a third point of comparison and concern between Islam's use of sharia law and theonomy: when

a state privileges one religion, conversion away from that religion carries political consequences, which in turn incentivizes superficial or nominal adherence to that religion.

In 1976, a group of Muslims and Christians gathered for a five-day conference referred to as the Chambesy Consultation. This consultation was convened for the purpose of discussing the missionary nature of both faiths and the tensions that result within their respective communities. During this consultation, the idea of proselytization and conversion arose. Khurshid Ahmad, then director of the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, made the following remarks regarding the political standing of a Muslim citizen in an Islamic state who converted to Christianity:

Islam is not merely a religion in the limited sense of the word involving some metaphysical doctrines and some religious rites and rituals; it is a complete way of life and a code of socio-political behavior. It establishes a community and a state on the foundations of the faith. Faith is not just like an overcoat which one may put on and put off as one likes. It is also the foundation of the state. Change of loyalty in faith has implications for loyalty to the state.<sup>8</sup>

This last line is startling: in a government run by sharia law, conversion is both apostasy and treason.

This general tenor was shared by Ismail al-Furuqi who likewise commented, "The Islamic state has, of course, to protect itself—and as was said already in an earlier session—conversion so often seems to be tantamount to subversion of Islamic values and existence."<sup>9</sup>

Throughout their dialogue, both Ahmad and al-Furuqi insisted that the Islamic state upholds the free practice of other religions. While that may be formally true, practically it isn't. Whether by threat of punishment or through financial and social incentives, a state that privileges specific religious convictions and adherence is unavoidably coercive.

The result, inevitably, is that fewer people formally convert away from Islam, yet remain superficially attached to it. Spend time in a Muslim country, therefore, and you discover how widespread nominal Islam is—even in a nation like Iran. People continue to identify as Muslim, even while admitting in more private conversations that they hate the mullahs and they doubt the religion.

This brings us to the crux of why Christian theonomy is a missiological mistake. Theonomy incentivizes superficial conversion toward a Christian identity. It also disincentivizes conversion away from Christianity—even among the unconvinced—based on the coercive power of the sword. The power of the sword, in other words, doesn't overpower the beauty of the gospel, per se, but it exerts its own "conversionary" power alongside the gospel. Like the gospel, coercion can create converts. Unlike the gospel, coercion can leave hearts unconverted. In other words, theonomy incentivizes a superficial adherence to Christianity. And this, in turn, makes it difficult to discern who is redeemed by the gospel and who is merely compliant to the state.

For the Christian, in other words, a coercive approach to faith and identity cannot be reconciled with the gospel. True belief requires individuals to recognize their inability to live according to God's law and to seek out new life through Christ. Entangling a person's citizenship and loyalty to the state with a faith-borne allegiance to King Jesus, however, blurs the division of labor between the state and the church.

Furthermore, by instating Christian theonomy, theological differences among Christians would be put on trial at the state level. Unbelieving onlookers will then be subject to intra-denominational infighting that presents the additional offense of having become state-sponsored inquisition.

## **Coercive Versus Compelling**

In short, theonomy, at least in principle, can lead to the same errors as Islamic sharia, even if not every author or advocate of theonomy takes it this far. These, as I said, are the risks.

To be sure, biblical Christianity, like theonomy and Islam, has a vision for the state. God has established governments for his purposes (e.g. Rom. 13:1-7). Not only that, biblical Christianity calls for the state to implement justice as God defines justice within the state's God-assigned jurisdiction (e.g. Prov. 29:4). The government can implement his version of justice or some other god's version of justice. There is no objective or detached brand of justice—it's one God or god or another's.

Yet biblical Christianity also limits the government's jurisdiction, refraining from the expansivist and

essentially totalitarian vision of both Islam and theonomy. Nothing in Scripture suggests the power of the gavel or the sword can produce true religion or worship or righteousness. Indeed, Israel's history teaches the opposite. The law serves to expose our need for grace, but it cannot give people new hearts. Even a legal code inspired by God cannot be the means of transforming society or creating ideal citizens.

The community that is best able to demonstrate the goodness of divine rule is not the state, but the church. The church is the community that has freely bound itself to the mandates of Christ's kingdom—without either incentive or threat from the state. As Christians, we ought to display the compelling nature of living according to divine law by grace and through faith, not by guilt through force.

When the church seeks to take up the sword and gavel, it reaches for worldly means to transform that which can only be changed by the gospel. The gospel is always concerned with the heart—an element of society which the state has no ability to regulate.

In contrast to Islamic injunctions to take up the gavel and sword to enforce Islam, the church's willingness to take up the cross and suffer according to Christ's example offers a far different—and more compelling—exhibition. The church has been established amidst the kingdoms of this world as a kingdom outpost where the obedience to and worship of God in Christ and by the Holy Spirit provides a display of the compelling beauty and goodness of King Jesus's reign before a watching world.

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1. See the recent video explanation by Doug Wilson "General Equity Theonomy," Christ Church Reformed Basics, Accessed 12/19/2022. Online at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9\\_4KGg2jxLY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_4KGg2jxLY). Also, for a cautious approach to General Equity Theonomy, see Tom Hicks, "Is 'General Equity Theonomy' a Confessional and Biblical Doctrine?" April 5, 2021 Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary. Accessed 12/19, 2022. Online at <https://cbtseminary.org/is-general-equity-theonomy-a-confessional-and-biblical-doctrine/>

2. One might consider the line of thought professed by Douglas Wilson, "Theonomy is a Many-Splendored Thing," Jan. 24, 2018, Blog and Mablog. Accessed 12/19/2022. Online at <https://dougwils.com/the-church/s16-theology/theonomy-many-splendored-thing.html>. While addressing the idea that the regenerate and the unregenerate relate to the law differently, Wilson concludes his argument by appealing to 2 Corinthians 2:16 to demonstrate, "To the regenerate heart, everything God says is sweet, everything is good news, everything is gospel. To the unregenerate heart, everything God says is obnoxious and savors of condemnation." The problem with this is that Wilson seems to be arguing that the law of God should be made to stand over the unredeemed via the state and any repulsion they might exhibit simply demonstrates their reprobate state and their rejection of the gospel. His appeal to 2 Corinthians fails to make his point, however, insofar as Paul is discussing those who are rejecting the fragrance of Christ, not of his law. For the state to wield divine law and then to assign the non-Christian who bristles under it the status of unregenerate is to obscure and confuse the gospel message beneath the law's demands.

3. David VanDrunen, "Theonomy: A Theological Critique," The London Lyceum. Online:

<https://www.thelondonlyceum.com/theonomy-a-theological-critique/>. Jonathan Leeman's distinction between the influence of Christian ethics on our political engagement versus the desire for the identification of a state as Christian is helpful here. Jonathan Leeman, "Christian Nationalism' Misrepresents Jesus, So We Should Reject It," 9Marks 10/31/2022. Online: <https://www.9marks.org/article/christian-nationalism-as-influence-or-identity/>

4. Anver Emon, "Dhimmi, Shari'a, and Empire," pp. 33–76 in *Religious Pluralism and Islamic Law: Dhimmi and Others in the*

*Empire of Law*, ed. Anver Emon (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 34.

5. Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Dubai: Oriental, 2012), 295n43.

6. See Ba'at Yeor, *The Dhimmi: Jews & Christians Under Islam* (Unkno, 1985).

7. Geneive Abdo, *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 163–164.

8. *Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah* (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1982), 90.

9. *Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah*, 92.



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# Culture Warriors: The Good and The Bad

by Michael Horton

Something called Christian Nationalism has been on the rise of late. Different folks define the phrase differently, particularly if they are a friend or foe of it. Some use the term to describe any form of political engagement from a Christian perspective. Others use it to refer to identifying a modern nation with Christianity, even as one would identify a Christian individual as a “Christian.”

Without presuming to offer a detailed analysis, it’s this latter usage that interests me in this essay. I will consider the phenomenon of Christian Nationalism from historical, global, biblical and practical angles and draw a lesson out of each.

## **A Historical Perspective: The Kingdom Advances Through Word and Sacrament**

The witness of the early church exposes us to a sort of culture warrior, but one who contrasts rather sharply from what’s usually meant by that term today.

According to the preeminent Roman historian Tacitus, Christians “got their name from Christ, who was executed by sentence of the procurator, Pontius Pilate, in the Reign of Tiberius. That checked the pernicious superstition for a short time, but it broke out afresh—not only in Judea, where the plague first arose, but in Rome itself, where all the horrible and shameful things in the world collect and find a home” (*Ann.* 15.44).<sup>1</sup> Suetonius refers to Jews and “other sects” (*similia secantes*) such as the Christians as “a body of people addicted to a novel and mischievous superstition” (*Life of Nero* 16).<sup>2</sup>

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Romans regard Christians as a sort of plague, spilling the banks of Judea and flooding the centers of Rome. Why? It wasn’t because Christians were more religious than the Romans but precisely the opposite. Everything the Romans did was religious, even entertainment. As the Epistle to Diognetus (130 AD) observes, Christians were not separatists. “For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor

employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity.” They look like anyone else, “following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest in their ordinary conduct [but] “dwell in their own countries simply as sojourners.” The letter continues, “As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners.” They marry and raise families like everyone else “but they do not destroy their offspring. . . They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. . . They love all and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich. . . They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless.” The letter concludes: “no one can explain why they hate Christians so much.”<sup>3</sup>

Christians were “atheists,” “impious,” and “haters of mankind” (Justin, *2 Apol.* 3).<sup>4</sup> Aristides, Marcus Aurelius’s tutor and a devotee of Asclepius, attacked them as unpatriotic and “impious men of Palestine who do not respect their betters” (*Oration* 46.2).<sup>4</sup> Hence, Christians were “mad,” perhaps even atheists. Minucius Felix faults Christians, “You do not go to our shows, you take no part in our processions, you are not present at our public banquets, you shrink in horror from our sacred games (*Octavius* 12).” Opting out of these explicitly religious entertainments, Christians were seen as anti-social and unpatriotic fanatics.<sup>6</sup> For the rhetorician Varro, theology is beside the point. Whether the

gods exist or not and the stories about them are true is a matter of political cohesion.<sup>7</sup> Most emperors were less cynical than Varro.<sup>8</sup> While Christians were seen as arrogant (thinking they alone possess the truth), Roman piety was no less sincere or unyielding. Robert Louis Wilken reminds us: “As a Roman proconsul put it at the trial of a Christian in North Africa, ‘If you make fun of things we hold sacred I will not allow you to speak.’”<sup>9</sup>

“By 150 AD,” Arthur M. Wolfson observes, “there were congregations as far east as Arabia, Persia, and India, and as far north as Britain.”<sup>10</sup> At this time, Justin Martyr explains to the emperor what Christians do. First, the Scriptures are read. Then, he continues:

And we afterwards continually remind each other of these things. And the wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through his Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost. And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles [Gospels] or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.

Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we said before, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying ‘Amen’; and there is a distribution to each and a participation of that over which thanks has been given,

and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. . . [And] the president succors the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead. . . [H]aving appeared to his apostles, he taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.<sup>11</sup>

Hardly the sort of gathering to incite the world’s mightiest empire to persecution, it is a wonder that such an apparently irrelevant movement spread like wildfire. Surely there must have been a hidden agenda, an aim to take control of the Roman empire. No, says Justin:

And when you hear that we look for a kingdom, you suppose, without making any inquiry, that we speak of a human kingdom; whereas we speak of that which is with God, as appears also from the confession of their faith made by those who are charged with being Christians, though they know that death is the punishment awarded to him who so confesses. For if we looked for a human kingdom, we should also deny our Christ, that we might not be slain; and we should strive to escape detection, that we might obtain what we expect. But since our thoughts are not fixed on the present, we are not concerned when men cut us off; since also death is a debt which must at all events be paid.<sup>12</sup>

One more example will suffice, from Tertullian in the second century:

To deal with this matter briefly, I shall begin with baptism. When we are going to enter the water, but a little before, in the presence of the congregation and under the hand of the president, we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, and his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel. Then when we are taken up (as new-born children), we taste first of all a mixture of milk and honey, and from that day we refrain from the daily bath for a whole week. We take also, in congregations before daybreak, and from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the Eucharist, which the Lord both commanded to be eaten at meal-times, and enjoined to be taken by all alike. . . We count fasting or kneeling in worship on the Lord's Day to be unlawful.<sup>13</sup>

What could be less threatening to the greatest power on earth? In fact, critics mocked that Christians talk about “nothing but Christ and him crucified.” They preach nonsense, such as the “Trinity of persons,” the deity of Christ, and his complete humanity, subject to suffering like a common criminal. No wonder they go to the gallows so eagerly. Then they believe in the resurrection of Jesus—and through him, of all the dead—as if this could be *good* news!<sup>14</sup> It's all “foolishness” but evidently worthy of combatting with might and mane.

In short, Christianity exploded because believers proclaimed the gospel in Word and Sacrament, repented of sins considered normal, looked

after each other's spiritual and material needs with assiduous care—one-by-one—and welcomed outsiders. No revolution. No marches or insurrections. Just a consistent message and way of life that repaid evil with good.

Fast-forward to the mid-fourth to the early fifth century, and we have a quite different context. The so-called barbarians have sacked Rome. Jerome lamented, “What will become of the church since Rome has fallen?” In contrast, Augustine argued that in his providence, God had brought the mission field to the missionaries. To confuse the kingdom of Christ with any earthly empire is to miss the very nature of the gospel as the proclamation that joins people from every tribe and nation to one body with Christ as the head. The city of God, known to God as the elect but for now a mixed body, is on sojourn. Only when Christ returns will all be made right. Even believers remain sinful. There is no clearer evidence of this than atrocities committed in the name of Christ when professing Christians take the reins of public power.

This ongoing sinfulness of Christians has been evident not only in the infamous age of inquisitions and crusades but even when better principles prevailed. Despite his marvelous narrative of the “two cities,” Augustine pressed for the military suppression of the heretical Donatists. Luther wrote a vitriolic tract stirring the princes to battle against the radical Anabaptists in the Peasants' War. Calvin defended Luther's formulation of the “two kingdoms” and argued that the civil laws of the Mosaic covenant are binding

on modern nations. Yet, after consulting Melancthon and Reformed leaders, Geneva burned Servetus and afterward Calvin wrote a treatise defending Christendom's long-standing practice of burning heretics who deny the Trinity. Quakers and Baptists were not allowed in Puritan Massachusetts. It was only by a long lesson of disenfranchisement that children of the Reformation came together with Unitarians and deists to form a nation that would never use its state power in religious affairs.

What's the lesson of a historical perspective for us today? We must not confuse the kingdom of Christ with any earthly empire, and the kingdom advances through Word and Sacrament, not through the sword. Even as the United States arguably becomes less hospitable to the Christian faith, losing sight of this lesson can lead the saints to a sinful use of force when they do gain political power.

### **A Global Perspective: Hurting Christians Around The World**

Turning from history to the globe today, we find another reason to be concerned about talk of Christian nationalism: it risks putting on our own cultural blinders and, worse, jeopardizes Christians around the world.

Every culture is "colonialist" because every human being is filled with sinful pride—what Augustine called the passion to dominate (*libido domi-nandi*). We like people who are similar to us because we like ourselves quite a lot. I do not even know when I am imposing my own national history on

brothers and sisters in a completely different historical context.

I have been learning this the hard way by annual meetings our organization sponsors in the majority world. For example, in India a leading evangelical Anglican presented a moving defense of "secularism." Across confessional divides, everyone in the room agreed. I thought to myself, "How provocative that defense would have sounded in *my* context—to defend secularism!" Yet this Indian brother did not offer an apologia for atheism, but for a government that made no distinction between religions, allowing them to practice freely. Think for a moment about his context. The belief that "India is for Indians"—and that means Hindus—is more politically influential than at any time since independence. Never mind the fact that Indian Christianity goes all the way back to the earliest centuries, or that Islam has an ancient place in Indian culture, too. The ruling party today claims that Indian Christians and Muslims are not *really* Indian but represent the attempt of foreign agents to infiltrate and dominate. Of course, this claim caricatures the intentions of our Indian brothers and sisters, but it can be supported by the history of Western colonialism and missions.

For almost a century, evangelicals have countered this suspicion by their faithful witness—much along the same lines as the early church as described above. Christianity is not a political movement, but a global community created by the gospel. Yet the Hindu Nationalists feel justified when headlines of *Christian Nationalism* rear their ugly head.

A centerpiece of the American experiment, refusing the throne-and-altar confusion of the Old World, is the limitation of government interference in religious affairs. The first freedom enshrined in the U. S. Constitution's First Amendment is precisely what Indian Christians pray for every day. Injuring the cause of global evangelization, however, headlines of Christian nationalism in American politics justifies Hindu Nationalism and a truly secular government seems to recede like a mirage.

The lesson from a global perspective? The aspirations to make America a "Christian nation," which the global press love to pick and discuss, can hurt the freedom of Christian brothers and sisters around the world to share the gospel, gather as churches, and worship Christ as the Bible prescribes.

### **A Biblical Perspective: Christ Identifies With a Holy Nation, Not The Nations**

Yet we're overdue in turning to Scripture. Worth attention is the relationship between the old and new covenants. And what's crucial here is observing who fulfills all those old covenant promises and types: not the nations of today, but Christ and his church.

"In speaking of a new covenant," says the writer to the Hebrews, "[God] makes the first one obsolete" (Heb. 8:13). Thus, like the legalists who opposed Paul, churches today that confuse the law with the gospel are in danger of being cut off—excommunicated—from Christ's kingdom (Gal. 1:6–9). To imagine that any nation today

can arrogate to itself the constitution God gave to Israel when he took her under his special care is, by implication at least, to deny the unique blessings of the new covenant.

Besides confusing law and gospel, Christian Nationalism strikes at Christian belief in "one holy, catholic and apostolic church." Peter Leithart argues that the Great Commission mandates the baptism of nations, not only people: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). However, the object of this baptism—"them" (*αὐτοὺς*)—is evident in the call to make *disciples* not only of Jews but of Gentiles—"the nations" (*τὰ ἔθνη*). All of the baptisms in Acts are of individuals and even when whole households are mentioned, each member is baptized. Nowhere do we meet a mission to baptize national entities. Leithart presses this eccentric exegesis further: "When a nation is baptized, the Father calls that nation 'Beloved Son' as he once said 'Beloved Son' over Israel (Exod. 4:23)."<sup>15</sup>

From the earliest times, Christians have read such Old Testament passages as types that find their fulfillment in Christ at whose baptism the Father pronounced, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). It is a wonderful promise fulfilled in the new covenant when we read that God will say, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance" (Isa. 19:25). Yet this is fulfilled in a remnant from every nation. Amos 9:12 is fulfilled, James announces, in the outpouring of

the Spirit on Gentiles as well as Jews: “that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things” (Acts 15:17). Does it not verge on blasphemy to apply “Beloved Son” to the United States or any other modern nation? Once the types reach their apogee in Christ, they have no further antitype.

The law was the constitution that created a particular nation, but the promise is the constitution that creates a worldwide family of Abraham. “For *as many of you as were baptized* into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:27–29). If the water of baptism is thicker than the blood of circumcision that separates Jew and Gentile, then it surely dissolves Gentile walls between Us and Them.

The covenant with Israel was indeed with a circumcised nation, but in the new covenant every person stands before God’s judgment, condemned or justified (Jer. 31:29; Ezek. 18:2). Nations do not exercise saving faith; they are not regenerated, justified, adopted, sanctified, and glorified. The new covenant God will make with his people is “not like the covenant that I made with their fathers” at Sinai (Jer. 31:31).

When nations assume a sacred status and mission, they assume a demonic character. And it is privileged religions that place this magical scepter in the ruler’s hand. The vicious aspect of lopping off the heads of infidels with the

“Christian Nationalism is not only a nest of theological errors, presuming to undertake Christ’s final judgment, but it is impracticable and wrongly binds Christian consciences.”

cry, “Christus est dominus!” lies not merely in the violent carnage but, above all, in its blasphemy. “You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you’” (Rom. 2:23–24). But there was never a *Holy* Roman Empire. Besides fulfilling the Great Commission, the church’s most important role in society is to render Caesar his temporal due while refusing to yield to him even a single jewel from Christ’s crown (Matt. 22:21).

The lesson we take from a biblical perspective for Christian nationalism? Identifying Christ with any nation today risks blasphemy. Christ identifies himself with the “holy nation” of the church, who is comprised of peoples from every nation (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 7:9).

### **A Practical Perspective: Engage Politically, But Don’t Presume To Undertake Christ’s Final Judgment**

What does all this mean practically?

God is the ruler of both kingdoms, but in different ways: in the temporary

order through providence, common grace, and natural law; in the everlasting kingdom through saving grace and the means of preaching and sacrament. Wherever the Word is preached and the Sacraments are administered, a colony of Christ's empire appears. However, believers belong to both realms. The secular realm is neither everlasting nor contemptible. Common callings that believers share with their unbelieving neighbors are neither holy nor evil but are good and necessary gifts for us and, through us, for others (1 Thes. 4:11).

“The powers  
of the age to come are  
breaking in on this  
present evil age here,  
not in Washington or  
in the statehouse or  
the courthouse.”

So believers do not sit by passively, withdrawing from the duties of citizenship. Especially in a democratic republic, they are called to politically engage while reminding themselves, each other, and the state itself that every nation belongs to a realm that will pass away and that only one kingdom will remain forever (Heb. 12:27). Believers seek the common good and justice for all, but they never assume the responsibility of Christ on the Last Day (Luke 9:51–56). Unlike Israel's commission, instead of executing vengeance on their enemies, they are to love, pray for, and even extend hospitality to them (Matt. 5). We can leave Christ's final judgment to

him. This paragraph summarizes exactly what we found at the beginning of this essay with respect to the conduct of the early church.

In contemporary movements of a postmillennial tendency, there is not even a consensus regarding what the establishment of Christ's kingdom over the nations might look like in practical terms. John Milbank's *Radical Orthodoxy* advances “Christian socialism” and affirms gay civil unions (though not marriage) while American Theonomists sacralize “Christian capitalism” and their ideal state would execute homosexuals. The postmillennialism that was popular among the likes of Abraham Kuyper, B. B. Warfield, and Woodrow Wilson (whom Warfield nominated as president of Princeton) was anti-war and progressivist.

A key tenet of the Reformed tradition is Christian liberty. Where Scripture does not prescribe elements in worship, doctrine, or life, the church cannot bind consciences. Like faith itself, Christian liberty would be threatened by coercion. Even members of the same local church might hold widely varying political views, even on the same pro-life basis. Christians have to put up with some policies to which they object. Politics, after all, is a realm of negotiation and compromise.

However, Christian Nationalism seems to require a unified platform that binds consciences to particular policies that are not addressed, as the Westminster Confession puts it, “either expressly. . . or by good and necessary consequence” in Scripture. In short, Christian Nationalism is not only a nest of theological errors, presuming to

undertake Christ's final judgment, but it is impracticable and wrongly binds Christian consciences.

## Conclusion

Allow me to close with what I see as the most practical solution to this impasse. Terms like "the two kingdoms" or the "spirituality of the church" have become lightning rods even in Reformed circles where they were settled doctrines. Even card-carrying premillennialists sound more like postmillennialists when it comes to the culture wars. So "amillennialism" can hardly be less controversial, although the magisterial reformers and Reformed confessions reject "the Jewish error" of Jesus's day that the kingdom of Christ is a geopolitical entity before the return of the King. So lately I have been wondering about a new tack: What if we upheld the Sabbath? I am not talking about making a list of what can and cannot be done on Sunday. I'm talking simply about the principle that God made us for himself and commands us to find rest in him as his gathered people one day every week. Or have we lost this, too?

It may well be that a firefighter who gardens between services is making good use of this rest. Taking treats to the nursing home or fishing with the kids at the local pond may be as well. But why can't we take a break from texting, tweeting, checking CNN or FOX, or talking politics in the narthex over coffee? Forget for the moment all the theory, differences over the relation of Christ and culture, and the millennium. What if we just all practiced

the Sabbath—especially when we gather as Christ's body for the means of grace? The powers of the age to come are breaking in on this present evil age here, not in Washington or in the statehouse or the courthouse. In the words of Luther's famous hymn,

That Word above all earthly powers  
no thanks to them abideth.  
The Spirit and the gifts are ours  
through him who with us sideth.  
Let goods and kindred go,  
this mortal life also.  
The body they may kill:  
God's truth abideth still.  
His kingdom is forever!

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1. Tacitus: *Annals 13-16*, vol. 5, trans. John Jackson. Loeb Classical Library, no. 322 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), XV.44, *emphasis added*.
  2. Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, trans. Alexander Thomson, revised and corrected by T. Forester (Burk Classics, 2013), [335], at XVI, 151; cf. 109. These notable Roman historians, Tacitus and Suetonius, were friends of Pliny; in fact, Suetonius was in his employ.
  3. Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*. Vol. 1. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.), 5.
  4. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 68. Like his predecessor Trajan, Hadrian declared that Christians were not to be charged based on hearsay. "Legitimate" cases are to be tried in court. "But, by Hercules, if any one brings any accusation through mere calumny, decide in regard to his criminality, and see to it that you inflict punishment" (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.8.1-3) (Wilken, 69).

5. Citations in this paragraph are from R. Joseph Hoffman, *Epilogue to Porphyry Against the Christians: The Literary Remains* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1994), 133, 140-43, 145.

6. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 66.

7. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 54.

8. Judging by his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius felt deep piety (*eusebeia*) in spiritual matters, though he justified his persecution of Christians on the charge that they dishonored public observance (*thréskeia*), were obstinant, and devoid of that proper self-control and calm that comes with being “ready to be separated from the body.” Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. George Long, revised and updated (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1997), Book XI, 85-86. His persecution of Christians was sporadic and local (especially Lyon, where Irenaeus’s senior minister shared with many in a gory death). “What a great soul is that which is ready to be separated from the body,” he wrote, “and then to be extinguished or dispersed or continue to exist.” “But this readiness

must come from a man’s own judgment, not out of mere obstinancy, as with the Christians, but considerately and with dignity and in a way to persuade others, without tragic show.”

9. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 63.

10. Arthur M. Wolfson, *Ancient Civilization: An introduction to Modern History* (New York: American Book Company, 1916), 101.

11. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 67.

12. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 11.

13. Tertullian, *De corona*, ch 3-4.

14. His *True Doctrine* (*Logos Aléthēs*) is preserved only in Origen’s *Contra Celsum* (c. 248) but was written between 175 and 177, probably in Alexandria. *Celsus* was a typical Middle Platonist and he seems to have considerable first-hand knowledge of Christian beliefs and practices. R. Joseph Hoffman, *Epilogue to Porphyry Against the Christians: The Literary Remains* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1994), 147. R. J. Hoffman notes, “Like Plutarch, he argues that there is one supremely good God who employs a vast array of *daimones* (some good, some evil) who act as influences in the material world.”



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# Against Religious Establishment in Baptist Political Theology

by Nathan Finn

**I**n 2015, the US Supreme Court legalized same-sex “marriage” in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. In the eight years since, American culture has increasingly accepted revisionist views of gender and marriage. The new sexual orthodoxy was a long time in the making, as Carl Trueman demonstrates persuasively in his much-discussed book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. Still, orthodox evangelicals and other moral traditionalists have been left reeling from how quickly the world is changing around us.

For a growing number of progressive politicians, libertine celebrities, and “woke” corporations, mere acceptance of the new sexual orthodoxy is not enough. These influencers and powerbrokers have fully bought in, and they seek to leverage whatever power they wield to compel affirmation from cultural troglodytes like us who still affirm outdated views of gender, sexuality, and marriage. They believe they’re on the right side of

history. In reality, they are the religious crusaders. And their anti-gospel is that traditionalists must convert to the new sexual orthodoxy or die—at least figuratively speaking—via cancellation and ostracization.

Some orthodox believers have responded to the growing decadence of American culture by championing various forms of Christian Nationalism or advocating for a return to a form of Christian commonwealth, like the nation-states that arose during and immediately following the Reformation era. In some Reformed quarters, theonomy has once again become an acceptable view, while in more charismatic circles, dominionism weds aspects of theonomy with the prosperity gospel. Whatever their differences, adherents to each of these positions believe Christian political theology ought to make the case that America should, in some sense, be a “Christian nation.”

While few Baptists would admit to embracing theonomy or dominionism, some contemporary Baptists are sympathetic to Christian Nationalism or drawn to the idea of a Christian commonwealth. These “establishmentarian” Baptists attempt to reconcile the historic Baptist commitment to religious liberty for all with traditionally magisterial Protestant understandings of a Christian nation. They do not want anyone to be persecuted for their religious beliefs; they simply want a modified religious establishment wherein the government promotes (or at least privileges) true religion.

I believe establishmentarian Baptists mean well. I resonate deeply with their desire for a nation that is more

influenced by Christian ethics and restrains, rather than promotes, moral evils. I lament the decreased influence that a biblical worldview has in the public square. Nevertheless, Baptists cannot embrace any form of Christian Nationalism or commonwealth without rejecting the political theology that has characterized most Baptists throughout history. From the beginning of the Baptist movement in the seventeenth century, the vast majority of Baptists have rejected religious establishments as a threat to flourishing faith.

## **Early English Baptists**

In 1644, seven Particular Baptist churches in London came together to draft a confession of faith. That confession, which came to be called the First London Baptist Confession, was not the earliest Baptist confessional statement. General Baptist ministers had written similar documents since 1611, when Thomas Helwys wrote a confession explaining the views of the earliest English-speaking Baptist congregation in Amsterdam. But prior to 1644, no group of Baptist churches had adopted a confession that summarized their common faith.

The early Particular Baptists were heirs of the English Separatists, a radical puritan movement that had rejected the Church of England as apostate and argued for autonomous congregations of believers who were bound together by covenant. But like the General Baptists before them, at least some of the London Particular Baptists had also interacted with Continental Anabaptists during the 1630s, when they were

wrestling with pedobaptism and moving toward the credobaptist position.

Not surprisingly, there were accusations that the Particular Baptists were really Anabaptists. This claim had also been made about the General Baptists. This was not merely a question about whether Baptists had embraced a heterodox view of baptism. Anabaptism was a remarkably diverse movement that ranged from pacifists who rejected the validity of Christian magistrates to revolutionary movements that sought to establish Anabaptist theocracies. For nations with an established state church, like England, Anabaptism was considered a potential threat to the social order.

The London Particular Baptists argued in the preamble to their 1644 confession that they were “unjustly” called Anabaptists. But they also made this clear in their articles that addressed the magistrate. Article 48 argued that “a civil magistrate is an ordinance of God,” while Article 49 acknowledged that the “supreme Magistrate of this Kingdom” was King and Parliament. But Article 49 also noted that the Particular Baptists could not in good conscience submit to some “ecclesiastical laws.” Article 50 expressed hope that God would mercifully “incline the magistrates’ hearts so far to tender our consciences, as that we might be protected by them from wrong, injury, oppression and molestation,” as had been characteristic when Catholic monarchs had persecuted Protestant dissenters in the previous century.

The remaining articles made clear, however, that even if the magistrates would not abide by the consciences of the London Particular Baptists, they would continue to practice their faith

according to their understanding of Scripture, which included praying for the magistrates and submitting to their authority in all matters that did not contradict Scripture. The desire of the Baptists was to always have “a clear conscience void of offense towards God” (Article 53), even if falsely accused of heresy, thus rendering faithfully what is due to both God and Caesar.

The position articulated by the London Particular Baptists represented a third way that rejected elements of both magisterial Protestantism and Anabaptism. Simply stated, they affirmed God’s grace in granting a nation magistrates who are Christians but rejected the authority of those magistrates to establish state churches or compel religious observance. They believed local churches should be autonomous covenanted communities of baptized believers who submitted to the rule of Christ by obeying his commands in Scripture. They argued for liberty of conscience in matters of religion, though they believed that one’s conscience should submit to the supreme authority of Scripture.

It is important to note that the London Particular Baptists were not arguing for what we might today call a secularist state that is hostile to religion. They wanted Christian magistrates who passed laws that reflected the natural law and the biblical ethics of the second table of the Ten Commandments. This was a key difference between the Anabaptist and Baptist positions, reflected a few years later when some Baptists served in political offices during the Interregnum. However, they did not want a religious establishment with the power to coerce conformity or

persecute dissenters—including heretics and unbelievers. True worship is not a legitimate concern of the state.

An establishmentarian Baptist might appeal to John Gill (1697–1771), the most influential Baptist theologian of the mid-eighteenth century. Gill argued in his *Body of Practical Divinity* for the right of rulers to be “guardians” of both tables of the law, thereby promoting true religion and punishing impiety and blasphemy. However, one could reasonably respond that Gill’s fusing of magisterial Protestant political theology with Baptist ecclesiology was inconsistent. It is worth noting that few other Particular Baptists appealed to Gill’s view of the magistrates, even though he was regularly cited as a theological authority in other matters. Gill may well have been a noteworthy establishmentarian Baptist, but he was also an outlier in the Baptist tradition. Modern establishmentarian Baptists should admit as much if they seek to retrieve Gill’s political theology and apply it in our contemporary context.

## **Baptists in America**

The trajectory established by the London Particular Baptists also showed up among Baptists in the American Colonies and later the United States. Roger Williams and John Cotton were the respective founders of the first two Baptist churches in North America, as well as the colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation. Each man argued for religious liberty and rejected the idea of a state church. In 1644, the same year as the First London Confession, Williams went so

far as to argue for a “hedge or wall of Separation between the Garden of the Church and the Wilderness of the world” in a letter to Cotton, a puritan minister in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Thomas Jefferson would later use similar language in his 1802 letter to the Baptists in Danbury, Connecticut, wherein he argued for a “wall of separation” between church and state.

In 1742, the Philadelphia Baptist Association adopted a confession that was lightly revised from the Second London Confession of 1689. The Philadelphia Confession affirmed the biblical validity of civil magistrates (Ch. 24), but also affirmed liberty of conscience (Ch. 21) and the local church as an autonomous community of covenanted, baptized believers (Ch. 26). This was consistent with the positions outlined in the First London Confession, though the later confession said less about magistrates and offered a more developed ecclesiology.

In the latter years of the colonial era and initial years of the Early Republic, roughly 1770 to 1800, Isaac Backus and John Leland emerged as the key voices for the Baptist view of church and state. Backus has often been identified as an “accommodationist” who was comfortable with the idea of a broadly Christian commonwealth, while Leland has often been labeled a “strict separationist” who assumed a more pluralistic view of church and state. However, recent scholarship has demonstrated their views were not that dissimilar. Both men thought it desirable that magistrates be believers, both wanted laws that reflected biblical values as much as possible, both argued

against the validity of state churches, and both championed religious liberty for all people. They emphatically rejected religious establishments.

Into the nineteenth century, American Baptist confessions continued to affirm traditional Baptist views, though adapted to a context where there was no longer a state church from which to dissent. For example, Article 13 of the New Hampshire Confession (1833) affirmed regenerate church membership and believer's baptism, while Article 16 affirmed the divine origin of civil government, the need to pray for magistrates, and the necessity of obeying them "except in things opposed to the will of God." The Abstract of Principles (1858) echoes elements of Philadelphia and New Hampshire in Articles 14 and 18.

Throughout the twentieth century, Baptists continued to affirm their historic views of church and state. Scholars such as E.Y. Mullins argued for the Baptist view in his influential treatise *Axioms of Religion* (1908), while in 1920 Texas pastor George Truett preached a famous sermon on the topic, titled "Baptists and Religious Liberty," from the steps of the US Capitol. The Baptist Faith and Message (1925) reflected the historic position in Articles 12 and 18, respectively. This consensus endured until the latter decades of the twentieth century.

### **Civil Religion and Culture Wars**

It was not until the midcentury that significant tensions arose that paved the way for our current debates. On the one hand, the postwar years were the apex of America's traditional civil religion,

which was broadly Judeo-Christian in its ethos. Following the Second World War, it became far more common for churches to place American flags in their sanctuaries and sacralize patriotic holidays such as Memorial Day and Independence Day during Sunday worship services. During this time, many churches throughout the country changed their names to Victory or Victory Memorial.

During the Eisenhower Administration, the government also made a number of national gestures to promote civil religion in the public square. Notably, in 1954 Congress added the words "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance, followed in 1956 by a joint resolution adopting "In God We Trust" as the national motto of the United States. Both moves were attempts to position the United States as a righteous counterpart to the atheistic communism of the Soviet Union. During these years, the National Council of Churches was provided with airtime on the radio and television, Billy Graham became a household name, and church attendance reached record highs.

At the exact moment when millions of Americans were comfortable with the idea that America was a Christian nation—or at least a God-fearing nation—everything seemed to change. The period between 1960 and 1990 witnessed the sexual revolution, the height of the Civil Rights movement, the assassinations of several public leaders, campus protests, racial riots, the Vietnam War, antiwar movements, legalized elective abortion, third-wave feminism, the rise of an organized homosexual lobby, battles over public-school textbooks, debates over nuclear disarmament, a

presidential impeachment and resignation—and the list could go on.

The decline of American civil religion, coupled with the increasing turmoil of the earliest culture wars, contributed to the rise of the Religious Right. Some Baptist ministers became key leaders in the Religious Right, while countless Baptist laypeople became engaged in national politics for the first time. Even those theologically conservative Baptists who were less interested in partisan politics were sympathetic to the Religious Right's agenda of promoting family values, championing traditional views of gender and sexuality, and opposing abortion-on-demand.

Unfortunately, many Baptists were also influenced by Christian nationalist voices in the Religious Right who argued that America had been founded as a Christian nation and simplistically equated church-state separation with secularism. Evangelical Baptist public witness to a free church in a free state has been muddied ever since, leading directly to the present debate over magisterial Baptists.

## Conclusion

Evangelical Baptists should reject political theologies that promote state-endorsed

religion. Such a posture almost inevitably leads to coercion in matters of faith, the confusion of piety with patriotism, and the proliferation of nominal Christianity. The earliest Baptists rightly rejected state churches and championed religious freedom for all. Establishmentarian Baptists mean well, but now is not the time to abandon the best of our Baptist heritage. The fusing of magisterial Protestant political theology with Baptist ecclesiology is ultimately untenable, and if history is any indication, it may well result in a loss of evangelistic urgency and a rejection of regenerate church membership.

Yet, it is not enough for Baptists to limit our political theology to trumpeting religious liberty, while America, in the memorable words of Robert Bork, slouches towards Gomorrah. Baptist political theology must also equip Baptist believers to challenge secularism in the public square and promote authentic human flourishing that is consistent with the Natural Law, the Scriptures, and the best insights of the Christian intellectual tradition. I am thankful for contemporary Baptist thinkers such as Jonathan Leeman, Andrew Walker, and Patrick Schreiner, who are leading the way in the retrieval of distinctively Baptist political theology for the sake of a more faithful public witness.



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# To Study History, Exercise Virtue

by John Wilsey

*Nessun maggior dolore*

*Che ricordarsi del tempo felice*

*Nella miseria.*

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto V, 121–123

“**T**here is no greater pain than to remember happy days in days of misery.” Thus spoke Francesca da Rimini to Dante in the second circle of hell. Her husband murdered her for committing adultery with his brother. She faced an eternal afterlife enveloped in darkness and tormented by roaring hurricane winds, which recalled the way she and her lover Paolo Malatesta were carried in life by the winds of their passion. As Dante told the story, Francesca’s hopelessness dripped from her words; Paolo could muster no words at all but only weep bitterly.

Such is the power of nostalgia. Nostalgia yields vivid images that bless the imagination but can also give birth to despair. It is not quite history,

nor is it really memory, and it is not merely a feeling. Nostalgia emerges when history, memory, and sentimentality meet.

As humans, we can all relate to the power of nostalgia in belief formation. We form our beliefs about reality based on a myriad of considerations. One of those considerations is our national identity. Who we are as Americans is integral to answering who we are as individuals, as members of families and communities, and even as Christians. National identity is not the only feature that matters, but it does matter a great deal because it at least in part defines what we have been, what we are, and what we aspire to be as human beings. And when considering who we are, we must assess our successes and failures honestly.

### **Christian Nationalism's Reliance on Nostalgia**

Christian nationalism offers one way to wrestle with our national identity. The past is an indispensable source in this pursuit. Historian Allen C. Guelzo describes history as “the second question.” The first question a human being asks is, “What is that?” The second is about history: This eloquent and vivid insight into the essence of history might be rephrased as “Where did we come from?” What does our past tell us about who we are now and what we may be tomorrow? Christian nationalism attempts to construct a frame of reference for answering Guelzo’s “second question.”

Unfortunately, Christian nationalism frequently taps nostalgia as a substitute

“Christian nationalism frequently taps nostalgia as a substitute for history.”

for history. This is not *always* the case. After all, Christian nationalism is complex. It has taken many forms over time (see my article “The Many Faces of Christian Nationalism”). Not every form has depended on the *tertium quid* produced by the alchemy of history, memory, and sentimentality. But a Christian nationalism that is oriented toward the past often does. Those of us who have paid attention to the degradation of American culture resulting from what Carl Trueman calls “the rise and triumph of the modern self” may be excused from short flights into nostalgia for happier times in the past. But nostalgia can really only serve as a funhouse mirror of the past. To get at the questions of “who are we” and “where did we come from,” we must turn to responsible Christian historical thinking.

Nostalgia has taken two significant forms over time: historical and rational. Christian nationalists influenced by the 1977 book by Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory*, and the 1979 formation of the Moral Majority lean toward historical nostalgia. More recently, with the 2022 publication of Stephen Wolfe’s *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, nostalgia has taken a rationalist turn.

The Moral Majority Christian nationalism of Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, John Eidsmoe, Benjamin Hart, David Barton, and others<sup>1</sup> relies on historical

arguments. Their thesis that America was founded as a Christian nation (the Christian America thesis) orients the country to the past and employs a historical method known as a declension narrative. The Christian America writers seek to demonstrate that America was founded as a Christian nation. They proceed by looking to the faith of the Founders and the Revolutionary generation and then casting the America of the early republican period in ideal terms. Declension narratives like this rely on cherry-picking the historical record. They despair over how far America has fallen from its noble and pure Christian roots—and finally, they call Christians to recover the Christian America that has been lost.

Such nostalgia is historical because its proponents make principally historical arguments. Historical arguments are *a posteriori*, which means they are inductive, concern themselves with probabilities rather than certainties, and rely on evidence taken from experience in the past. I have argued in other places against the Christian America thesis, that America was not founded as a Christian nation, but as a nation with religious liberty. My counter argument is also historical and inductive, using evidence from experience to arrive at a more probable conclusion. The Moral Majority tradition of Christian nationalism, as a declension narrative, is nostalgic because the evidence the writers use to set up their narrative (while usually solid and reliable) is not balanced by any equally substantial and reliable evidence that goes against their narrative. Thus, the Christian America writers employ the logical fallacy of special

pleading, rendering their arguments (in my view) improbable.

I have spent nearly twenty years in academia thinking about the Christian America thesis in historical terms. But there emerged a new form of Christian nationalism in 2022. We have yet to see how influential Wolfe's argument will be. Still, if social media is any indication, his book has already significantly impacted the American Protestant scene. Wolfe's argument is also nostalgic, but he majors on using deductive, rational arguments to present a model for Christian nationalism rather than pointing to the experience of a specific Christian nationalism in American history (though *a posteriori* is not entirely absent in his line of argument). How, then, is his argument nostalgic?

Wolfe's deductive argument for Christian nationalism is framed by sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth-century Reformed political theology, especially that of John Calvin, Johannes Althusius, Francis Turretin, Samuel Willard, and others. Wolfe establishes premises informed by pre-modern Calvinist theology (as opposed to modern Calvinist theology such as that of Jonathan Edwards or Charles Hodge, for example) to arrive at a precise definition of Christian nationalism, civil law, magistracy, and the role of government. Since Wolfe does not mainly appeal to historical experience but to syllogisms informed by the logic of premodern Reformed thought, he is not arguing for probabilities. Instead, he is arguing for certainties. In other words, like a geometric proof, if his starting point is given, his premises are sound, and his argument is valid,

then his conclusion must be true. But even though his argument is rationalistic and *a priori*, he still looks to the past for support, namely, the premodern Reformed tradition. This is what I am calling rational nostalgia.

To arrive at an inevitable conclusion, Wolfe goes to the world of the seventeenth century—a very different world than our own—and imports the ideas from the seventeenth century directly into the twenty-first. Frozen in time and timeless, those ideas are supposed to serve as the basis for Christian nationalism. His retrieval begins with his own justifiable frustration and despair at the present-day monstrosity of a pagan nationalism that swallows everything it sees. However, Wolfe then looks to the past as the source for hope, ignoring the profound foreignness of the past and wrongly applying the static past to argue for an establishmentarian, authoritarian Christian state in the present.

Both the historical and rational nostalgic postures are conservative. But not all conservatisms are alike. In his 1956 classic *Conservatism: From John Adams to Churchill*, Peter Viereck divides conservatism into two schools of thought. The first, Burkean evolutionary conservatism, recognizes the inevitability of change but seeks to control the forces of change through deliberation, constitutional procedure, and order, as these are defined by tradition. This is the dominant conservative tradition in American history from John Adams to William F. Buckley. The second, Viereck styles “Ottantottism.” Viereck credits the French thinker Joseph de Maistre as the founder of this

school. He coins the term “ottantottism” in noting the story of the reactionary King Charles Albert of Piedmont-Sardinia, who muttered to himself, “*ottantotto*,” which is Italian for “88.” Viereck writes, “Thereby he meant to say: all problems would vanish if only the world turned its clock back to 1788, the year before the [French] Revolution.”<sup>2</sup>

While Wolfe would like to claim to be neither conservative nor traditionalist, he is unavoidably a conservative of the Ottantottist brand. So are the advocates of the Christian America thesis. Ottantottists see history as a story of decline and seek to recover what is lost (Wolfe’s “revitalization”). Their appeal is made attractive by the emotional pull of nostalgia. But nostalgia cannot inform our historical thinking, whether we look to history to make inductive or deductive arguments.

### **Christian Historical Thinking Requires Virtue**

I am not denying that evidence-based historical arguments are necessary when we are considering our American identity. After all, pure logical arguments for an order based on religion, which make no appeal to historical experience for definition or justification, will not do because they entail immanentizing the eschaton. Look no further than the philosophy of Johann Gottfried von Herder (whom Wolfe cites favorably), G. W. F. Hegel, or Karl Marx for evidence of this entailment. The human attempt to join heaven and earth, however rightly or wrongly conceived, through the means of the

nation or the state inevitably leads to totalitarianism, the death of states, and the death of their citizens. The only bridge between heaven and earth is the “ladder. . . the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Gen 28:12). That ladder is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ: “Truly, truly I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (John 1:51).

Since history is necessary to both Christian and American identity, to engage in responsible Christian historical thinking, we have to exercise virtue. We must exercise the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. We also must exercise the classical virtues of temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice. The exercise of virtue in historical thinking will guide us into answering the necessary questions that emerge when considering our national identity.

First, let us pause and reflect on the question: why think historically in the first place? Is there any biblical mandate to study the past? While the verse phrased, “thou shalt study history” is, admittedly, missing from the canon of Scripture, we do have a firm biblical basis for studying history. First, we are created in the image of God (Gen 1:26), which, in part, means we have the power of perspective in time. This power is uniquely human and reflects in us (albeit limited and marred by sin) God’s sovereign power of perspective over the space-time-matter continuum that he created. Second, our faith is historical, not mythological, and not mystical. It is based on historical events,

people, and ideas that occurred, lived, and were expressed in real time and real places. According to John 1:1–14, Christ’s Incarnation occurred in time even though the Lord Jesus himself is the Eternal Son of the Father. Here we see that the spiritual and material, the temporal and the eternal, are bridged together by the Word, Jesus Christ. Third, God commands us to remember the past (Isa. 46:8–10). All that was, is, and is to come is for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). We see that great truth in the past, and so we have hope that in both the present and the future, God remains sovereign over space, time, and matter and is faithful to fulfill all His purposes. We remember the past because, in the study of the past, we find hope (Isa. 44:21–28) and wisdom (Prov. 4:5–9).

How, then, does virtue relate to the study of history? Remembering that we are created in God’s image, that the redeemed share union with Christ and each other in the church, and as such, we follow the law of love. We exercise the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity as we consider the past. Faith allows us to depend on God and obey his word. We recognize the biblical basis for studying history and act on it based on our faith in God and his Word. Related to faith, hope looks forward to the promises God has made to us in Christ. Therefore, we do not read history as a collection of random events but have the assurance that every effect of every cause begins with the First Cause and that history has a *telos*. When we read of events, especially the troubling ones,

we do not come away with fear for the future but hope in the sovereign God, who is transcendent yet active in his world. And charity is the greatest of the theological virtues for studying history. Our study of history follows the contours of Paul's writing in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7. We do not pursue self-interest at the expense of the dead or rejoice in unrighteousness. We rejoice in the truth and seek to tell the truth in all its complexity, even when it is hard.

“There are no right or wrong sides of history. History is our making sense of the past, not a bludgeon to subdue our ideological opponents. Justice helps us make sense of the past in ways that foster selfexamination, not self-righteousness.”

Modernity would have us turn our backs on the past, rejecting the people of the past as morally inferior. In his *Social Contract*, French sentimentalist Jean-Jacques Rousseau envisioned human society as being comprised of the living only. He began his work with the memorable phrase, “Man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains.” The “chains” enslaving people comprised social conventions and traditions from previous generations. In a 1776 appendix to his influential revolutionary tract

*Common Sense*, the radical Thomas Paine celebrated American independence by writing, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.” And Karl Marx, in an 1852 essay, wrote in a similar spirit of rejecting the wisdom of the past: “The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” In contrast, British thinker Edmund Burke conceived of society as comprising more than one or two living generations. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), he described society as united under a contract “not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.” The Scriptures commend the same, and if such a conception of human society is right, then faith, hope, and charity are necessary for any consideration of the past.

And what of the classical virtues—temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice? These virtues are further expressions of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity when we exercise them for the gospel's sake. Temperance in historical study involves controlling passions like triumphalism or condemnation. It is characterized by patience and the ability to accept circumspectly the successes, failures, and especially the quotidian dealings of the people of the past. With courage, we start with the recognition that the world of the past is vastly different from our own, and because it is so different, it often makes us uncomfortable. Uncomfortable realities of human sin, like slavery, war, violence, and oppression,

were (and remain) unavoidable, and any historical study requires that we confront these realities directly. That takes determination and moral strength. It also requires joy because in confronting the painful events of the past, we shed the light of truth on them and the truth always liberates. Wisdom guides us into drawing sound conclusions about the implications of the past on today's world and the world of the future. Wisdom also entails humility in our judgment, remembering that we are no more and no less fallen in sin than those from the past. Finally, justice involves treating our historical subjects with respect, refraining from hasty generalizations, cherry-picking for the sake of preconceived agendas and ideologies, or idolizing one's heroes and condemning one's villains. History is not a moral arbiter. There are no right or wrong sides of history. History is our making sense of the past, not a bludgeon to subdue our ideological opponents. Justice helps us make sense of the past in ways that foster self-examination, not self-righteousness.

### **Virtue as a Defense Against Nostalgia and Cynicism**

When we think about who we are as Americans, where we have come from, and where we are going, we must draw from history. To think about American identity is to think about American history. And in thinking about history, there are at least two extremes against which we are to guard: nostalgia and cynicism. Nostalgia causes

us to idealize the people and times of the past, to ignore the fact that the past world was just as cursed by sin as the present world. Nostalgia directs us to ignore the outrages and frightful thoughts and actions of the people we count as heroes and to excoriate those who would remind us that even the great men and women of the past were deeply complex, flawed people in need of a Savior. It is nostalgia that leads us to idolize our nation, finding in its history a divine origin and seeking to restore that which was lost without thought of the cost and by authoritarian means if necessary.

“When—not if—  
we are persecuted for  
our faith, our hope  
will not be found in  
the past. Our hope will  
not be found in the  
Christian prince who  
sallies forth to rescue  
us from the pagans.  
Instead, our hope is  
found in Christ and the  
life he purchased for  
us with his own blood  
once for all.”

On the other hand, thinking about the past can encourage cynicism. We can look at the people of the past as morally backward and inferior, criminal, and inhuman. Their hypocrisies we take to be evidence of their

falsehood, thus rendering both the values and the people that held them to be illegitimate and void of meaning. In their ignorance, superstition, hypocrisy, and villainy, the people of the past are guilty of both the outrages of the past and the reverberating effects of those outrages in the present. Therefore, they are to be condemned, canceled, struck from the nation's collective memory, and pronounced dead, not only in fact but also in name. Those defending them must also be considered outlaws on the wrong side of history. If nostalgia begets national idolatry, then cynicism begets national denunciation. Criminal origins mark the national past, and those crimes must be purged without considering the cost and by authoritarian means if necessary.

To be faithful to the gospel, we must orient ourselves to the future, not the past. This does not make us progressives in the modern sense because we are not looking for an immanent eschaton, a utopia of our own making. We are looking for the return of Christ. That is our hope. We have all our eggs in that basket. We know that only Christ will make the wrong things right. Our hope is not found in pining for a past we wish had existed through inductive or deductive means. Declension narratives based on nostalgic sentiments are not hopeful because they are not true. We study history to make sense of it, to gain wisdom from it, and to see the faithfulness of God demonstrated in the lives of those who are now dead but were once just like us—"afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but

not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4:8).

Those who have made conservative historical and rational arguments for Christian nationalism are perplexed but, unfortunately, seem to be despairing. Committed Christians of every stripe agree with their diagnosis of contemporary America. The pagan nationalism<sup>3</sup> of contemporary times is godless and the enemy of the church and human civilization writ large. But the answer to pagan nationalism cannot be reactionary or counter revolutionary. We do not use the same methods as the utopian revolutionaries of the left, which are authoritarian, destructive, and totalitarian. Totalitarianism, whether directed by atheists or Christian Nationalists, is undiluted evil. Atheistic and religious totalitarianism have this in common—both purport to lead their people to the highest good. Persecution follows dissent from the state's definition of the highest good. Ultimately, who do you want holding the pliers, ready to pull your fingernails out by the roots in the prison cell after you've been detained for not taking your medicine, i.e. breaking the civil law meant for your "good"—the drag queen apparatchik or a Christian prince?

When—not if—we are persecuted for our faith, our hope will not be found in the past. Our hope will not be found in the Christian prince who sallies forth to rescue us from the pagans. Instead, our hope is found in Christ and the life he purchased for us with his own blood once for all. If

I am to have my fingernails torn out with pliers by the jailer, I need hope like that to sustain me.

In the meantime, I think historically as a Christian and am informed by the virtues—faith, hope, charity, temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice. These help us to guard against the extreme vices of nostalgia and cynicism in our historical thinking as we come to grips with what it means to be an American. They protect us against idolizing ourselves. Idolatry is the common element that combines nostalgia and cynicism, demonstrating that while they are distinguishable, they are also parallel. Virtue wars against pride and virtue will see us through to the final victory. In that great truth, we have hope.

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1. *Not all of the Christian nationalist writers in what I am calling the Moral Majority tradition of Christian nationalism were formally part of the Moral Majority. My moniker of “Moral Majority tradition of Christian nationalism” refers to the body of writings arguing that America was founded as a Christian nation, a concept I called the “Christian America thesis” in my book One Nation Under God? An Evangelical Critique of Christian America (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).*
  2. *Peter Viereck, Conservatism: From John Adams to Churchill (Princeton: Nostrand, 1956), 11.*
  3. *I have argued that there exists a pagan brand of nationalism, as Wolfe has. See John D. Wilsey, “Progressive Nationalism,” Public Discourse (February 2, 2022), <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2022/02/80366/>.*



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# Utopian Seductions

by Matthew Arbo

**T**hose familiar with the wider historical contours of Christian political theology find little new in the resurgent nationalism of our moment. Nationalist sentiment has come and gone, each time a different flavor, perhaps, but always the same recognizable brand.

I do not have space here to account for all the continuities between movements but will focus instead on one point of continuity that links all nationalist movements, Christian or otherwise: the utopian impulse. Christian nationalism succumbs to utopian seductions. It dreams of initiating today a political order reserved for the life to come and, as such, eschews the eschatological nature of Christ's kingdom and the principle tasks of the church.

What is the question to which Christian nationalism is the proposed solution?

Its ascendancy has caught many by surprise, in turn sounding the usual alarms and provoking a steady spate of apologies. A glance at social

media reveals a thicket of conflicting viewpoints and tangled reply threads that terminate in a slow realization that discourse is only getting less clear. We have received several accounts explaining why it has arisen, but have yet to consider how Christian nationalism is a solution. I suggest it is not so much a political project as it is a *sentiment*. Projects have *plans*, and CN has no observable or unifying plans, none beyond civil enforcement of the Decalogue. It is first a brooding mood of political disaffection.

“Christian nationalism succumbs to utopian seductions. It dreams of initiating today a political order reserved for the life to come and, as such, eschews the eschatological nature of Christ’s kingdom and the principle tasks of the church.”

Putting the matter simplistically, many believe the regnant liberal order of the past half century to be irrecoverably imperiled. It failed to maintain adequate social equilibriums. Culture rots before our eyes, institutions are impoverished, society is fractious, and our noblest collective aims have vanished from sight.

Thus, the question to which Christian nationalism is the answer goes something like: in light of liberalism’s collapse, to what may Christians turn to re-establish the vital forces integrating and animating a healthy society?

Not an insensible question on its face. But why is Christian *nationalism* the answer?

First, some important distinctions. To begin with, there isn’t one Christian nationalism on offer today, but *many* nationalisms. There are as many iterations and priorities as there are Twitter accounts. For some, the aim is simple church establishment. For others, the aim is greater governmental respect for the moral law. For still others, the larger segment by far in my view, Christian nationalism is another name for paternal patriotism or soft authoritarianism. None of these iterations bear meaningful similarity with modern European national churches, which have establishment traditions and constitutions unshared by the U.S. They are politically novel.

The resurgence of Christian nationalism is attributable in part to the highly elastic nature of the concept. One of the more vocal advocates has referred to nationalism as a nation becoming conscious of itself. The “Christian” character of nationalism is equally variegated, assuming incorrectly that individual conceptions of “Christian” are uniform. The chief advantage of this conceptual elasticity is that it invites sympathizers to suffuse their own individual meanings. As a result, what is meant by “nation” or “Christian” is ultimately subjective.

Christian nationalism has three basic moves: (1) observing the imperiled state of modern liberalism as no longer politically serviceable, it (2) argues for universal religiosity (i.e., that all societies are religious in a strict sense) and, (3) since only one religion can be true, society should in principle be governed by the true religion. Secularity is a false religion that failed to sustain social order, so why not try for Christian governance? The truth is superior to the false.

Let us note explicitly several of the necessary conditions that must exist for Christian nationalism to be formally established. First, the concept of “nation” must have a clear rationale, including whom precisely it encompasses and why. Second, that nation must specify decisively what counts as “Christian” and what does not; Christianity being the one True Religion requires formal judgment on ethnic or confessional expressions as valid or invalid. Third, a mass conversion of modern polytheistic society to Christian monotheism must occur. If that feat is accomplished, then, fourth, the nation must secure near-universal agreement on the essentials of Christian governance and statecraft. A tall order, admittedly, and this names only a few such conditions.

Here we may turn to an unlikely source.

### **An Old Book**

In the latter section of his semi-satirical *Utopia*, Thomas More portrays religion in terms both vivid and biting. A variety of religions exist on his fictive island, but the “greater and wiser” members acknowledge only one

Supreme Being who deserves glory and honor. More and his visiting entourage preach Christ to the inhabitants, and in due course, many islanders believe and are baptized. “Those among them that have not received our religion do not fright any from it,” says More, “and use none ill that goes over to it, so that all the while I was there one man only was punished on this occasion.”

That man was punished not for his religious belief, but for inflaming the people to sedition. One of their ancient laws, after all, is “that no man ought to be punished for his religion.” The law bears the wisdom of past experience. Having been once rife with religious conflict, the people had adopted an alternative political stance in which no religious compulsion can be imposed upon another save that of persuasion and gentleness.

This relaxed law was among the first promulgated by the founding authority, Utopos. He felt it necessary “not only for preserving the public peace, but because he thought the interest of religion itself required it.” Valuing wisdom above all, “he therefore thought it indecent and foolish for any man to threaten and terrify another to make him believe what did not appear to him to be true.” No one can be forced to believe and thus no one ought to be punished for disbelieving:

And supposing that only one religion was really true, and the rest false, [Utopos] imagined that the native force of truth would at last break forth and shine bright, if supported only by the strength of argument, and attended to with a gentle and unprejudiced mind; while, on the other hand, if such debates were carried

on with violence and tumults, as the most wicked are always the most obstinate, so the best and most holy religion might be choked with superstition, as corn is with briars and thorns; he therefore left men wholly to their liberty, that they might be free to believe as they should see cause.

There's a just-so-ness to the ordering of religion in Utopia. Temperamentally latitudinarian, we might say.

More, writing at a time of religious upheaval, was pessimistic about using coercion as a means of solving religious conflict. It didn't seem effective to him, nor could he identify in the New Testament warrant for soft authoritarianism. If the True Religion is really *true*, then it will unmake falsehood the way light unmakes darkness. It will *persuade*. The message of the church is persuasive in itself and bolstered by righteous acts of the faithful. Good works are a highly effective means of persuasion.

Christian nationalists respond to such arguments by affirming the ideal but arguing the ideal is unrealistic. It is one thing to maintain tolerance toward diverse religious perspectives, they argue, but quite another to tolerate inevitable conflicts arising from these diverse communities' pursuit of discordant ends. Every religion presumes its own rectitude. Adherents believe their religious beliefs are true and that they should act on the basis of that truth. But when religions are widely discordant about ends, a society must decide on the exact *limits* of political toleration. More's Utopia is just that, after all—a fictitious society perfectly ordered. *Real* societies must have *real* political limits.

## Limits How?

It was precisely these sorts of limits that resulted in More's own beheading by King Henry VIII when he refused to take the oath of royal supremacy recognizing the king as head of the English church. The example More makes of the one man punished for sedition, but not specifically his religious beliefs, raises a natural question as to what *constitutes* sedition in the first place.

Modern political liberalism employs the concept of an "overlapping consensus"—in John Rawls's words—in order to create a space for tolerance. Yet a society may still change its mind about what it is willing to tolerate. Standards of tolerance are perpetually negotiated. Is protesting peacefully outside an abortion clinic seditious? What about a militant cult living off the grid and stockpiling munitions in preparation for a future apocalypse? May clergy refuse to accept a person's preferred pronouns? Further examples can be easily imagined. Exactly when is the limit of toleration breached?

This perpetual negotiation is exactly what proponents think CN resolves by drawing clearly defined limits on freedom and tolerance.

But does it? Beyond enforcement of the first and perhaps second table of the Decalogue, does it offer a clear and coherent set of limits and tolerances? Future states of affairs in which Baptists are legally compelled to baptize their children or Catholics to fore-swear allegiance to the pope are easily imagined. But to what standards of justice will religious authorities

appeal in prosecuting fellow Christians for deviance?

This question about the outer limits of tolerance raises another one: at what point will we know that the Christian nationalist project has succeeded? What are the relevant evaluative criteria? Need it only be appreciably better than late democratic liberalism? I think no great answer is forthcoming to such questions.

History is full of surprises. Perhaps one day it will defy the odds, who can say? But I would remind us of a key insight of More's *Utopia*, and indeed of past utopian experiments—that when we attain what we thought we wanted most, we find the achievement bittersweet, failing to deliver fully on the promise we endowed it with.

On the longer historical view, more often than not, a power secured and consolidated is just as quickly lost. Wielding authority is notoriously precarious.

It isn't crazy to think that closer adherence to the first table of the law,

say, would improve the social order in comparison to contemporary liberalism. But if that is an attractive destination, as many believe it is, how will any society begin deliberately to traverse the expanse between here and there? Institutional renewal is indispensable, but that cannot occur without first garnering more widespread support for such an involved cultural undertaking. In other words, to even begin such a political quest, Christians need (far) more Christians!

Because it is utopian, Christian nationalism in the United States is idealist rather than realist. To become realist would be to forfeit all of its seductive force, since the realist, by contrast, accepts the contingencies of time and place, accepts the call God has extended to lead quiet, peaceable lives, to serve neighbors and to await the time God has appointed to judge and restore creation. The perfect order we seek is reserved for the life to come.



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# John Gill on Theonomy

by Ian Clary

**T**heonomy began as a controversial movement in late-twentieth-century American Reformed theology and, in recent years, has reappeared within some parts of this community.

Between the 1970s and 1990s, theonomists such as R. J. Rushdoony (1916–2001), Gary North (1942–2022), and Greg L. Bahnsen (1948–1995) were involved in debates over the Old Testament’s relationship to the New, the continuance of the Mosaic civil laws, postmillennial eschatology, and presuppositional apologetics.<sup>1</sup> After the deaths of Rushdoony and Bahnsen, the movement largely cooled. However, with the help of Covid lockdowns, a new strain has regained some standing. Figures in this renewal include Joseph Boot, James White, and Douglas Wilson.<sup>2</sup>

While the earlier debates over theonomy were largely relegated to the American Presbyterian world, this brand is finding traction among Baptists, forcing them to face the incongruity between their theology and

theonomic distinctives. Theonomy stresses the continuity of Mosaic moral and civil laws with the New Covenant. Though they differ as to particulars, Baptists typically see discontinuity between the covenants and stress the newness of the New.<sup>3</sup>

Without getting into a discussion of whether the relationship between Baptists and theonomy is tenuous, this essay considers the thought of an important eighteenth-century Baptist, John Gill (1697–1771). It also considers the question of the natural law, an aspect of moral theology whose validity theonomists strangely deny. While they stress the abiding character of moral law, they deny the possibility of the decalogue’s analogue in nature.

Gill is important because of his Reformed pedigree and his influence on later Baptist thought. Analyzing his work will clarify a fundamental difference between Baptist thought and theonomy.<sup>4</sup>

## Theonomists and The Natural Law

Following the groundwork laid by modern Dutch thinkers like Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977), and Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987), theonomists teach that there is no neutral ground between unbelief and Christian thought. They misinterpret natural law theorists and accuse them of saying that the natural law is neutral territory for believer and non-believer, where God does not have direct moral governance.

Bahnsen described Christian views of natural law as arguing that God is

“‘separated’ from the ordinary and ongoing workings of the world he made. God has chosen not to directly govern every detail in the created world on a moment-to-moment basis, and thus ‘nature’ has laws inherent in it which determine what things are like and how things happen.”<sup>5</sup>

In stronger words, North wrote that, “Christians are often confused about this [battle for the mind]. They have been sold a bill of goods by the enemies of God, namely, that there are *zones of neutrality* scattered throughout the creation, and that some sort of common natural law rules these neutral zones. This is a myth.”<sup>6</sup>

For Boot, natural law is a vague and contentless notion derived from the Enlightenment that allows for a “public sphere [that] is not subject to God’s revelation, but to reason, or natural law.”<sup>7</sup> Natural law stands as the “main rival to biblical law” but is merely an “abstraction.”<sup>8</sup> He argues that Christians have misguidedly made an “appeal to classical philosophy,” which he describes as a “death wish.”<sup>9</sup>

Instead of natural law, Christians should appeal to common grace which does not provide an “*alternate* law structure to biblical law.”<sup>10</sup> The appeal to natural law, according to Boot, is that “it pretends to neutrality,” and so Christians see it as a “non-religious paradigm and therefore a useful tool for engagement with the ‘secular’ sphere.”<sup>11</sup>

## John Gill and The Natural Law

What would a Reformed and Baptist theologian like John Gill say to this? Is

the natural law some vague, abstract, neutral territory where believers and non-believers alike can come together in a public sphere, devoid of any notion of the Christian God or his law?

A perusal of Gill's voluminous corpus reveals a contrary conclusion. For Gill, the natural law shares the same content as the moral law of the Decalogue and is part of God's active moral governance. From creation, humans have been made in God's image, which was not annihilated after the Fall, and so they know the natural law as part of their conscience, per Romans 1 and 2. Gill draws his understanding of the natural law both from pagan sources—especially Aristotle's *Politics*—and from the history of Christian thought, particularly the church fathers and his fellow Protestant theologians on the continent and in Britain.<sup>12</sup> For instance, he quotes approvingly Cicero's (106-43) oft-quoted maxim from *De Legibus* (*On the Laws*): *salus populi suprema esto* [the welfare of the people should be the supreme law]. This principle is found throughout Protestant political philosophy, for instance, in the *Table Talk* of John Selden (1584-1654), the famous English jurist.<sup>13</sup>

A helpful place to start is in Gill's important *Body of Divinity* (1769-1770), where he relates the natural law to Adam and his posterity in pre- and post-fall conditions. As Richard Muller argues, this distinction "is particularly important for our recognition of the limits of natural theology," as pre-fall Adam "had an unfallen perception of the handiwork of God in the natural order." The fall necessitated special

revelation from God to answer the problems of the noetic effects of sin so that mankind could have a saving relationship with God; natural revelation could not establish this. Though sinful man could not know God as Savior, they could know him as Creator through nature.<sup>14</sup>

Gill argued that God governed his rational creatures by law as part of his "government of the world." This law came via covenant where Adam functions as federal head of humanity. God gave Adam a law that was both "natural and positive," which was God's prerogative as King of the world, and humans were expected to follow it.

Based on Romans 2:14-15, Gill described the natural law as "given to Adam, was concreated with him, written on his heart, and engraved and imprinted in his nature from the beginning of his existence, by which he was acquainted with the will of his maker, and directed to observe it." We see evidence of this because "the remains of it in the hearts of all men, even of the Gentiles" was apparent as part of the "natural conscience in every man." This law was not sufficient to save. Rather, salvation required the law being "reinscribed" in regeneration on the hearts of believers (Jer. 31:33). The content of this law that was written on the hearts of all in Adam and in Christ "is the same with the Decalogue, as to the substance of it." The summary of this law, which was "binding on Adam, and on all his posterity" was summarized by Christ in Matthew 22:37, that we are to love God and neighbor.<sup>15</sup>

“Theonomic readings of the Protestant natural law tradition are, at the very least, misguided. Baptists who care about the integrity of their own tradition would do well to leave theonomy to the side and embrace the thinking of theologians like Gill whose thought wellrepresented the best of both Reformed and Baptist theology.”

## Conclusion

Much more could be said on Gill and the natural law, but suffice it to say that Gill would be baffled by theonomic descriptions of the natural law as some kind of neutral, vague, or abstract concept that owes more to pagan philosophy than to Scripture. For Gill, the natural law was given to Adam and his posterity at creation by God the Governor, as part of his providential control over what he made.

The content of the natural law is that of the Decalogue and, as such, all men were expected to obey it. While the natural law could not establish God as the Savior of mankind, it could tell us about God the Creator. What was first written on the heart was not sufficient

to save sinners, which is why it needed to be re-engraved in regeneration.

Theonomic readings of the Protestant natural law tradition are, at the very least, misguided. Baptists who care about the integrity of their own tradition would do well to leave theonomy to the side and embrace the thinking of theologians like Gill whose thought well-represented the best of both Reformed and Baptist theology.

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1. *Helpful historical introductions to theonomy are: Michael J. McVicar, Christian Reconstruction: R. J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Molly Worthen, “The Chalcedon Problem: Rousas John Rushdoony and the Origins of Christian Reconstruction,” Church History 77.2 (June 2008): 399-437.*

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6. Gary North, *Liberating Planet Earth: An Introduction to Biblical Blueprints*, *Biblical Blueprints Series* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 21.
7. Joseph Boot, *The Mission of God: A Manifesto of Hope for Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto: Ezra Press, 2016), 525.
8. Joseph Boot, "The Enduring Relevance of Biblical Law," *Jubilee* (Fall 2012), 9.
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10. Boot, "Enduring Relevance of Biblical Law," 10.
11. Boot, "Enduring Relevance of Biblical Law," 10. *Italics* Boot's.
12. In this regard, see the excellent summary of Gill's relationship to broader Christian theology, as well as pagan philosophy, in Richard A. Muller, "John Gill and the Reformed Tradition: A Study in the Reception of Protestant Orthodoxy in the Eighteenth Century," in Haykin, ed., *Life and Thought of John Gill*, 51-68.
13. John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity: Or, A System of Evangelical Truths, Deduced from Sacred Scriptures*, 3 vols. (London: W. Winterbotham, 1796), 3:454-455. Cf. John Selden, *Table-Talk: Being the Discourses of John Selden, Esq.* (Glasgow: R. and A. Foulis, 1755), 143.
14. Muller, "John Gill and the Reformed Tradition," 61.
15. Gill, *Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 3:454-455.



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# Government's Two-Edged Sword

by Matt Martens

**T**here's a debate raging among Christians about the proper role of government in enforcing biblical morality. You've likely encountered this debate in one of its various forms. Sometimes it's framed in terms of "Christian nationalism." Other times you might hear a reference to "common good" conservatism. David French defends "liberal democratic order," while others are "post-liberal." There's Roman Catholic "integralism" and its cousin, "magisterial Protestantism." All these terms and phrases are circling the same question: to what extent should the government use its coercive power to enforce Christian ethics?

The argument for a more aggressive governmental role in regulating morality is seemingly straightforward. In its most simplistic form, the syllogism goes something like this: Scripture tells us certain conduct is evil, the government's role is to restrain evil (Romans 13), thus the government should prohibit that evil conduct. In recent months, I've encountered highly educated and undoubtedly sincere Christians arguing for the

criminalization of blasphemy, profanity, and speech promoting an unbiblical sexual ethic.

As a Christian, I understand the alarm that my fellow believers feel as we find ourselves increasingly out-of-step with a culture that seems ever more hostile toward us. We are pilgrims, not pioneers. I also understand the critique of the claim that the government can be truly neutral on matters of morality. As my good friend Jonathan Leeman has said, “Behind every [law] . . . is someone’s basic worldview of how things ought to be. And behind that worldview is a god.”

At the same time, I think this newfound faith in a more muscular government, particularly when it comes to punishing and restraining speech, is misguided. John Leland, a Baptist minister during America’s earliest years who was instrumental in the adoption of the First Amendment’s religion clauses, argued that “government should protect every man in thinking and speaking freely.” I share that view, for at least three related reasons.

*First*, the more expansive vision of government being advocated by some Christians today fails sufficiently to account for universal fallenness. Because, as a Christian, I believe that all men and women are corrupted by sin, any theory of government must include a mechanism to restrain and punish government actors when they act unjustly. Irenaeus of Lyon made this point in *Against Heresies* where he argued that justice requires that, when government magistrates act “to the subversion of justice,” then “they shall also perish.”

“Any Christian theory of government must recognize that, time and time again across the ages, the government has itself been an instrument of evil rather than good.”

It’s this universal fallenness that makes me exceedingly concerned when, for example, Christians call for governmental restraints on speech they find repugnant. Short of violent revolt, speech is the citizen’s last line of defense against corrupt public officials. A theory of government that grants to government the power to punish speech is a theory of government that unjustifiably assumes the nobility of those who hold government office and a-historically assumes that fallen men and women, given the power to punish speech, will not wield that power to suppress criticism of them. In a fallen world, it is critical that the principle of free speech be maintained, not because of optimism that fallen citizens will always use that freedom in an honorable way, but to protect against the reality that fallen government actors will use the power to punish speech to quell critique of their dishonor.

*Second*, running throughout Scripture is a proportionate limitation on the government’s authority to punish wayward citizens and subjects. For some moral wrongs, the sword of the state is a disproportionate response. Human government has not been divinely

authorized to punish every wrong by means of the physical force that is the essence of government. Many wrongs can and should be addressed in much less serious ways to ensure the response is proportional to the offense. A just society must rightly distinguish right from wrong, but a just society must also rightly distinguish the seriousness of wrongs. Some wrongs demand government intervention; others demand government passivity, which brings me to my last point.

“The continuing struggle for just government in this world will always fall short, but that struggle points us to a day when the Only Just Judge will come again in glory to establish the perfect kingdom that will have no end.”

*Third*, Government is not the only institution ordained by Scripture to restrain evil. What makes government unique in Scripture is its authority to use physical force to respond to evil. As Max Weber, one of the fathers of modern sociology, would later write, the government has the monopoly on the legitimate use of physical violence. Romans 13 teaches the same thing. But though God has conferred on government alone the authority to use physical force against evil, he has ordained

a variety of social institutions that can more effectively and proportionately respond to some wrongs.

To take the speech example, it is certainly true that some types of speech harm society. And the right to speak is not without limits. To take one well-worn example, one cannot prompt a deadly stampede in a crowded theatre with a false claim of fire. And the government can (in some circumstances) limit what people speaking on the government's behalf say. But, as I noted earlier, empowering the government to punish speech by private actors is empowering the government to suppress speech seeking to hold the government accountable. It is unnecessary to give the government this dangerous power because, in God's providence, there are other social institutions and mechanisms available to deal with harmful speech. Churches can preach against it. Schools can teach against it. Parents can shield their children from it. Social circles can shame those who participate in it. And even government can speak in opposition to it. But not every wrong merits a coercive government response, particularly in light of the existence of these other institutions. In most instances, less coercive responses by institutions other than the state are far more proportional to the harm.

The evils evident in our society are rightly concerning to the Christian. But any Christian theory of government must recognize that, time and time again across the ages, the government has itself been an instrument of evil rather than good. The challenge in a fallen world is to identify a role for government to, alongside

other God-given institutions, restrain evil while at the same time establishing robust means to check the evil of government.

None of this is simple, as history has taught us. As Leland put it, “To give power enough to men to do good, and yet to have it so counterpoised, that they can do no harm, is a line so difficult to be drawn, that it has never yet been done.” The continuing struggle

for just government in this world will always fall short, but that struggle points us to a day when the Only Just Judge will come again in glory to establish the perfect kingdom that will have no end. Maranatha.

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# Charlemagne and the Legacy of Christian Political Violence

by Dustin Asbury

**W**ith moral chaos abounding in the world today, many evangelicals wonder if the nation would be better if the church were in charge. Like the good ole days of Christendom, maybe we should return to a sword-and-shield world where state and church combine efforts.

It might serve Christians today, therefore, to be at least somewhat aware of the history of how the church has used state violence for its purposes, particularly as conversations about theonomy, magisterial Protestantism, and Christian nationalism have grown in urgency of late. To this end, Charles the Great, or Charlemagne, is one crucial figure to consider. So is his legacy of military conquest performed in the name of Christ.

Known as the grandfather of modern Europe, Charlemagne codified the partnership between the emperor and the papacy, making the papacy Christian Europe's most powerful authority. A key feature of their partnership was Charlemagne's use of state coercion to convert pagans to Christianity.

## Christian Violence Before Charlemagne

Christians had employed violence before Charlemagne. Once Constantine became the emperor of Rome, rogue groups of Christians began to sack pagan temples. However, these events were sporadic and independently orchestrated, and they never received the official endorsement of the church.

Augustine may have been the first Christian to advocate the use of violence to enforce Christian beliefs. Though originally reluctant to use violence, Augustine came across Jesus's banquet parable, which he found useful for dealing with the theologically aberrant Donatists. A rich man prepares a feast. His invitees don't come. So he tells his servants to "compel people to come in" (Luke 14:23). Augustine used this verse to justify the use of coercion to bring the Donatists back to the fold. Augustine's appeal to the civil authorities was heeded, resulting in the outlawing and persecution of the Donatists. Augustine remarked,

The Church persecutes by loving; they [the Donatists] persecute by raging. The Church persecutes in order to correct; they persecute in order to destroy. The Church persecutes in order to call back from error; they persecute in order to cast down into error. The Church, finally, persecutes and lays hold of enemies until they collapse in their vanity so that they may grow in the truth. They return evil for good because we have at heart their eternal well-being, while they try to take from us even our temporal well-being.<sup>1</sup>

Notice Augustine's goals for the use of coercive force: "to correct"; "to call be from error"; for "eternal well-being." In other words, he sought to protect the purity of the church. In that sense, his call for violence arguably more resembled the post-Reformation wars than the religious wars against the pagans during the Middle Ages.

## Charlemagne and the Saxon Wars

What Charlemagne introduced was using force to convert pagans into Christians. And Charlemagne's use of violence to create Christians served as a model for the next thousand years.

Charlemagne and his brother, Carloman, became joint rulers of the Franks after their father's death in 771 AD. However, Carloman died the same year he was crowned, and Charlemagne became the sole Frankish king. Without wasting any time after his coronation, Charlemagne led his army to war with the pagan Saxons of the north.

The Saxon wars began in 772 A.D. As his first military move, Charlemagne desecrated the Irminsul, a pagan tree used for the worship of Saxon gods. This act struck at the heart of his enemy's pagan ideology. From there, Charlemagne's victories were many. In the face of success, he became increasingly convinced that God's favor was on him. To pay homage, Charlemagne forced prisoners of war to confess Christ and be baptized. The *Royal Frankish Annals* depict these pagan "conversions":

There they all surrendered their fatherland (patria) by a pledge into their [the Franks"] hands, promised to be Christians, and subdued themselves to the rule of the lord king Charles and of the Franks. . . They came with their wives and children, a multitude without number, and were baptized and gave hostages, as many as the king asked for. Charlemagne viewed the Saxons as lost souls who needed to be "compelled to come in."<sup>22</sup>

He regarded his military crusades as his Christian duty and the duty of the Franks.

Saxony would eventually be "converted" by being conquered in 804 A.D., after eighteen bloody campaigns that saw thousands of deaths and thousands more displaced.

## **Charlemagne and the Approval of the Church**

The Catholic Church approved of Charlemagne's tactics. His military endeavors were heavily influenced by clergy like Archbishop Lullus of Mainz, a Frank who had dedicated his life to the ministry of Saxony. Every time that Charlemagne would leave the region, the Saxons would flare back up in rebellion. Lullus saw this and argued the only way to save the Saxons was through violence, for "these stubborn people will never convert on their own. So, we have got to force them to submit."<sup>23</sup>

During those campaigns, in 796 A.D., Charlemagne wrote to Pope Leo and affirmed his purpose in "enforcing" acceptance of Christianity. He also asked for the pope's aid in the endeavor.

Charles, by the grace of God, King of the Franks and Lombards, and patrician of the Romans, to his holiness, Pope Leo. . . I will ever defend the most holy seat of the Holy Roman Church. For it is our part to defend the holy Church of Christ from the attacks of pagans and infidels from without and within to enforce the acceptance of the Catholic faith. It is your part, most holy father, to aid us in the good fight by raising your hands to God as Moses did, so that by your intercession the Christian people under the leadership of God may always and everywhere have the victory over the enemies of His holy name, and the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified throughout the world.

The correspondence outlines a division of labor for advancing and protecting Christianity. Charlemagne was the sword and shield of the Christian faith, while the pope was its intercessor. The former concerned himself with the temporal domain, while the latter oversaw the ecclesial.

Yet these lines, already a little blurry, would become more so when, on Christmas Day 800 A.D., the pope crowned Charlemagne as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. By overseeing Charlemagne's coronation, the pope foregrounded his authority over the empire (temporal). Similarly, Charlemagne's title as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire affirmed his duty to protect and advance Christianity (ecclesial).

## Charlemagne's Crusading Offspring

Charlemagne believed he was doing the Lord's work by "preaching with tongues of iron."<sup>3</sup> In the name of Christ, he conquered pagans and forced them to be baptized, making them members of the Catholic Church. Though not necessarily his intention, he established a precedent for religious violence and warfare. Again and again, Christian Europe would use him as an example of how to deal with its non-Christian neighbors. Future generations of governments were eager to replicate his legacy.

*The First Crusade.* In the Middle Ages, for instance, Christendom found itself pressured on multiple fronts. This was nowhere more felt than in the Byzantine Empire, where Turks, recently converted to Islam, raged against Christians and Arabs alike. After capturing Jerusalem, nomadic Turkish tribes moved to set up a capital city just 100 miles south of Constantinople, the Byzantine capital. Unable to deal with the Turkish invaders on his own, Byzantine emperor Alexius Comnenus wrote to Pope Urban II for aid. Alexius could not have hoped for a better outcome.

After receiving Alexius's letter, Urban called for the Council of Clermont in 1095. There he would present a speech that would come to be regarded as one of the most important speeches in European history. With an immense crowd listening, Urban implored Christian knights to take up the sword against the Turkish invaders and Muslims more generally. He motivated

them by graphically detailing the torture, rape, and murder of their fellow Christian brothers and sisters in and around the Byzantine Empire. The Pope then turned to the example of Charlemagne to inspire his audience. He said to them:

Let the deeds of your ancestors move you and incite your minds to manly achievements; the glory and greatness of king Charles the Great (Charlemagne), and his son Louis, and of your other kings who have destroyed the kingdom of the pagans (Saxons) and have extended in these lands the territory of the holy Church. Let the holy sepulchre of the Lord our Saviour, which is possessed by unclean nations, especially incite you, and the holy places which are now treated with ignominy and irreverently polluted with their filthiness. Oh, most valiant soldiers and descendants of invincible ancestors, be not degenerate, but recall the valor of your progenitors.

The pope knew Charlemagne's reputation continued to loom large in Christian Europe. Therefore, he made him an exemplar for the crusaders. Between 60,000 and 100,000 men then responded to the pope's call. Following Urban's speech, the crowd erupted into what would become the crusaders' battle cry: "Deus le vult!" or "God wills it." They also decided at that time that crusaders would wear a cross on their foreheads and shield.

The first crusade to defend the brethren and reclaim lost territory for the Church was launched in 1096 A.D. It was quickly proven more successful than Alexius or Urban originally intended. After making short work of the Turks near Constantinople, crusaders

went on without order to Jerusalem, sacking and reclaiming it for the Church. With the Holy Land in hand, they established the Crusader States, which were army-controlled territories won through battle. Unfortunately for the Church's army, the Muslims soon retook these territories, propagating many more Church-sponsored campaigns to recapture the Holy Land.

Christendom now had the military force to enforce its theology of Christ Jesus. After the first crusade, monastic military orders emerged dedicated to killing pagans and propagating the word of Christ: knights templar, knights hospitaller, knights order of the Holy Sepulchre, order of Saint Lazarus, and the Teutonic Knights. These orders popped up all over the Middle East, Hispania, and the Baltics. All shared a strict code of conduct to follow the teaching of Christ and to strike down his enemies.

Examples like that of the first crusade are aplenty. Like Charlemagne, the crusading Church of the Middle Ages was comfortable using its might and mane to spread the gospel. Therefore, they leaned on his example to justify doing so.

*Spanish Reconquista.* Another example: Charlemagne had been defeated when attempting to rescue the Iberian Peninsula from Islam. Later Christian forces followed in his footsteps by seeking to retake it in what historians call the Spanish Reconquista, which lasted until the late fifteenth century. Medieval Spain became a scene of constant warfare between the followers of Christ and Mohammed. Christians brutally slaughtered the Muslims in the

battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212.<sup>4</sup> By 1250, almost all of Iberia was under the rule of Christians except for the Muslim kingdom of Granada, which held out until 1492.

“Time and time again, church power becomes abusive and dangerous when it employs the sword to enforce its rule.”

Christian kingdoms did not show any mercy. At the end of the wars, Spain's Muslim population was estimated to be between 500,000 and 600,000. Before the wars, a few hundred years earlier, the Muslim population is estimated at around 5.5 million.<sup>5</sup>

Victory led to the forced conversion of both Muslims and Jews on multiple occasions: it was enacted by the Crown of Castile in 1500–1502, in Navarre in 1515–1516, and by the Crown of Aragon in 1523–1526.<sup>6</sup> The Spanish Inquisition<sup>7</sup> upheld the same policies as the Spanish Reconquista, forcing all Muslims and Jews to convert to Catholicism. Those who refused to convert were brutally tortured and killed.

*Teutonic Wars.* The Teutonic wars were the conquest and forced conversion of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania by the Teutonic knights and other European forces. They lasted from 1230 to 1411. The Teutonic knights were especially brutal to their pagan neighbors. One historian referred to how the knights dealt with those who refused to convert—“Roasting captured brethren

alive in their armor, like chestnuts, before the shrine of a local god.”<sup>8</sup> The knights spared no one in their quest to convert the people. Taking after Charlemagne, they forced conversion on pagans before allowing them to return to a semi-normal life.

Ultimately, the church’s use of force became less about propagating the gospel and more about conquest and glory. Charlemagne’s means were saddled to vain ends.

### **Relevance For Today?**

What relevance does Charlemagne’s example have for today’s conversations about theonomy and Christian nationalism?

Nearly everyone would count Charlemagne’s example as extreme. Even the most ardent theonomist or Christian nationalist will remark, “Of course, we cannot convert people by the threat of the sword! That’s ridiculous.” So why recount the history at all?

There are two possible answers to that question. Those who advocate for some version of theonomy should beware of perversions, and they should beware of precedents.

In terms of perversions, time and time again, church power becomes abusive and dangerous when it employs the sword to enforce its rule. Charlemagne’s religious wars were not the first or last time the violence was used for Christian ends. In the 1096 crusade mentioned above was the first of nine. And many more examples could be mentioned. When the church possesses coercive power, it invariably becomes warped and corrupted. Those

who advocate for some version of theonomy should ask themselves, “How might the systems of governance I’m promoting be abused?” Because they *will* be abused.

“When the church possesses coercive power, it invariably becomes warped and corrupted. Those who advocate for some version of theonomy should ask themselves, ‘How might the systems of governance I’m promoting be abused?’”

In terms of precedents, Charlemagne serves as a possible lesson in the telos of Constantinianism. Augustine used violence to protect the purity and unity of the church, Charlemagne for the conversion of pagans. Yet are these two things that differ categorially? Both rely on the sword for the advance of Christ’s kingdom. What if we were to lower the stakes to something like a religious tax on unbelievers or a religious test for office holders? Both are clearly less violent or forceful than holding a sword to someone’s throat. Yet isn’t the difference now one of degrees? Aren’t we still relying on coercion for a spiritual result? Both tax and test remain qualitatively distinct from the ordinary means of grace.

The apostles relied on preaching and prayer (Acts 6:4; 2 Cor. 4:2). Their weapons of warfare were not of the flesh (2 Cor. 10:4).

By the same token, theonomists today argue that the civil laws of Israel establish a precedent for us, whether to be applied precisely (“Reconstructionists”) or with adjustments for time and place (“General Equity”). If that’s the case, wouldn’t Israel’s use of holy war in conquering the land of Canaan establish a viable precedent for us, too? If not, why not?

Perhaps it’s time to focus instead on building the heavenly city promised in the Revelation of John.

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# Section Six

# Pastoral Encouragements

# The Aim of Preaching in an Increasingly Hostile Culture to Christianity

by John Piper

**J**ohn Piper was recently asked, “How can American pastors begin to prepare the churches for persecution?” Below is his response:

My answer would be, you should have started a long time ago—like, from your very first sermon when you came to your church. You must teach your people that they are not first Americans but Christians. Christians are aliens and exiles on planet earth. This world does not owe Christians anything. And Christians should expect to suffer.

We should preach these truths even when things are going as well as they can possibly go, because hostility against Christianity is built into the nature of the fallen world. In a sense, I am a little uncomfortable with painting the present moment as extraordinary and terrible, so that it becomes the reason Christians need to be ready to suffer. From the get-go and for fifty years, I want pastors to help Christians see that life is hard and that they are going to suffer. Jesus said, “If they persecute me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20b). This is plain biblical

teaching. Therefore, suffering by persecution is not peculiar to America. All over the world, Christians are suffering persecution.

In preaching and pastoring, I want to prepare martyrs. I want my people to go to the hardest places in the world. So, my answer to how you preach, considering current persecution and pressure, is that you preach the sovereignty of God and that suffering is to be expected. This is the opposite of prosperity theology. The problem with prosperity theology is that it lacks a doctrine of suffering. Pastors, you want to build the capacity to suffer into your people. That suffering may be a child born without the ability to speak, or it may be persecution. No one knows in what ways Christians will suffer in their lifetimes.

I think the kind of preaching that the church needs is found in places like 1 Peter: “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (2:21); or, “But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled” (3:14).

Or the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for

righteousness’ sake, for great is their reward in heaven. Rejoice in that day and be glad” (Matt. 5:10).

I think constantly narrating how bad things are can have an effect of making people angry and sowing seeds of bitterness. How do you turn that back toward Christian hedonism? The last thing we want is for people to walk out of church on Sunday, seething in anger at their culture; that’s the dominant emotion they have.

I want them thrilled with the sovereignty of God.

Thrilled that they’re saved.

Thrilled that they have meaning in life rooted in the gospel.

Thrilled that no matter what happens in this world, they’re going to be able to walk in the truth and joy.

So, there’s a concern in my heart that preachers may embrace the mistaken notion that the way to get ready for suffering is to continually narrate how bad things are.

Preachers, what should be the dominant emotion people walk away with from your sermons?

It should not be rage against the culture, but rather trust in the sovereignty of God and a sober and cheerful readiness to embrace suffering.



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# Three Building Blocks for a Christian's Political Theology

by Kevin DeYoung

**E**very pastor desires to see his congregation formed theologically (and if the pastor doesn't want that, he should!). Part of this theological formation involves thinking through a number of questions that relate to church and state. The three entries below are taken from a book I've been writing over several years called *Daily Doctrine*. It should be out next year. In the meantime, hopefully the topics below can help us think theologically about a few of the pressing issues of our day.

## **Church and State**

In his 1802 letter, Thomas Jefferson wrote to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut offering his interpretation that the Constitution erected a "wall of separation between Church & State." Although Jefferson's phrase has been often misapplied, and his gloss on the First Amendment can be criticized, Jefferson was right to recognize that church and

state are different institutions whose aim and approaches must not be confused or conflated.

The church is the visible society of professing Christians (and their children) on earth. This society has an order and government designed primarily for the spiritual well-being of its members, though not without all reference to the temporal interests of the community.

By contrast, the state is the visible society of all the members of that body (e.g., a country). This society has an order and government designed primarily for the temporal well-being of its members, though not without reference to the spiritual references of its members.<sup>1</sup>

While the church and state will overlap in aims and functions at times, and both societies are ultimately accountable to God and will be judged according to the divine law, the two institutions are fundamentally different and independent.

*The two societies differ in their origin.* The church owes its origin to Christ as Mediator. The state is founded in nature, not in grace. That is, the state is common to all people, whereas the church is a part of God's redemptive plan.

*The two societies differ in the primary objects for which they were instituted.* The church was ordained by God for the salvation of souls and for the spiritual good of its heavenly citizens. The state was ordained by God for the outward order and good of human society.

*The two societies differ in the power committed to them.* The church's power

does not involve the exercise of physical force. The church exercises its power by the force of truth upon the convictions and consciences of men. To the magistrates of the state belong the power of the sword.

*The two societies differ in the administration of their respective authorities.* The church has its own office bearers to exercise authority over its own affairs. The state, while not being prescribed a specific form of government in Scripture, has its own office bearers appointed by God to exercise authority as a government over the governed.

If these four points are true, then we must reject any Erastian system whereby the state exercises supreme authority over the church, and any mediaeval Catholic system whereby the church exercises supreme authority over the state. In the best of circumstances, the church and the state will pursue their unique aims in ways that are mutually reinforcing of the other, but the two societies must not be confused as being the same.

## **Establishment Principle and Voluntary Principle**

As Reformed ecclesiology developed in the modern world, few theologians advocated final state authority over the church or final church authority over the state. Anything too close to the former was dismissed as Erastian—named after the Swiss physician Thomas Erastus (1524–83) who argued for state supremacy in ecclesiastical affairs—and anything too close to the latter was considered dangerously Catholic.

But this doesn't mean the relationship between church and state was easy to figure out. Far from it. Even in countries with deep Protestant roots, church leaders and theologians often disagreed on whether the church should be organized according to the establishment principle or the voluntary principle.

According to the establishment principle, the church should be supported, defended, and promoted by the state. Even in a country like Scotland, which had long emphasized the distinction between church and state as two kings and two kingdoms, the assumption was that Scotland was a Christian nation and ought to be governed as a godly commonwealth. The church alone had authority to determine its worship, doctrine, and discipline, but the state was obligated to recognize and support the church by means of tax revenue and by upholding certain fundamental principles of true piety (e.g., Sabbath observance). The magistrate was afforded a power about religion (*circa sacra*) but not a power in religion (*in sacris*).

By contrast, those holding to the voluntary principle insisted upon a sharper separation of church and state. Most practically, this meant that the church was to be supported by the voluntary contributions of church members rather than out of the state coffers. Likewise, no one would be considered a member of the church simply by virtue of being a citizen of that country. Churches would be formed by the voluntary association of those wanting to belong to a given congregation. Among paedobaptists, "those" included parents and their children.

Given the fact that many of the greatest Protestant theologians in history have belonged to and believed in an establishment church, I'm hesitant to insist that the idea cannot mesh with biblical principles. And yet (as a Presbyterian), I'm glad that American Presbyterians, in forming a national denomination in 1788, altered the Westminster Standards in several places so as to give the civil magistrate much less of a role in the affairs of the church (WCF 20.4, 23.3, 31.1; WLC 109), sowing the seeds of disestablishment (which took almost fifty more years to play out in the individual states). This formal change cemented what had already taken place informally when chapters 20 and 23 of the Confession were curtailed with the Adopting Act of 1729.

While the separation of church and state has often been misconstrued as the separation of the church *from* the state (or, in more recent years, the hostility of the state toward the church), I nevertheless see good reasons for the voluntary principle. (1) In an Establishment, the church normally depends, to some degree, upon state revenue. This makes true ecclesiastical independence impossible. What the state giveth, the state can also taketh away. (2) The state that can establish my religion, can later change its mind and establish someone else's religion. Given our belief in human depravity and corruptibility, I'd prefer not to give the state authority concerning religious matters. (3) The early church was clearly not an establishment church. The voluntary nature of gathering, belonging, and financially giving to the church—without which

the church cannot flourish—seems more the spirit of the New Testament and should be considered a vital part of Christian discipleship.

## Liberty of Conscience

When Martin Luther was summoned before the Diet of Worms and told to repudiate his views on theology and the church, he famously refused to recant, claiming that it was “neither right nor safe” to go against his conscience. More than a century later, the Westminster Confession of Faith stated just as emphatically, “God alone is Lord of the conscience” (WCF 20.2). The liberty of conscience has been ever since not just a hallmark of Protestant Christianity but one of the defining marks of the Western world.

But what did Luther and the Westminster divines mean by liberty of conscience? For starters, Luther declared that his conscience was “captive to the *Word of God*.” Luther did use “conscience” as shorthand for “doing whatever I want to do.” His statement was about fidelity to the Bible, no matter the cost, not about cruising through life with “conscience” as a get out of jail free card.

Further, the Westminster Confession makes clear that “conscience” is not an excuse for sin and lawlessness. When, “upon the pretense of Christian liberty,” we “practice any sin, or cherish any lust,” we dishonor God and destroy the purpose of Christian liberty (WCF 20.3). Likewise, Christian liberty is not meant to overthrow the lawful power of civil and ecclesiastical authorities (WCF 20.4). The God-given authority

of the civil magistrate and of the church are designed to work in concert with the God-given authority of the individual’s conscience—each supporting, and at times limiting, the others.

How this all works out in practice is often complicated, but the principle that “God alone is Lord of the conscience” is worth preserving. It means that we should not press others (nor capitulate to pressure) to do what their conscience (or ours) has concluded from the Bible is wrong. It means that the church should not require of its members (in worship or elsewhere) what the Bible does not require. And it means that wherever possible the government should look to accommodate the sincerely held beliefs of its citizens.

The Reformation view of the conscience means that religious freedom is not just an Enlightenment value or a pragmatic consideration. John Locke’s famous *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) argued chiefly on *Christian* grounds that the Protestant nations of Europe should show love, forbearance, and goodwill to all people.<sup>2</sup> Locke said there is “but one truth, one way to heaven,” but we cannot lead people there by coercion and by making them violate their consciences.<sup>3</sup> The care of souls does not belong to the civil magistrate. The magistrate is to secure men’s possessions; the church is to secure men’s salvation. They have distinct roles and operate in distinct spheres. To be sure, this may mean that the state has to tolerate false religion, but Locke feared that any power “given to the magistrate for the suppression of an idolatrous Church” could in time be used for “the ruin of an orthodox one.”<sup>4</sup>

The revolutionary notion that the individual conscience should be respected and that there should be freedom of religious belief and practice is one of the great legacies of Reformation principles. May God be gracious to preserve these freedoms in our day and for generations to come.

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*1. These definitions, as well as the points that follow, summarize James Bannerman, The Church of Christ, 101-113, though it should be noted that Bannerman, who defended the*

*establishment principle, argues for a more pronounced role for the state in establishing, supporting, and promoting true religion.*

*2. Though, admittedly, Locke was thinking mainly about all Protestant people. Locke was actually more in favor of toleration for Jews and Muslims than for Catholics, because, like almost all Protestants at that time, he viewed Catholicism as a dangerous geo-political power hostile to the interests of Protestant Europe.*

*3. John Locke, Letter Concerning Toleration, 153.*

*4. Locke, Letter Concerning Toleration, 175.*

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# What Is a Greater Grief: A Compromised Church or a Compromised Nation?

by Jeremy Walker

**W**hat is the greater grief—a compromised church or a compromised nation? Which more afflicts the heart of God’s people—a morally declining country or a spiritually diseased congregation?

I’ll answer in seven points.

## **1. Churches Constituted by Citizens of Every Nation**

We begin with clarity: local churches are made up of Christians who have covenanted together to walk in the ways of their crucified Lord. There is no such thing as a *Christian* nation. The new covenant people of God are gathered from every kingdom, tribe, and nation, and they testify together that “here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come” (Heb. 13:14).

Ham-handed efforts to shoehorn Old Testament texts and principles into the life of modern nations will not work—the patterns and precepts, the warnings, and the exhortations are written “for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11), not for nation-states.

## **2. Yet Christians Should Not Withdraw But Preach The Gospel**

Does that mean we withdraw from the world? Should we become modern monastic communities, ignorant of and distant from the things happening on our doorstep?

Absolutely not! We preach the gospel as the way to glorify God and, incidentally, as the only effective means of bringing purity, peace, holiness, and happiness to our neighbors and friends, one soul at a time. We let our light so shine before men that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16). We go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, making disciples out of all the nations, baptizing those disciples in the triune name, and teaching them all the commands of Christ, in anticipation of and dependence on his presence with us (Mark 16:15 with Matt. 28:18–20).

## **3. Christians Should Also Love Their Nations**

Does that mean we neglect and despise the nation to which we belong?

Not at all! Andrew Fuller helps us in a sermon entitled “Christian Patriotism.”<sup>1</sup> Fuller preached with care and caution from the often-abused Jeremiah 29:7. His sermon was delivered in England in 1803, a time of national threat and unrest. The authorities were suspicious of the Dissenting believers; they feared a revolt like those in America and France. Fuller makes precise distinctions between our attitudes and actions as earthly and heavenly citizens. He makes plain that, as believers, it is right and proper to love, serve, defend, and pray for the country in which God has put us:

Ought we not to seek the good of our native land; the land of our fathers’ sepulchres [tombs]. . . protected by mild and wholesome laws, administered under a paternal prince. . . where civil and religious freedom are enjoyed in a higher degree than in any other country in Europe. . . where God has been known for many centuries as a refuge; a land, in fine, where there are greater opportunities for propagating the gospel, both at home and abroad, than in any other nation under heaven?

Not every Christian then or now can speak this way of their nation, but every Christian might still truly “seek the good of our native land; the land of our fathers’ sepulchres.”

Yet love of our nations can go too far, and we must not err in this direction either. So often our Christian feeling is tainted by an ugly and pompous nationalism which sets our earthly ties above our heavenly home.

## **4. Yet Our Greatest Love Should Be Reserved for the Church**

Does this mean that our first and best energies and endeavors, our highest and brightest hopes, our deepest and truest joys, our surest and sweetest commitments, are to the church of Jesus Christ?

Yes, and amen, “for our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:20). Has that gripped us? More than anything, we should be committed to the church’s peace and prosperity, her protection and purity. We must contend for her with the spiritual weapons appointed by God. And we should sing,

I love your church, O God:  
Her walls before you stand,  
Dear as the apple of your eye,  
Engraved upon your hand.

For her my tears shall fall,  
For her my prayers ascend;  
To her my cares and toils be given,  
Till toils and cares shall end.<sup>2</sup>

## **5. A Compromised Nation Should Grieve But Not Surprise Us**

Putting these first four points together, we can say that a compromised nation, *our* compromised nation, should grieve us. Like the Apostle Paul, I may “have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart,” wishing “that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my

countrymen according to the flesh. . .” (Rom. 9:2–3). Our heart’s desire and prayer to God for the people to whom we belong should be that they may be saved (Rom. 10:1), whatever they know of the legacies and privileges Israel enjoyed in the days of Paul.

Yet even though a compromised nation should grieve us, it should not surprise us. It is not a surprise because we do not expect nations as entities to be Christian; we do not look first to governments to establish and enforce God’s law; we do not expect nations to promote and defend an established church. Indeed, we rather expect to see the nations of this world rise and fall at God’s command, and all come to nothing. We long to see God so work that multitudes shall be brought into his kingdom, and that nations might know God’s blessing accordingly, but we also anticipate the biblical norm in which God’s people will be outcasts and strangers, like their Lord before them.

## **6. A Compromised Church Should Grieve Us Even More**

To be sure, the greater grief is a compromised church.

If we forget that Christ’s kingdom is not of this world, if we abandon the spiritual weapons of our warfare for the carnal weapons of the world, if we build our houses upon the sand of national prosperity, if we yoke our expectations to thrones that topple, we are undone, and we can be of no earthly use to anyone.

## 7 Hope in The Kingdom, Not Your Nation

We do not hang our hopes upon any earthly nation but upon the King and his everlasting kingdom. We want and urge civil authorities to restrain outward evil, but we do not anticipate that they will change men's hearts—only the Spirit can write the law there. The kingdoms of the earth shall all utterly fail and fall, but the kingdom of the Lord endures forever. If we compromise the eternal for the sake of the temporal, if we prioritize the seen over the unseen, not only will we lose our own souls, but we will also disavow the very truth men and women need in order that they might enjoy everlasting life in Christ.

In his profound treatment of this question in *The City of God*, Augustine reminded his readers that the city of man and the city of God do not rise and fall together. He urged them to remember that Christ's kingdom would not collapse with Rome but must endure if they continued steadfast in the faith and held fast to the gospel. Loving our nations as we do, we as God's people must believe and behave the same.

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1. *Andrew Gunton Fuller, The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller: Memoirs, Sermons, Etc., ed. Joseph Belcher (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 1:202 ff.. It is well worth reading in its entirety.*
  2. *From the hymn, "I love Thy kingdom, Lord," by Timothy Dwight of Yale, slightly modernised.*



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# God Is (Not) an Englishman

by Jamie Southcombe

If you type into a search engine, “God is a . . .” near the top is “Englishman” (just after “astronaut”—go figure!). We quote this phrase all the time in England. It’s from a well-known book by R.F. Delderfield. Suffice it to say that my country’s relationship with God has a long and complicated history. Nowhere is this more evident than in the words of the hymn “Jerusalem.” Considered one of our most patriotic songs, the hymn also has the dubious honor of being the only one where every line can be answered in the negative:

*And did those [Jesus’] feet in ancient time walk upon England’s mountains green? [No!]*

*And did the Countenance Divine, Shine forth upon our clouded hills? [Nope!]*

*And was the holy Lamb of God on England’s pleasant pastures seen? [Again, nope!]*

*And was Jerusalem builded here among those dark satanic mills? [All together now: No!]*

William Blake penned the poem as a riff on an apocryphal story about adolescent Jesus visiting England's shores and finding it to be heaven on earth. The hymn was written when religious fervor was rife in England; many believed God "favored" our land. Such words convey that *nationality*, not spirituality, is God's highest priority. Moreover, they assume something about "the English" that requires God to be more for us than he is for others. Such sentiment, I fear, isn't confined to the past or restricted to my nation.

Now I long for the church attendance, respect of the Bible, and gospel zeal of previous generations of my kinsmen according to the flesh. However, my forbearer's apparent linking of "Englishness" and "Christianity" wasn't just *unbiblical* but positively *counter-biblical*.

## Unity in Ephesians

Over the last three years, I have preached through Ephesians at my church. Week after week, unity has been the theme. Throughout Ephesians, Paul emphasized unity because Christians are in Christ together, not because they're from the same earthly background. Indeed, Christian unity exists despite our array of temporal differences. Paul rejoiced in the truth that the gospel provides a superior unity.

Here are just some of the things Paul says to the Ephesians:

- In chapter 2, he writes, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both

(*Jew and Gentile*) one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (italics mine).

- In chapter 3, he explains, "This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."
- In chapter 4, he delights in the truth that, "There is one body and one Spirit. . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

In light of these great spiritual realities, it's no wonder that Paul is concerned that the church should be eager to maintain the "unity in the bond of peace" (4:3).

## Christians Share the Most Fundamental Thing In Common

The manifold implications of these truths are glorious. But one primary insight is that Christians share the most fundamental thing in common, regardless of our earthly backgrounds. Indeed, Ephesians taught our church that our spiritual bond is far stronger than our earthly ties. I heard this same sentiment when someone recently said to me: "I have more in common with my brothers and sisters suffering in underground churches in China or the poor churches of Sub-Saharan Africa than I do with the unconverted of my homeland who vote, live, dress, and talk like me."

In other words, what matters most for our churches is that we're together *in Christ*, not that we're together *in England*.

“We should never confuse God’s kindness to our home nation with the idea that nationality is his primary interest.”

This truth hit home to me more profoundly several years ago when we arrived in the US for seminary. We moved into our campus accommodation and found that one set of neighbours was from West Africa and the other from Texas. Culturally, our three families had very little in common. We had very different tastes in food, music, and sport. Truth be told, our conversations did not flow freely at first.

However, the conversation dynamic changed when we talked about the Lord, his Word, and his work in our lives. Suddenly, we had so much to talk about. There was warmth in our conversation as we recognized each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. We were strangers from an earthly standpoint. But because of Christ, we were family. Our love for Jesus outpaced and will outlive our love for our homelands.

## **I’m Grateful to Be an Englishman, but...**

Now don’t get me wrong, there are many things that I’m thankful to God for about living in England. Chief among them: Christians in our country have more or less enjoyed the freedom to proclaim the gospel. And no doubt, whatever country you’re reading this from, there are elements of your culture you can also thank God for. However, we should never confuse God’s kindness to our home nation with the idea that nationality is his primary interest.

No, whether we are from Nigeria or Nepal, Britain or Bahrain, believers in Jesus across nations share the most important thing in common with each other—that we have been brought from spiritual death to life and share an eternal inheritance. As we display a diverse unity in local churches throughout the world, we foreshadow the day when every tribe and language and people and nation will be before the throne, worshipping Jesus as one.

So contrary to my country’s popular phrase, God is certainly not an Englishman—and for that, this Englishman is very thankful.



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# Baptist Covenant Theology: A Pastor's Best Defense Against Theonomy

by Jeff Wiesner

“If we knew this is what you taught before we joined the church, we probably wouldn't have joined,” remarked a dear saint to me before submitting a membership resignation.

Years of growing doctrinal dissonance between him and our church's public teaching led to this meeting. I replied, “If we knew what you believed, then we would have slowed down before bringing you into our membership.”

To my brother's credit, the conversation was amicable despite exasperation on both sides.

The disputed matter concerned the perpetuity of Old Testament laws and their application to Christians and culture. My brother believed that most, if not all, Old Testament laws were still binding today, especially those governing Israel's civil life. After all, Jesus taught, “Until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18).

Resolving myriad disagreements on how to interpret our Lord's teaching is not the aim of this essay. Yet the illustration above highlights the challenge of Theonomy and Reconstruction (TheoRecon) and other related errors for Baptist pastors today, especially in Calvinistic or confessionally Reformed churches.

Moreover, in the face of today's so-called "culture war," TheoRecon teachers often take bold stands on social issues that attract anxious evangelicals. Drawing from an "optimistic" postmillennial eschatology and a presuppositionalist apologetic, TheoRecon sells as an attractive alternative to supposedly "retreatist" evangelical pietism. How, then, can pastors guide and guard their sheep from possible error?

Before I offer suggestions, allow me to put my cards on the table. First, I am writing from the conviction that TheoRecon is a theological error that Baptists cannot consistently maintain. Second, many Baptists tolerate this error, partly due to ignorance or neglect of distinctly Baptist covenant theology in our churches. Finally, this ignorance may reflect pastoral leadership and practice.

I'll leave it to more able-minded writers in this Journal to defend the first and second points above. I aim to address the lattermost issue by considering prudential practices that may help guard pastors and congregations against doctrinal error and equip church members to grow in godly discernment. I primarily address pastors in the five considerations that follow, but non-pastors may find them helpful as well.

## **1. Pastor, Assume the Best of Others.**

Even in disagreement, assume that most TheoRecon teachers and all your sympathetic church members are motivated by a desire to obey God through the correct application of God's law to their lives.

Praise God for these motivations! Assume the best.

But remember that good motives don't necessarily produce good theology. Consider wise ways to follow a gracious commendation with godly correction where necessary, which leads me to my next point.

## **2. Pastor, Correct Gently.**

Christ has appointed pastors to teach sound doctrine and correct what contradicts it (Titus 1:9). Correction is a necessary part of Word ministry. This means when we correct doctrinal errors, we must do so knowledgeably, avoiding lazy generalizations and straw-man arguments.

Not only that, pastors must also resist a quarrelsome spirit and correct others with gentleness (2 Tim. 2:23–25). Some of the brazen and provocative rhetoric that often accompanies TheoRecon polemics may tempt you to respond in kind. Ask God to help you distinguish correcting from quarreling. As you do, consider resources that strengthen your polemical ministry, beginning with your church's confession.

### 3. Pastor, Consider Your Confession.

TheoRecon is a law-gospel error that folds too much Old Covenant into the New, positing *continuity* where Baptists (and most Presbyterians) traditionally assert *discontinuity*. Some of our church members are unable to discern this inconsistency, partly due to ignorance of Baptist covenant theology. They're content to simply add Theonomy to preexisting Baptist convictions.

But this isn't unique. Evangelical Christians commonly treat doctrines like marbles in a bag, to be added or removed at will. It's unsurprising when some wind up with an oxymoron like "Baptist Theonomist."

"Evangelical Christians commonly treat doctrines like marbles in a bag, to be added or removed at will. It's unsurprising when some wind up with an oxymoron like "Baptist Theonomist."

A good church confession, however, resists this by functioning more like an interconnected, organic body of divinity. For example, the Baptist Faith and Message (2000) contains no explicit statement on the covenants, but its expressions of *credobaptism*, *regenerate church membership*, and *the Lord's Day*, to name a few, are inferred from

a variety of covenantal theology that assumes significant *discontinuity* between the Old and New Covenants.

Do your members know your church's confession? Does it inform your teaching and assist you in disputes and controversy? A well-worn, time-tested Baptist confession is one of the best defenses against law-gospel errors like TheoRecon.

### 4. Pastor, Strengthen Your Membership Process.

Three words from my opening illustration haunt me: "If we knew. . ."

One lesson I've since learned is the importance of doctrinal specificity in the membership process. Meaningful membership guards the front door of the church. Ambiguity weakens a church's defense system. Error loves to invade through ambiguity. Or, as John Calvin pointedly remarked, "Ambiguity is the fortress of heretics." Knowing this helps to strengthen a church's membership process, including but not limited to the following ways:

First, when leading a membership class, teach the confession's explicit affirmations *and its implicit denials*. Doing so includes being clear about the implications of our church's covenant theology, including law-gospel distinctions that necessarily oppose TheoRecon.

Second, as you meet with prospective members in casual meetings or membership interviews, find ways to discern their agreement with your church. You might ask, "Who are your favorite Christian teachers?" or "Who are some of your theological influences?"

An attentive pastor can tell a lot from answers to these questions.

I'll give you an example: a dear brother who aspired to pastoral ministry visited our church with an interest in membership. When we talked about his influences, he mentioned certain Christian teachers associated within the TheoRecon and Biblical Patriarchy camps. Assuming the best of him and the named teachers, I told him what he could expect from the public teaching ministry of our church, how it would inevitably oppose their teaching on certain issues, and that his ministerial preparation in our church would be hindered if he was unwilling to change his views over time. He later joined a nearby church with whom he remained for only a short time before leaving over doctrinal differences. Perhaps the Lord will grant our brother fruitful ministry in a like-minded church. But for our sake, a stronger, more explicit membership process likely guarded our congregation from similar disputes.

## **5. Pastor, Study (Baptist) Covenant Theology.**

I've argued in this article that distinctly Baptist covenant theology is the best defense against law-gospel errors such as TheoRecon. It helps pastors preach Christ from all of Scripture and undergirds many of our Baptist distinctives. Thus, our flocks benefit when we give ourselves to studying the covenantal framework of the Bible.

To this end, good guides abound. Helpful resources include *God's Kingdom Through God's Covenants* by Steven Wellum and Peter Gentry

(Calvinistic Baptist) and *The Mystery of Christ, His Kingdom, and His Covenant* by Samuel Renihan (1689 Federalism). These introductions to Baptist covenant theology disagree on important points but are nevertheless united in maintaining an appropriate discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants.

## **Conclusion**

In my experience, Baptists stumble into TheoRecon mostly through the backdoor of postmillennialism and presuppositionalism, but never the front door of covenant theology. Against the backdrop of contemporary culture wars, TheoRecon offers a compelling vision for "all of life" Christian engagement that seems absent in evangelical pietism.

Yet this attractive vision for cultural engagement often keeps Baptist sympathizers ambivalent toward the necessary consequences of TheoRecon for Baptist theology. Inevitably, the Baptist must either reject his own Baptist tradition *or* live comfortably with known doctrinal inconsistency, which no serious student of the Bible should be able to do for long. Either way, TheoRecon is a position that no Baptist can *consistently* maintain.

Therefore, a Baptist pastor concerned about TheoRecon wisely commits himself to at least three things:

First, he studies the commitments and consequences of TheoRecon in order to interact with the position accurately and in good faith. This Journal is a good place to start. Second, he's explicit about Baptist covenant theology

and its implications for proper law-gos- errors with gentleness and patience  
pel distinctions. Finally, fearing the when necessary—all to the glory of  
Lord above all, he corrects TheoRecon God and the good of his flock.

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# Ten Diagnostic Questions for the Potential Ideologue

by Ken Barbic

Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacificism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part . . . in which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce . . . Once you made the World an end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing . . . .and the more “religious” (on those terms) the more securely ours. — C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 1942

**J**esus commands us to obey him in every domain of life, including in our politics. Yet not every political position or strategy amounts to “Thus saith the Lord.”

The above admonition of C.S. Lewis also reminds us that an “all or nothingism,” over-attachment to a political viewpoint is a perennial temptation for the Christian. While boiling political positions and strategies down to binary choices may make for effective political campaigns, biblical faithfulness may not be so easily reduced.

How do you know when you've become too attached to your political perspectives on debatable matters and that you're more of an ideologue than a biblical theologian? Here are ten diagnostic questions to help you know if you've become too attached to your political views.

### **1. Do You Present Opposing Viewpoints in Ways that Your Opponent Would Agree With?**

This is much harder to do in short bursts on social media, but whether in person or online, Christians must rightly characterize others' views. To do otherwise is a form of bearing false witness. Unfortunately, many are quick to accuse others of not representing them fairly, but very few actively correct their misstatements.

### **2. Do You Resort to Personal Attacks, Either Directly or Subtly and Indirectly? Do You Call into Question the Legitimacy of Someone's Faith if They Disagree with You on How to Approach Some Political Matters?**

Be very careful to throw around terms like "heretic," "woke," "anti-woke," "radical," "Marxist," or "fundamentalist." Some of the derogatory terms thrown around on social media are only meant to signal your political tribe; they are rarely helpful beyond that.

### **3. Are You Able to Assume the Best about Someone Else's Approach Even if You Disagree with Their Conclusions?**

Christians should always be marked by charity, gentleness, self-control, integrity, and courage. Speaking the truth in love is an inseparable directive, and many matters are merely downstream applications from this truth. Jesus didn't give a "politics exception" for loving our neighbors . . . or our enemies.

### **4. Do You Deploy Logical Fallacies to Make Your Case?**

If you don't know many logical fallacies, read *Exegetical Fallacies*. Any time you are relying on grandstanding or strawman arguments, you are potentially moving towards idolizing your viewpoint. Carson's book is meant first for preachers, but his chapter on logical fallacies is a useful guide to any Christian speaking truth or trying to be a more discerning learner.

### **5. Do You Ignore or Justify Character Flaws and Historical Difficulties Because Acknowledging them Would Undermine Your Political Viewpoint?**

We see this all over the spectrum politically and religiously. It is far easier to uncover and highlight discrepancies or less flattering qualities of those who are not part of our "tribe." The Bible

encourages us not to believe slander, but also that justice should not be bent because of personal relationships.

**6. Do You Seek to Make Theological Claims about Every Matter that Comes Up in Your Culture and Community?**

Hot takes garner social media acclaim but often disregard the wisdom of Proverbs: “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame” (18:13; see also verse 17). This is one of the cancers of social media. The medium itself compels participants to offer and consume immediate reactions to everything happening in the world. Believers must recognize the spiritual dangers that accompany the desire either to give or consume immediate reactions to too many things.

**7. Do You Rarely Point Out Your Opponent’s Positive Views, and Are You Remiss to Speak Critically of Those Who Mostly Agree with You?**

This is especially true in politics, but we see it in the church broadly as well. If you cannot sincerely and charitably identify positive views or character qualities of someone you disagree with, then that’s a good indicator you may be taking your political allegiance too far.

**8. Are You More Eager to Engage in Political Debate and Controversy than to Engage in the Regular Means of Grace God Gives his People?**

Specifically, what makes you more excited: worshiping with God’s people, reading your Bible, praying, and engaging in acts of service; or making your political views known and engaging in the current moment’s public debates and controversies?

**9. Would Your Fellow Church Members Who Know You Best Characterize You as Proud and Quarrelsome or Humble, Gentle, and Charitable?**

This applies in all contexts. Jesus was a truth speaker. He was the epitome of courage *and* the pinnacle of gentleness, kindness, and love. These are not competing or mutually exclusive qualities.

**10. Do Your Political Statements Make it More or Less Difficult to Have Fellowship With Christians of Varying Perspectives in Your Local Church?**

Proverbs 10:12 says, “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.” Do you enjoy stirring up strife and controversy, or is your posture one that looks to absorb and unify?

## Conclusion

Politics can be a messy and uncomfortable endeavor. It rarely involves strategic approaches that are either clearly right or flatly wrong. This is true even when biblical principles inform our policies.

Be wary of anyone who casts their political strategy and positions on less clear matters with a “thus saith the Lord” level of certainty.

Christians have engaged in politics in many different contexts throughout the centuries. It’s important to learn how to develop principles and political strategies that fit your particular context. Yet remember we are all on the threshold of eternity. We are, after all, Christians. How surprised will many of us be at the various political approaches of those who, like us, are eternally united to Christ, of those with whom we’ll spend an eternity together in glory?



Ken Barbic has worked in politics and agricultural policy positions in DC for the last 20 years. He is a member of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

# How I Went Too Far with Politics

by Dave Brown

**Y**ou want to make a difference for Christ politically. Maybe your social media account is your avenue. Or maybe you even wonder about moving to Washington to work for a congressman or senator. I understand and sympathize. “Been there, done that,” as they say. Only I got my start in politics in the 1960s and 70s and became involved in the work of the Moral Majority.

These days folks don’t talk about the Moral Majority but about “Christian nationalism.” And people running under this banner are doing good political work, even as they did under the Moral Majority banner in the 1980s and 90s.

Yet just as the temptation of political idolatry loomed in my day, so it does today. How do we as Christians know when we’re putting too much hope in politics? Even an idolatrous hope?

Idolatry happens when we take good things and make them ultimate things. In this reordering, we find functional saviors other than God. So it is

with political idolatry. Before becoming a Christian, my own heart was an incessant idol factory, producing idols faster than I could keep up with. My experience would go on to teach me just how powerful and dangerous idols are not only to individuals but to entire nations.

## Early Career in Politics

I grew up in small-town, rural Ohio. My home was neither religious nor political. In fact, my first encounter with God's Law came from Charlton Heston, who played Moses in the 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments*. My grandfather was a coal miner and pastored a local church where he displayed the American flag near his pulpit. His younger brother busied himself in county politics.

As a young man, my appetite for politics was whetted by my love of American history. The founding fathers, Lincoln, and Eisenhower became my heroes—along with Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, and Ted Kluszewski. By high school, I was infected with Potomac fever, determined that someday, somehow, I'd go to Washington and make my mark. Indeed, after college, I headed off to DC. Starry-eyed and full of naïve ambition, I landed on Capitol Hill as a legislative aide and then climbed the proverbial ladder to become a staff director.

I entered the political arena as a full-throated, rock-ribbed, Goldwater conservative—wedded to a patriotism of duty, honor, and country. But the history books hadn't quite prepared me for Washington's rank hypocrisies and resident partisan, ideological, and personal agendas. I arrived on the scene

when the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, environmentalism, consumerism, and Watergate were rapidly revamping the size, scope, cost, and role of government. I saw how the pursuit of power, pragmatism, and pride often led to forms of nationalism across the political spectrum.

G.K. Chesterton once observed, "When a man stops believing in God, he doesn't then believe in nothing, he believes anything." Like my fellow idolaters, I filled my God-vacuum with God substitutes—isms, idols, if you will. My preferred god early in my career was politics, and my preferred brand was Americanism.

## My Conversion

Praise be to God, twelve years into that career, God rocked my world when he saved me. I was 33 years old when reading the Psalms from an old family Bible tucked away in the attic, I trusted in Christ. Shortly after, I devoured Chuck Colson's autobiography *Born Again*. I didn't know any other Christians then, but I had met Colson years earlier when he was in the Nixon White House. Even though I was a new Christian, I sensed a desire to enter the ministry but had no idea what that would look like. Unsure of what to do, I reached out to Chuck. I shared with him about my conversion and asked him what he thought the Lord wanted me to do. His response was blunt yet wise: "I have no idea, but he will make it plain in his own way and time." Lacking clarity, I kept on in my government career, but not exactly in the same way I had before being saved.

“Christians should work to be good citizens out of love of neighbor, which includes political engagement as God gives opportunity. Yet we must not put our trust in horses and chariots.”

Later that same year, after the 1980 presidential election, I got a call from the Reagan transition team asking if I would be willing to serve in his administration. I ended up working for the president in various capacities over the next eight years, during which I began part-time seminary education. Early in my time in the Reagan administration, I received a sidebar assignment to “show the flag” at Moral Majority meetings in DC. I wasn’t sent there as an official liaison or spokesman per se. It was more like Regan’s way of signaling to Falwell and the movement that he remembered his friends.

As I became familiar with the movement and those in it, I was struck by how prevalent the belief was that if Christians could get the right people elected and appointed, the Kingdom of God would be ushered in. Even though I was a baby Christian, I was familiar with the story of Jesus standing trial before Pilate—the representative of the “divine Caesar.” Jesus clearly told Pilate that his Kingdom was not of this world. So, what gives? It seemed clear that the Left planned to usher in an

earthly utopia through political power, but did this justify what I saw as a sort of counter-revolution by the Right? In either direction, I saw idolatrous isms; “Christian Nationalism” on one side and “Social Nationalism” on the other.

### **Don’t Be Seduced by “Christianity And”**

Whether Christian Nationalism and Prophet Populism of the Right or the Social Gospel and Critical Theory of the Left, Christians are often tempted to combine various political beliefs/opinions with orthodox Christianity. Moreover, this temptation isn’t at all new. It finds purchase throughout the Bible, particularly under the Old Covenant, when Israel kept borrowing worship practices from their pagan neighbors and then perpetually failing to obey God.

C.S. Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters* gets at this a bit. Lewis wrote:

MY DEAR WORMWOOD,

The real trouble about the set your patient is living in is that it is merely Christian. They all have individual interests, of course, but the bond remains mere Christianity. What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of mind I call “Christianity And.” You know—Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and Faith Healing, Christianity and Psychical Research, Christianity and Vegetarianism, Christianity and Spelling Reform. If they must be Christians let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute for the faith itself some Fashion with a Christian coloring. Work on their horror

of the Same Old Thing. The horror of the Same Old Thing is one of the most valuable passions we have produced in the human heart—an endless source of heresies in religion, folly in counsel, infidelity in marriage, and inconstancy in friendship. (135)

Syncretizing the Right, Left, or Center's ideologies with orthodox Christianity always results in Lewis's "*Christianity And.*" People may imagine the combination of ideology and Christianity to make both more relevant, fashionable, and palatable, but it results in a wax-nosed God. He ends up existing in our image and is forced to conform to our twisted desires—or so we think.

Elsewhere in the *Screwtape Letters* Lewis writes about the politics of patriotism vs pacifism of his day. His one demon says to the other:

Whichever he adopts, your main task will be the same. Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of a partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him on to the stage at which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce in favor of [Patriotism] or of Pacifism. . . Once you have made the World an end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing. Provide that meetings, pamphlets, policies, movements, causes, and crusades matter more to him than prayers and sacraments and charity, he is ours. . . *I could show you a pretty cageful down here.* (34–35)

As it was in Lewis's day, so it is in ours. Syncretism remains an all too flattering option for our idolatrous hearts. This is why we need to discern the whole political spectrum. According to Lewis, ours is a world made up of enemy-occupied territory. It is a place where the enemy delights in Christians who chiefly prioritize their political loyalties. The reason is that doing so results in one's failure to trust the one true God. Unfortunately, mine was the hard way of learning that political idols never deliver what they promise. They are never satisfied but leave us chasing the next vote or winner.

### **Don't Put Your Trust in Horses and Chariots**

So what's the lesson from this old Moral Majority culture warrior turned pastor? Christians should work to be good citizens out of love of neighbor, which includes political engagement as God gives opportunity. Yet we must not put our trust in horses and chariots (see Ps. 20:7).

Another old pastor, Richard Baxter, came to similar conclusions after putting a little too much hope in politics. Baxter had high hopes for Oliver Cromwell. Then Cromwell died and in short order the monarchy was back. In the midst of this, Baxter wrote,

I am farther than I ever was from expecting great matters of unity, splendor, or prosperity to the Church on earth, or that saints should dream of a kingdom of this world, or flatter themselves with the hopes of a gold age, or reigning over the ungodly. . . . On the contrary, I am more apprehensive that suffering

must be the church's ordinary lot, and Christians indeed must be self-denying cross-bearers, even when there are none but formal, nominal Christians to be the cross-makers; and though ordinarily God would have vicissitudes of summer and winter, day and night, that the church may grow extensively in the summer of prosperity and intensively in the winter of adversity, yet usually their night is longer than their day, and that day itself hath its storms and tempest. (The Holy Commonwealth, 1659).

## Conclusion

Perhaps you've heard of G.K. Chesterton's timeless response to the newspaper survey which asked readers to write in with an answer to the question, "What's wrong with the world today?" Chesterton responded, "Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G.K. Chesterton."

Chesterton told the truth about himself, as did Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who wrote, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor

between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts."

As a follower of Jesus Christ, I strive to speak honestly about myself. I want to be prepared to give reasons for my hope in Christ. After all, I am just one beggar telling another where he found bread.

Whatever we're called into the public arena to do, we must remember that redemption does not come to us on Air Force One, through the next slate of candidates, or by fervent political ideologies, as important as these things are. Instead, redemption comes by the sovereign grace of God in Christ Jesus—our sin-bearer, our wrath absorber, and our robe of righteousness.

I'm 76 now. I ended up having a long career in politics and then another in ministry as a pastor. Thinking back on either venture often reminds me of what C.T. Studd once wrote, "Only one life to live, twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last."



Dave Brown is the Director and Pastor-at-Large of the Washington Area Coalition of Men's Ministries.

# International Pastors on Culture War—Why or Why Not?

by Josh Manley, Sam Masters,  
Benny, Johnny Lithell

**9** Marks asked several pastors outside of the U.S. to answer this question: in your context, do you think of yourself as a culture warrior? Why or why not?

Here are their answers.

## **JOSH MANLEY**

*RAK Evangelical Church, Ras Al Khima, UAE*

As the pastor of an international English-speaking church in the United Arab Emirates, I do not consider myself a culture warrior. For the Christian pastor, to war either for or against certain cultural values would be to aim too low. My role is not to seek to change the culture but to faithfully proclaim and apply the Word, which will always confront the idols of the culture.

Even though I do not identify as a culture warrior, I am conversant with, deeply concerned for, and aware that the gospel will demand that I come

in conflict with the culture. While cultures take different forms in this fallen age, the church will always be situated in cultures that oppose the gospel.

But cultures are not changed by legislation or decrees, but by hearts transformed from worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). We are at war. The apostle Paul makes clear we are “to put on the whole armor of God” because we “wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:11–12). To win this war, we fight not with the weapons of this world, but in the power of the Spirit.

As a pastor, my call to shepherd the flock of God (1 Pet. 5:2) inevitably means I will be called at times to shepherd those the Lord has entrusted to my care into conflict with the culture. Equipping my members to engage in this battle comes through proclamation of the Word, prayer, and faithful counsel. The weapons with which they engage, and their aim and posture in how they engage, matter deeply. Nevertheless, our mission is to bear witness to and make disciples of the risen Christ wherever the Lord has placed us. And that will ultimately have the greatest, most-lasting effect on all cultures.

## **SAM MASTERS**

*Iglesia Crecer, Cordoba Argentina*

As pastor of a church in Argentina, my first rule of thumb in dealing with social issues is to remember where we are. In a time when social media connects our

people to events around the world, there is a danger we will misapply the maxim to think globally and act locally. Social media drives the debate.

The problem for us is that American voices tend to drown out the rest of the world in our reformed subculture. We deal with many of the same issues of a sinful culture in Argentina as in the United States. However, the cultural maps and historical timelines are not identical. It might be a mistake for us to go to DEFCON 1 just because a pastor in the US has.

We find the best thing we can do is continue to preach the gospel, apply scriptural principles in our congregational life, and remember we are called to be salt and light in this specific culture in this particular time and place.

## **BENNY**

*Church, East Asia*

I am not sure if I understand “culture warrior” the same as you. In China where I live, citizens do not have religious freedom or the right to speak. The authorities strictly enforce a single ideology, so it is very hard—even risky—for Christians to bring Christian values into public dialogue.

From this perspective, I hardly can consider myself a culture warrior. However, the Christian faith is a holistic worldview. Every culture should be reformed according to the biblical culture (Rom. 12:1–2). From that perspective, every Christian should be a culture warrior in his or her cultural setting, including me as a local Chinese pastor.

I try to help my congregation stay sober in our current cultural chaos. I won't

publicly post my interpretation of culture or defend Christian culture on social media. But I constantly write pastoral letters through email to my congregation.

Every Tuesday morning, I study a popular topic, a public issue, or a confusing Chinese tradition and try to re-interpret it with a biblical worldview (inspired by Al Mohler’s podcast, *The Briefing*). My prayer is that the weekly culture dialogues would complement the weekly sermons and equip my church to live out a biblical culture in their communities.

## **JOHNNY LITHEL**

*Parkway Church, Gothenburg  
Sweden*

The term “culture warrior” suggests disagreement between groups with different social and cultural beliefs. But I pastor in Sweden, which means that my truly evangelical church is part of a minority that is so small it could hardly be considered a group of any significance. Almost nobody in the world’s most secular, individualistic, and feministic society knows what a conservative evangelical is, let alone cares about what we think. In this sense, I could hardly consider myself a culture warrior.

However, I see two lines on the horizon. The first is a slight tendency toward a resurgence in conservative thinking in our culture, which draws from the biblical corpus. If recent decades in Sweden could be characterized as neo-romantic, with individuals’ emotions providing the standard of truth, we may now be experiencing the first breeze of a neo-renaissance, with traditional values sometimes re-emerging. As one anecdote, I recently explained complementarity to a soccer dad. To my surprise, I was not immediately dismissed as an oppressor. It’s still just a line on the horizon, but nonetheless encouraging.

The other tendency is less encouraging. The overwhelming majority of so-called evangelicals in our country refuse to speak out on issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage. They’re also untroubled by a modalist view of the Trinity. These same “evangelicals” would treat with utter contempt someone—like me!—who believes that God has given men and women different roles in the church. As our tiny church-planting movement gains momentum—by God’s grace—those who will spend the most time trying to cut us down will think they’ll be offering service to God.



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Benny is a pastor in East Asia.



Johnny Lithell is the pastor of Parkway Church in Gothenburg, Sweden

# Samples of Public Prayers Prayed by Pastors

by Mark Dever, Juan Sanchez,  
Jamie Owens, Ross Shannon

**S**ome argue that a Baptist political theology is retreatist or pietistic—i.e., it ignores the here and now and the people in it. We disagree. Rather than retreat, God commands Christians to pray for the leaders of their land (1 Tim. 2:2). Our leaders desperately need God’s wisdom to exercise their authority well. More than that, they need God’s gospel. They need to repent and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. So we must pray for them and share the gospel with them. To encourage you and your church to this end, we asked some pastors for public prayers they’ve prayed over authority figures in high places.

## **Mark Dever**

*January 20, 1995, United States Congress*

Let us pray:

Lord God, before the debates and disputes, the committees and compromises which may fill our day, we would stop and confess publicly that

you are a good God. You have provided all we need, and so much more. We praise you for the freedom from want which marks off this land from so many others. Thank you for the wise and just leaders who work in this place, and for the people who honor law and pray for our elected officials. Thank you for all the good motives which move the hearts of those present to undertake these duties of governance.

We ask that where their hearts are stubborn to you, you would subdue them; where they are mistaken, you would teach them; where they are discouraged, you would comfort and strengthen them. Help them in their service to this nation, to discern their service to you. Lord God, bless America, we pray. Forgive us for our callousness to your blessings. Forgive this nation, particularly we pray for the ways in which we abuse our leaders. Give this nation a sense of the hope for justice and prosperity that America still is to many around the globe today.

We ask that you would give us a renewed sense of your bounty in this land, an appreciation of the wealth you have given us in the abundance of natural resources, in the hard work of so many people, in the stability of our society. Give us a nation marked by gratitude for your blessings, and stewardship of them in kindness and compassion and self-control. We pray that this Chamber would reflect your character in this. And along with a renewed sense of your bounty, we pray for a renewed sense of our accountability. Remind all who work here, in massive buildings which seem so permanent, remind them of the brevity of life, and

the certainty of judgment. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

## **Mark Dever**

*May 23, 1996, United States Congress*

Let us pray:

Lord God, as we begin the official business of the day in this place, we praise you for your sustaining presence. We remember facing situations that we were certain we could not face, or having to face them, could not survive. Yet, by your providence, we did. And so we begin this new day by praising you for your sustaining presence, even in apparently hopeless situations.

We praise you, too, for your sovereign reminder of yourself, even through pain and disaster. We confess, Lord, that for all of our words about problems in our society, we are too often quietly and wrongly proud of the prosperity of this nation, feeling that we ourselves are sufficient explanations for all the good we see and know. So, Lord God, we praise you and thank you that you use the bounds of our abilities and troubles to remind us of the limits of our power. Do not leave us, Lord, in false beliefs about ourselves and our roles here, or about you and your rightful claims on us.

When we are frustrated by injustices we cannot address, remind us, Lord, of the brevity of this life. And remind us of your coming judgment: of its reality, its certainty, its inevitability, its finality. When we are tempted to be selfish or indifferent to our work, remind us of the responsibility you have entrusted to us: to listen, to

learn, to reflect, to pray, to legislate, to obey. When we are tempted to pride in what we have done—when we see a bill passed, a program begun or ended, an initiative completed—and we feel something of the power of our office, remind us of our complete and utter dependence on You.

For your glory, O Lord, restore this land. We know that we are not here finally to fulfill our own desires, or even the desires of our constituents. We know that we are put here to serve you. So, we pray that you would use us—use the business done in this place today, use our government, use our nation to display your character, your glory throughout all your creation. We ask through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

### **Juan Sanchez**

*March 16, 2015, Texas State Senate Session*

Let us pray.

Almighty God, you are “the king of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God; to you be honor and glory forever and ever” (1 Tim. 1:17).

We acknowledge that, in your providential care, you have appointed governing authorities over us (Rom. 13; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). We also acknowledge that, like ourselves, these human authorities are imperfect. Yet, they are your servants, given to us as a gift of your grace in order that we may live in a just and peaceful society. Therefore, you urge us to offer prayers and thanksgivings for our leaders in order that we may lead peaceful lives, godly and dignified in every way, for such prayers are pleasing to you (1 Tim. 2:1-8).

Therefore, we thank you, Almighty God, for our leaders. Thank you for the men and women who serve in this senate chamber, both now and in the years to come. Thank you for their willingness to sacrifice time with their own families and careers in order to serve us.

We ask now, O God, that you would sustain these senators as they work together to promote a just and peaceful society for all Texans. May you grant them wisdom as they consider difficult issues that affect all Texans. May you grant them compassion as they seek to faithfully represent the diversity of peoples who call ourselves Texans. May you grant them courage both to stand up for their convictions and to change their positions when convicted to do so, regardless of whatever cultural, political, and relational pressures they may feel. And may you grant them kindness toward one another as they work together to represent all Texans.

Now, Almighty God, we ask that you would bless this session of the Texas State Senate. May all of us be able to look back upon this session years from now and acknowledge that much good was done on behalf of all who live in this great state of Texas. In the name of Jesus Christ, I pray. Amen.

### **Juan R. Sanchez**

*May 29, 2015, Texas State Senate Session*

Let us pray.

All-wise God, your judgments are unsearchable and your ways inscrutable (Rom. 11:33). For from you and through you and to you are all

things. To you be all glory forever (Rom. 11:36).

We thank you that in your wisdom you appointed these men and women to serve in the 84<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature in order that all Texans, regardless of our differences, may live together in a just and peaceful society (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-14).

We ask, O wise God, that you would bless this last day of the regular session of this senate. May the men and women of this chamber be encouraged by the work they have accomplished, and may they look forward to sweet reunions with family and friends as they return home.

May you also grant much grace so that at the end of this day these men and women may part as colleagues who respect and honor one another, though they may disagree on various and even important issues, for we can all agree that all in this chamber share a common love for the people of this state and long to see us flourish.

We also ask on behalf of all who have been affected by the recent flooding. Spare life and property, O God, and show your kindness.

Now, great God, we ask that when this session concludes that you may grant these senators favor as they return home to pursue other endeavors. In the name of Jesus Christ, I pray. Amen.

### **Jamie Owens**

*March 1, 2023, Boston City Council*

Father in heaven, you are a great God, the living God, the only God. You are righteous and just, and yet, you abound in steadfast love and faithfulness. You

are the Creator and Sustainer of the galaxies, majestic in holiness, transcendent, and set apart from your creation. And yet, in compassion, you have moved to redeem this fallen world. As the Creator, you are creation's judge, the One to whom everyone must give an account. And yet, you are a tender Father towards those who trust in you.

O Lord, I approach your throne of grace in prayer to ask for wisdom to govern in times of trial. You know that we are in desperate times as a nation and a city. In your Word, the Psalmist asks, "If the foundations are destroyed, what shall the righteous do?" (Ps. 11:3). Surely, wisdom calls us to look to you, to the sovereign Lord. And you have declared in your Word that the times are in your hands (Ps. 31:15). I pray that this Council will boldly and courageously face an unknown future, both in their personal lives and as City Counselors, drawing confidence not in their own virtue and abilities, or in their own grit and resolve, but in your power and your love.

I pray for the vulnerable of our city, for the homeless, for many of our veterans, for those caught up in sex-trafficking and the drug trade. I pray for victims of violence and for their families, for children who are at risk of harm and abuse, and for so many others. And I also pray for first responders, for medical staff, for the shelters and churches throughout this city, and for so many others who render care. O Lord, you are a God who is near to the broken-hearted, a God who saves the crushed in Spirit. I pray that you would be near to them, to provide, protect, and comfort them.

I pray particularly that the work of this Council would be a display of your own compassion and care for the least of these. May these Council members burn with passion to see the hurting healed and the wounded made whole. May they love justice and mercy and display it in their efforts to alleviate suffering in the city of Boston.

I pray also that each member of this Council would be marked by integrity, by a disinterestedness that lends to the care of others, that the flourishing of this great city and all who move within it would be their greatest concern, so that justice would roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

I pray that you would guard each Councilor from desires and temptations for dishonest gain. Give each one an aversion to corruption. Cause them to be the same people in the darkness as in the light of this chamber, that the reputation of this Council and this city will gleam for many years to come.

I pray also that collectively, as the legislative body over this city, that their use of authority, though it will not be perfect, will reflect your very own. I pray now for the city of Boston in the words of your departed servant King David,

When one rules justly over men,  
ruling in the fear of God,  
he dawns on them like the morning light,  
like the sun shining  
forth on a cloudless morning,  
like rain that makes grass  
to sprout from the earth. (2 Sam. 23:3-4)

I pray that under the guidance of this Council, the city of Boston, its

institutions, its residents, and all who pass the time in her streets will flourish like a well-watered field.

And finally, I pray that your love, supremely displayed in the sin-bearing death of Jesus Christ and in his glorious resurrection, would be known and trusted among the members of this Council. Thank you for sending your Son to bear in his own body the guilt for sin for all of those who trust in you!

O Lord, grant to this Council blessing and joy as they serve us. And may your name be glorified among the members of this body! In the strong name of Jesus I pray, Amen.

## **Ross Shannon**

*March 16, 2016, Michigan Senate*

Father, we come before you this morning and ask for your blessing. We have no good apart from you—so we ask: would you come and give these servants wisdom to lead and wisdom to legislate? May their leadership sustain our freedom to live peaceful and quiet lives, our freedom to live under your good and sovereign hand. May their work recognize the worth of every human life—no matter that life's size, or level of development, or ethnicity, or neighborhood, or degree of dependency, or location, or desirability by some. We are all made in your image. We are all given life by your hand. May we all receive it and preserve it as a precious gift. May these servants love what you love and rule as you rule: with equity and justice.

Father, would you help us to recognize that you do according to your will among the host of heaven and among

the inhabitants of the earth? You work all things according to the council of your will. Would you give us eyes to see that none can stay hand or say to you, “What have you done?” There is no authority except from you, and where there is authority—like here in this room—it has been instituted by you. You raise up leaders and remove them. You resist the proud but give grace to the humble. Give us, we pray, a greater awareness—this morning—of these

realities. Give us the strength to serve others in light of them.

We have no good apart from you—and so we thank you for the greatest of goods. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ—he came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Father, bless this day in this place and bless these servants. We commit it all into your good hands. And we pray it in the strong name of Jesus, Amen.



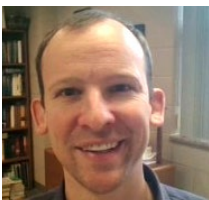
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# Section Seven

# Book Reviews

# *The Case for Christian Nationalism,* by Stephen Wolfe

by Andrew Walker

## **Introduction**

I am not attempting to write a typical review of *The Case for Christian Nationalism* by Stephen Wolfe. Others have written exhaustive chapter-by-chapter reviews that faithfully represent Wolfe's book. I am happy to recommend, for example, Kevin DeYoung, Neil Shenvi, Peter Leithart, and Wyatt Graham's reviews.

Instead, I am interested in engaging—rather than strictly *reviewing*—this book from within the free-church tradition. “Free church” denotes an ecclesial tradition that insists that a church should be composed only of those who are self-consciously Christian.

### **Logic Trumps Bible.**

If you accept his logic, Wolfe's book will seem very convincing. No one should dismiss the work as unserious, even if the staid prose

disguises radical proposals and the rhetoric towards the end borders on the conspiratorial. But therein is the fatal flaw of this book: It is more logical than biblical. In saying that, I am not pitting the Bible against reason. I am pitting Wolfe's application of reason against what I consider the Bible's own exegetical and redemptive reasoning. Overlaying a logical heuristic at the expense of *prima facie* readings of Scripture is not a methodology that one can accept within a redemptive-historical hermeneutic. Wolfe admits toward the beginning he's not a theologian. He's more right than he means. He's a logician with very clever argumentation that—as I read Scripture—results in conclusions that are attenuated and only loosely informed by the actual text.

Ironically, therefore, the book is hard to critique on its own grounds as an exercise in logic, even if one is not convinced that the logic of the book overlays as neatly on Scripture as Wolfe would intimate. Wolfe protests that no one is engaging the arguments of the book. One really cannot, though, because he has insulated the book against attack if that critique doesn't begin and ultimately end with logic itself. To that end, the book is "rigged" from the start if one doesn't find his claims compelling.

Wolfe's argument goes something like this (he states something similar himself on p. 183):

- Government has a duty to promote true religion.
- Christianity is true religion.

- Therefore, government has a duty to promote Christianity.

The internal logic of this syllogism works. It's rational. But that's different from making an exegetical case for the argument or demonstrating that it fits with Scripture's own covenantal developments. This, again, is what makes this book as frustrating as it is creative. As a matter of pure argumentation, it's not hard to make logical syllogisms. For example:

- Four legged animals can run in the Kentucky Derby.
- Unicorns have four legs.
- Unicorns can run in the Kentucky Derby.

The problem is that while this argument is sound, unicorns do not exist.

To go back to the original syllogism, Wolfe may assert that "the government has the duty to promote true religion," but he never argues that point from the Bible from any clear command. It's just assumed. It's far from clear to me that "duty" or "promote" are in themselves clear according to the Bible to the degree that Wolfe assumes them to be. He points to what the world must have been like in Genesis 1 and 2 had they continued without the fall. But the argument about the natural principles in Genesis 1 go beyond what the text allows. "Duty" denotes the idea of authority to command such outcomes. But, again, the most that Wolfe does is make inferences from an unfallen Adam to the role of government today. He fails entirely to

give sufficient attention to the Bible's creation-fall-redemption-restoration storyline and assumes we can simply reprimatinate Eden without calling attention to the developing sage of the covenants and what they require for government's calling. Wolfe seems to think that the world of Genesis 1-2 is the world that contemporary governments are called to resurrect. This notion, however, ignores massively the fall and the calling of government within a fallen era, as detailed in the Noahic Covenant in Genesis 9.

His lack of exegesis doesn't help to convince me that Genesis 1 and 2, rather than Genesis 8 and 9, are the conditions that set the stage for the government's calling. The failure to deploy basic categories of biblical theology or to show awareness of a redemptive-historical analysis is one of the major shortcomings of the book.

But even if we were to grant that government can "promote" religion, Wolfe fails yet again to make an exegetical case as to what promotion entails, let alone that it justifies the exhaustive program that he later argues for. Why, for example, can government not "promote" true religion by clearing the ground for citizens to "seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him" (Acts 17:27)? There is simply no positive command in Scripture for the state to promote religion like what Wolfe envisions.

## **Wolfe's Program Is Incompatible with a Baptist Understanding of Religious Liberty.**

Let me summarize a few axioms that are worth stating on what The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 Article XVII teaches concerning church and state:

- The church does not rely on direct support from the state to accomplish its mission;
- No religion deserves formal legal favoritism over another religion;
- The state is not competent as an arbiter of doctrine or making ecclesiastical appointments;
- The church and state should not be hostile to one another, but neither should the church be formally established;
- Religious liberty is for the good of all, equally;
- Participation in society is not premised on correct theological belief;
- Citizens cannot be punished for believing and acting upon a false religion.<sup>1</sup>

On all of the above, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* draws the opposite conclusion:

- The church looks to the state to suppress heresy;
- Christianity is given official favor by the state;
- Church and state are formally united;
- The state takes active interest in cultivating and protecting Christian doctrine;

- Religious toleration is extended only so far as the religion in question does not disturb sound order;
- Non-Christians are subject to a form of second-class dhimmitude;
- Heretics and non-believers could potentially be executed.

Perhaps Wolfe would insist that I'm being inaccurate, but when worked out to their logical conclusion, I don't see how the principles within his volume are not a total repudiation of Article XVII of the Baptist Faith and Message. Where the Baptist confession envisions a civil arrangement where the church and state are kept conceptually, institutionally, and functionally distinct, Wolfe presents a contrary vision. He gives little attention to differentiating the church from the state to the end that government and church reinforce one another through direct action—with potentially bloody outcomes—where one serves the other.

### **Authorization and Enforcement**

Now, in fairness to Wolfe, he admits that the arguments of his book more naturally align with a pedobaptist ecclesiology. That has to do with the willingness to label entities such as nations “Christian” without that necessarily meaning regenerate. Thus, from the start, there is a major adjectival distinction to note. In his taxonomy, “Christian” is a loose concept that may denote little more than Christian influence. Baptists, on the other hand, insist upon “Christian” as meaning that which is regenerate or authorized to carry out a mission that includes

regeneration. By that definition, earthly government is neither regenerate nor can be truly “Christian.”

Even if we grant that the state has been ordained by God (Rom. 13:1-7), according to a Baptist perspective, the state lacks the Scriptural authority to enforce religion. It lacks the mandate, competence, and jurisdiction to do so. It is not cordoned off from accountability to God, but it does not rule on behalf of a redemptive kingdom. Because it can't and shouldn't try to, we shouldn't call government Christian. It is not a coincidence that no single iteration of a government-established church has proffered long-term success to the nation's moral ecology or the church's commitment to orthodoxy. Either pure Christian Nationalism has never occurred or else its arrangement, like every other form of government, is subject to the frailties and ferocities of fallen human nature.

Rightly construed, authorization makes enforcement possible. For Christian Nationalism to work, it must be biblically authorized in such a way that its principles can be consistently upheld without exceptions. The local church has the authorization and enforcement mechanism to hold its people accountable to the Christian faith (Matthew 16:13-20). The state does not, which means “Christian” becomes just another label subject to abuse and redefinition. It's one thing to say something is “Christian.” It's another thing to hold that label in faithful perpetuity. Can a nation, as an amorphous entity, hold its people accountable to a confession that its magistrates and citizens

don't actually believe? That results in the worst form of hypocrisy and religious nominalism, which is the fruit of Christian Nationalism. Hence, the authorization principle behind establishment is biblically flimsy; its enforcement is impractical if not deeply illiberal; and its outcome unappealing and unfruitful.

One should also consider how a government comprised of non-Christians (unless, that is, Christians are the only ones eligible for office, which raises a number of practical questions) can discipline itself when it errs doctrinally or morally. The state, in the interest of preserving its own power, has no safeguard to self-correct and discipline itself once unbelief gets nested somewhere within it. So, either you must adopt a principle of exclusion to ensure regeneracy throughout the echelons of government, or you are peeling off into unbelief as a feature—not a bug—of the system.

## **The Marriage of Church and State**

This book doesn't offer any detail on the specific elements of church-state establishment, but we're afforded insights into a few things the state can do to promote religion: voicing support for true doctrine, suppressing heresy, and convening synods. While Wolfe tries to distinguish the Two Kingdoms, the distinction is merely rhetorical, not substantive, as Wolfe's "Christian Prince" is called to promote true religion by defending it against blasphemers and pagan religion. This imagined omnicompetent

talisman might as well be Vladimir Putin, which may be okay if Christian authoritarianism is in the offing.

In Wolfe's imagined utopia, the church is wedded to the state in perfect bliss. Whether that's a Lutheran Church or a Presbyterian Church, I'm not sure. Whether the Westminster Confession or the Augsburg Confession is operative, who knows? Wolfe writes of a "pan-Protestant" establishment but does not provide insight for how to apply such an arrangement. I'm not sure whether Baptists are a long-term threat to public order in this "Christian nation." Maybe we will be imprisoned or horse-whipped for challenging the Christian Prince's particular iteration of Christianity. Or maybe we'll be executed since that's allowable in Wolfe's regime. But here's where we need to be clear: in Wolfe's Christian nation, executing heretics and non-Christians is considered just if it serves the common good. Some might reply, "Well, that's what the Magisterial Reformers called for, so don't be surprised." I'm not surprised, in fact; what I am is deeply cynical about the biblical authority to carry out such culturally-and-religiously-homogenizing pogroms. I know this might sound audacious, but to speak as a Baptist, on matters of marrying church and state, John Calvin was wrong. Martin Luther was wrong. Any of the Reformers who believed the state could be used to advance religion in a direct manner were wrong. They aren't wrong according to Andrew Walker. They are wrong because I think the Magisterial Protestant tradition absorbed

a theo-political imagination more allied with their cultural setting than with Scripture. Having power and using theology to justify it is a dangerous cocktail.

“Intellectual honesty demands that Baptists who are tempted to make Wolfian Christian Nationalism compatible with the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 should stop.”

So much of Wolfe’s volume is a hypothesis in search of a praxis. What practically results are Prince Joe Biden’s Catholicism calling for abortion and Princess Nancy Pelosi adjudicating ecclesiastical appointments. Such absurdity is what Wolfe’s book legitimizes, even if he would be appalled at the character of their Christianity. Wolfe would object by insisting that the abuse of the principle does not lead to the principle’s negation. But inside of the logic of his system, there is *absolutely no principled reason* this could not be the case. After all, there is no further authority to ensure the state’s authority is used for Wolfe’s Christianity rather than Biden’s or Putin’s or anyone else’s, never mind some other religion.

Through all the syllogisms and Thomistic argumentation, Wolfe’s recapitulation of Magisterial Protestantism ends with a nation that has

never existed in ur-form. Where it has been tried, it’s failed spectacularly in protecting public morality and growing the church in faithful perpetuity. If the theological case is thin, the historical facts bode even worse for making Christian Nationalism appealing. Looking at the historical record, one could not envision a program so inimically apt to undermine the gospel as Christian Nationalism has wrought. Christian Nationalism is an arrangement where everything is Christian except the actual people, and where the abuses of the status quo is baptized with the church’s imprimatur.

## Conclusion

I want to begin concluding with what I think is the sum and substance of Baptist discomfort with Christian Nationalism, which I’ve already mentioned but want to discuss again: authorization and enforcement.

To take an example from my friend Joe Rigney’s piece here at 9Marks, the distinction between a Christian radio station and a Christian state is that it poses no practical problem for a self-selecting entity such as a radio station to hold itself and its members to a particular religious confession—especially if it is an auxiliary association tied to an ecclesial body. The radio station is not a church, but it has a confession that it can uphold and enforce through a confessional statement that its members are held accountable to within *their* local churches. The same goes for a Christian school. There is a proximal degree of enforceability through

voluntary and conscientious cooperation that allows for self-sustaining institutions to remain Christian. But can a nation as an amorphous entity actually hold its people accountable to a confession that its magistrates and citizens don't actually believe?

I know this review has been strongly negative, all things considered. And that isn't to say that there aren't valuable aspects of the book at all. There are. Wolfe's section on Christian Culture is one of the best defenses of the organic development of culture and why "Christian" culture is not the bogeyman that some, even in my own Baptist tradition, make it out to be. But I am interested in tracing the book's argument from the perspective of a confessional Baptist. On that front, while a Baptist might appreciate elements of the book's reflections on nationhood and the importance of Christian culture, a Baptist who knows their confession is going to bristle at "Christian" and "Nationalism" being conjoined together under one idea. What I also want to express gratitude for is there now being an identifiable foil from which to engage "Christian Nationalism" from. Far from it being David Barton God-and-Country schtick or Christian Nationalism being a liberal swearword, Wolfe has given a serious argument that will, undoubtedly, be one test case for further conversation. Again, I reject most of what Wolfe is offering, but his forthrightness is appreciated.

An even longer essay would give greater attention to the soteriological fuzziness of Christian Nationalism, its ecclesial nominalism, and its missional confusion. And this is to say nothing of

the imagined pipedream that Christian Nationalism is in our context—America is not returning to a small, homogeneous monoculture. But if words have meaning at all, the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 brooks no compromise with the sort of Christian Nationalism that Stephen Wolfe argues for. Intellectual honesty demands that Baptists who are tempted to make Wolfian Christian Nationalism compatible with the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 should stop.

This debate isn't about conservatism versus liberalism. As I have written elsewhere, I understand the attraction of Christian Nationalism and can sympathize with many elements of it. So, if the spat over Christian Nationalism gets put in conservative versus liberal or woke versus anti-woke, the whole conversation is going to go off the rails. I, too, am tired of secular progressivism. I want it disempowered. I have spent my entire career in public policy circles and within the academy working to undermine secular-progressive order. I want moral order. How do I get it? Overturning the current legal regime through violent revolution (which Wolfe sanctions)? Or do I do what is legitimate within the process of our legal regime, which is to persuade, argue, and mobilize? A better political theology understands that all regimes are imperfect and fallen and works backward from that reality. Political theology must be adjusted to the era of redemption that we inhabit, lest we falsely believe we can outpace the limited vision that Scripture has for government's responsibility right now.

The greatest danger in this conversation is exchanging a conversionary ethic so cherished by Baptists for a more nominalist ethic that deadens the church and further paganizes nations. Such an ethic would have a rapaciously violent outcome on the nature of the church. In studying the history of the church's relationship to civil polity, a consistent error throughout, whether of conservative or liberal varieties, is making Christ's kingdom co-equal with the nation-state. Every tradition is prone to exaggerating, denying, or

flattening out the antithesis. The solution is a rightly ordered arrangement between heavenly attachment and heavenly detachment. But *The Case for Christian Nationalism* trades the beatific vision for Bible verses at the DMV.

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*1. This should not be construed to mean that threats to public order, public health, and public safety are permitted under a rubric of religious liberty. There is no absolute right to religious liberty and restrictions should be justly determined by legitimate public authorities.*



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# *On Earth as in Heaven,* by Peter Leithart

by Dan Darling

**A**lmost every week I have conversations with church leaders on the state of Western culture and the church. Most, if not, all are less than positive.

Many rightly lament our deteriorating cultural environment that embraces norms that are not merely indifferent to Christian orthodoxy but are openly hostile to it. Others are rightly vexed by an American evangelicalism that seems riven by petty disputes, mired in scandal, and in search of an identity. Proposals for renewal are varied, diverse, and often in conflict with each other.

Into this milieu, Peter Leithart, no stranger to provocative theses, offers a manifesto of sorts—a bold idea that is not some new, catalytic, socio-political movement, but an embrace of the church’s mission. *On Earth as in Heaven: Theopolis Fundamentals* emerges from Leithart’s leadership of The Theopolis Institute, a Christian think tank and training center in Birmingham, Alabama. It is the city of God, the *theopolis*, that is

the locus of God's work in the world and must be the center of the Christian's focus.

Leithart identifies his ideal reader, not only pastors and church leaders, but also laypeople who "attend worship at least once a week, but wonder if there isn't more. . . . [and] sense there's something deeply wrong with today's world, and you're anxious for the future. But you don't want to turn the clock back, you don't want to stand with the doomsayers, and you think that politicization of Christianity does more harm than good."

What Leithart delivers in the next 400 pages is a rich biblical theology and doctrine of the church. "The theopolitical vision is a view of the church and her role in the world. . . the church is an outpost of the future city of God. The city of God exists now, in the present as a real-life society among the societies of men. This real-world, visible community is the family of the Father, the body of the Son, the temple of the Spirit." The church exists, writes, Leithart, "to transform and renew human societies, inside and out, top to bottom."

To be sure, this is an overly expansive definition. Yet let me defend him first. Leithart isn't a transformationalist in the sense that he's calling for congregations to appropriate every social cause. Instead, he's calling for a renewal of rich theology and true worship that transforms individual Christians into agents of change in their communities and within their specific callings. His focus begins on the church, not the nation.

Yet here's the word of caution. Leithart's view of the church's mission roots in postmillennialism, which yields not just an optimism about the future, but risks placing an eschatological and redemptive burden on Christians' work in the world. Further, this paradigm presupposes a world in which Spirit-filled, theologically rich, liturgically formed Christians will automatically be accepted into society and be able to enact positive social change. This has sometimes happened in church history. There are many places where faithful Christians have seen the fruit of their faithful witness result in flourishing societies and movements for justice.

But this is not always the case, and, what's more, how quickly have we seen good work get undone as the futility imposed by the curse settles in again. Consider a house church in China, an underground church in Iran, or a congregation in Kenya threatened by terrorist networks, as just this last Sunday a Kenyan pastor testified about his own congregation while visiting a friend's church in the States. And remember, Kenya is an evangelized nation, where seventy percent of the population professes Christianity.

So I would have liked to see a bit more instruction on how the priorities Leithart so rightly encourages in church life—liturgy, faithful preaching, fellowship—are met with opposition and even persecution where Christians have not been able to "transform societies top to bottom." This is where I think post-millennialism tends to put a bit more burden of expectation

on churches than a more chastened eschatology.

Those criticisms aside, there is much to commend in Leithart's work here, as he seeks to recenter Christians on their primary task as members of both the local and universal church.

The book is divided into four sections: Theopolitan Vision, Theopolitan Reading, Theopolitan Liturgy, and Theopolitan Mission.

### **The Church as the Future of the City**

For Leithart, the church's primary work is worship. "Our practice and understanding of worship must be shaped by the whole Bible—from Genesis through Leviticus and Chronicles to Revelation. Worship should be saturated with Scripture."

Though all credo-Baptists will diverge from his commitments to a paedobaptism, and many will disagree with his spiritual presence view of the Lord's Supper, all of us will cheer his exhortation to active, sacrificial, bodily participation of believers in local church life: "If you want to commune with your Creator, you are going to have to do it with other real men and women and children with real bodies and souls, who also want to commune with their Creator."

To change the world, as it were, you don't begin outside the four walls of the church; you begin when the people of God gather, worship, read Scripture, and are equipped for mission. "Your mundane, apparently pathetic little church is the greatest mystery in the universe."

"Your mundane, apparently pathetic little church is the greatest mystery in the universe."

And yet Leithart's vision isn't a call to a narrow, unengaged piety. When the church rightly understands her mission, when she rightly worships, when she understands what it means to live out the mission of God, it should result in Christians moving through the city with gospel purpose, animated by their identity as citizens of another kingdom. "The early Christians," Leithart writes, "believed their assemblies—their ekklesia—determined the future of the city where they assembled."

Many chapters, with rich prose, trace important themes such as Adam, Eve, the world, and others through Scripture to give readers a robust vision of the Christian life.

*On Earth as in Heaven* specifically calls pastors to step into their vocations with courage and clarity, taking seriously their job to preach the Word faithfully and shepherd their people actively. "When the church has no shepherds," he warns, "or weak, vacillating shepherds, she is prey to wolves, false shepherds, and dragons." In Leithart's formulation, pastors are "angels at the gate." Pastors are commissioned, he writes, "to teach your church everything Jesus commanded." Not merely the spiritual disciplines, but what it looks like to serve Christ in varied vocations Monday to Friday. The book

fleshes out a doctrine of creation and a theology of making, connecting work life to the eternal mission of God.

### **A Joyful Mission**

All of this is wrapped not in ominous tones of cultural doom, as so many manifestos are, but in otherworldly joy. Leithart is animated by the church's mission in the world as he walks through the Bible's vision for the church, the family, and culture-making. Though a committed Presbyterian, he expresses a catholicity bound by orthodoxy, urging local congregations to find healthy cross-denominational partnerships where appropriate. He urges humble, intellectual pursuits:

“A full curriculum for Bible readers quickly becomes a curriculum about everything under the sun and many things beyond the sun.”

If you are looking for a tome on the appropriate relationship between church and state, for a manual on political theology, or an ethics text, you'll be disappointed. Leithart does see the church as the most important institution and social change springing from within her walls. “In the sanctuary-ark of the church, Jesus nourishes new forms of compassion, which, over the centuries, have transformed the world.”

*On Earth as in Heaven* is not the first word, nor the last, about spiritual and social renewal, but it is one that will be engaged for years to come.



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# *Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America*, by Crawford Gribben

by Joseph Thigpen

**C**rawford Gribben. *Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America: Christian Reconstruction in the Pacific Northwest*. Oxford University Press, 2021. 210 pages.

Amidst growing societal pressure and a waning consensus on the best manner of Christian political engagement, American evangelicals face a torrent of suggestions for how to relate to the public square. Some opt for direct action on local, state, and national levels. Others avoid such activism. Some seek to build think tanks, schools, and other institutions in global centers of power. Others call for a strategic retreat in order to build a new society.

Each movement has its arguments and growing body of literature. But it's this last group that forms the subject of Crawford Gribben's *Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America: Christian Reconstruction in the Pacific Northwest*. What's appealed to survivalists in previous generations has now found a following among American evangelicals. In particular,

hundreds of evangelicals have moved northwest in the hopes of building a better society.

## Overview

The following review will give special attention to Gribben's description of his subjects' beliefs. His work should help pastors and Christians better wrestle with the assumptions his subjects celebrate.

Gribben doesn't aim to critique but describe. He writes, "More school of thought than an organization,' Christian Reconstruction was developed by R.J. Rushdoony and his son-in-law Gary North in the late 1960s, but it has evolved over time, and has variegated in that evolution" (8). Gribben demonstrates how new challenges over time led to such changes.

Gribben's description focuses on a few growing communities in the Pacific Northwest. Most notably—and, in Gribben's view, the most successful—is the one in Moscow, Idaho led by Douglas Wilson and others. Through careful research and personal interviews, Gribben describes some of the history, beliefs, and challenges facing these communities, as well as the troubling past of similar movements.

Unlike the Christian Reconstructionists or theologians (used synonymously) of the mid-twentieth century, contemporary theologians find an audience for their views in the cultural mainstream. Their books are distributed by major publishing companies, and other forms of media find substantial followings across several platforms.

The invitation to join these communities is not a call to retreat, but a beckoning to build for the future. Their aim is a Christian society.

## Chapter by Chapter Summary

Gribben's book summarizes common beliefs of these communities in five main chapters—Migration, Eschatology, Government, Education, and Media.

### *Migration*

His chapter "Migration" details the variety of organizations, individuals, and groups who have sought haven in the Pacific Northwest. Notably, "Religious migrants have been moving in and out of Idaho for 200 years—and some of their visions have been aggressive," (20), with evangelicals migrating in the 1950s and 60s (22). In the 1970s, more evangelicals took the journey, convinced that they lived in an unstable world awaiting cataclysmic events.

Some were dispensational in their theology, while others were Reformed and postmillennial. As Gribben observes, "Some wished to build a family or a congregation, while others wished to build a fortress. Some were preparing for tribulation while others were pursuing the millennium. All of them wanted to resist, and almost all of them expected to survive" (28). They shared a conviction that American society was declining quickly, and the best chance for survival and resistance would be found in the Pacific Northwest.

## Eschatology

The following chapter, “Eschatology,” explains how various views of the end times informed strategies of survival and resistance. Attacking the “sorry tribulation complex” of dispensational premillennialists, R.J. Rushdoony and other postmillennialists pressed Christians to consider the biblical basis for social order and how they could change it. They offered hope. The book of Revelation, Rushdoony argued, was a “declaration of the sovereignty, lordship, and victory of Christ in history.” “Christians,” then, “should be working for a ‘world which has been brought under the discipline of the gospel and evangelized in every area’ (42). It would take time, so Christians must be patient.

Although postmillennial theology was overwhelmed by dispensational premillennialism in the 1960s and 70s, it would find a friendlier audience in the 1980s and 90s. Most notably, in Gribben’s telling, it would be accepted and developed by a former dispensational charismatic, Douglas Wilson. In the late 1970s, Doug Wilson became the pastor of a church built from the evangelistic ministry of his father, Jim Wilson. In the 1980s, the younger Wilson would become influenced by Reformed ideas, and in 1988 he published the first issue of *Credenda Agenda*, which popularized some of the postmillennialism of Rushdoony and others.

For Wilson, this postmillennialism offered surety in the storm. Gribben cites a 1998 essay where Wilson stated, “The medieval period is the closest

thing we have to a maturing Christian culture . . . Christians need to start thinking more about plotting the rest of the story, preparing for the death of modernity over the next century . . . The nation which we call the United States *has already been lost*” (50, emphasis original).

Postmillennialism would also help make sense of Wilson’s success. As his church grew and more people moved to Moscow, Wilson’s rhetoric turned more triumphalist, Gribben recounts. Echoing Abraham Kuyper, Wilson said much later, Jesus Christ is “already king of Idaho . . . We have the task of announcing to the remaining rebels in the hinterlands that their capital city has already fallen, their rulers dethroned, and that resistance is futile” (55). As Wilson and others might see it, the Moscow community provides a picture of a future America. But short-term victory is not the goal; theirs is the long game.

## Government

In Gribben’s description, as Christian Reconstructionists grew disaffected with evangelical dispensationalism, they joined the program of the Religious Right. Gribben claims, “Large pandenominational and politically pragmatic religious coalitions that dominated an earlier phase of evangelical political engagement have fractured, and have given way to a much more vigorous, variegated, and entrepreneurial evangelical political landscape” (63). It’s among this balkanization, argues Gribben, that the Christian Reconstructionists have gained ground.

The vision of government espoused by Wilson and others finds its growing audience amongst those who find the public square hostile to Christian claims, making a Christian approach to politics untenable in the current system. The editors of *Credenda Agenda* argued, “The fulfillment of the Great Commission . . . requires the establishment of a global Christendom.”

Additionally, Wilson saw his work as contributing to a “network of nations bound together by a formal, public, civic acknowledgement of the lordship of Jesus Christ and the fundamental truth of the Apostles’ Creed.” Wilson continues, “Christian ministers must proclaim the crown rights of King Jesus everywhere, and over everything” (82). Gribben summarizes that this achieves a “baptized civilization” or theocracy where “the practice of non-Christian religion would be permissible only within private homes” (82).

### *Education*

According to Gribben, Christian Reconstructionists aim for a new education paradigm. Perhaps surprisingly, they agree that Christian teaching has no place in public schools (91). Instead, their task is to build a thoroughly Christian education system where Christian families can educate their children according to their practices and beliefs. This led to calls by some for new institutions that would be viable alternatives to the “humanistically controlled institutions of the secular state” (103). And as Gribben notes, the Moscow community succeeds where others fail.

The Moscow community established a school in the 1970s and later a university. Due to the latter’s engagement with Western literature and academic rigor, Gribben says, “It is hardly surprising that its graduates enter programs in elite European universities and the Ivy League” (112). Considering its history, the Moscow community has realized the hopes of former theologians who saw Christian education as instilling the virtues and values that would shape society for generations to come.

### *Media*

So far it could seem that these theologians possess an interesting ideology, albeit provincial. How is it relevant for others? What helps fuel the migration mentioned in chapter one?

As Gribben conveys, it’s the new use of media that gives the modern theologian a growing audience. Particularly print and online media, Gribben says, have been primary tools. In Moscow, Canon Press publishes for readers who already accept their premises. Many theologians publish more broadly, largely bypassing evangelical publishers and choosing instead more mainstream brands. Authors publish with HarperCollins, Random House, Oxford University Press, and more. Their success with mainstream publishers shows the allure of their ideas, and for adherents, the success of their program. Gribben summarizes, “The Moscow community has survived, and has successfully resisted American modernity, and its greatest success may be found in its members’ creative work” (143).

“Pastors will be well served by reading Gribben’s work. Though he doesn’t evaluate the claims or ideology of his subjects, his descriptions help pastors understand where all these theonomists come from and what parts of their views may appeal to fellow church members.”

Rather than evaluating the claims of these theonomists, Gribben concludes by reflecting on how his subjects are positioned to answer questions many American Christians are considering. Amidst evangelicalism’s balkanization, Gribben demonstrates that those in Moscow have been building and refining a program for decades. Their foundation is well-established, and their reach is broad. Historically rough edges have been smoothed, and their success can be measured.

After reading Gribben’s account, one matter is clear—these are not your father’s (or grandfather’s) theonomists.

### **For Further Analysis**

Pastors will be well served by reading Gribben’s work. Though he doesn’t evaluate the claims or ideology of his

subjects, his descriptions help pastors understand where all these theonomists come from and what parts of their views may appeal to fellow church members.

This review, like Gribben’s book, has aimed to be more descriptive and less evaluative to prompt readers to consider the appeal of Gribben’s study and the arguments of his subjects. However, permit me to raise a few questions to provoke further thought.

Is the theonomic vision of a society biblically faithful? Does the Bible call Christians to work for an explicitly Christian society? If so, in what ways? And if not, what and how should Christians seek to build as parts of society grow more hostile to belief?

Furthermore, is the migration pattern toward the Pacific Northwest anti-Great Commission? Under the Old Covenant, God called his people out of Egypt north and eastward to the land of Canaan. In exile, his Old Covenant people felt that same centripetal draw toward the land, only now the pull was south and westward. Think of Daniel opening his windows and praying toward Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10). All this changes with the New Covenant and Christ’s Great Commission. The book of Acts begins with Jews “from every nation under heaven” showing up in Jerusalem for Pentecost (2:5). There’s the centripetal pull. Yet then Acts spends the rest of the book reversing course with a centrifugal push toward Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth for the purpose of making disciples. In other words, does the migration pattern toward Idaho recounted by Gribben represent a reverse Great Commission, an

exchange of the centrifugal for the centripetal once again, and the attempt to rebuild ancient Israel?

Now that Tim Keller is retired from his pastoral work in Manhattan, would the pastors of Moscow consider moving to Manhattan and picking up the work there? Or are secular hubs like Manhattan not a place where Christians who really care about the nation should go? Is there something about the Moscow program that would make a move to Manhattan unlikely,

and, if so, doesn't that suggest that something about the Great Commission has been lost?

Answering these and other questions will require pastors and Christians to revisit our assumptions about the mission of the church and what hope for the future Christians possess. For those attempting to challenge such a vision summarized here, Gribben's work is a helpful starting place. It will take carefully considering such claims with an open Bible.



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# *Empires of Dirt,* by Douglas Wilson

by Paul Alexander

**A**s our public discourse has become more polarized and politicized, calls for Christian nationalism have begun to resonate with well-meaning believers. Doug Wilson's *Empires of Dirt* reads like a manifesto. His "Mere Christendom" is not as mere as it appears.

## **Summary**

Wilson begins by reminding us that public secularism is not religiously neutral. "Soft socialism" has advanced its own salvation narrative (8, 9). American Zionism and Exceptionalism were idols. And compassionate conservatism was never a convincing stand-in for Christianity. But raw secularism looks like the last man standing in the public square, and it leaves the state (apparently) answerable to no one. Whither then a Christian public theology?

Wilson first dismisses radical Anabaptist separation of church and state as pessimistic (Hauerwas, Willimon) and pacifist (Greg Boyd). Since “Christ already humiliated the principalities” (80) in binding Satan, Wilson says, “This should have obvious political implications” (81), one of which is Christian nationalism. Buttressed by an ecclesial application of Psalm 2 and Revelation 19:15, the church rules with the rod of iron, which is “the preaching and declaration of God’s gospel authority in this world” (89, 90). When kings kiss the Son, they lead their nations—as nations—to espouse Christian views and virtues, and nations become disciples as national people units (95, 259).

Wilson then dismisses, maybe even torches, what he calls Radical Two-Kingdoms theology (R2K for short) as argued for by the Escondido brothers (Horton, VanDrunen, Clark). In Wilson’s mind, R2K is nothing short of a departure from an otherwise robust Reformed tradition of cultural impact. He opines, “The Reformed theology I have read and studied and loved built a great civilization. The Reformed theology of the truncated R2K brethren, consistently applied, would have trouble building a taco stand” (145). Wilson critiques R2K as a system built on “principled cultural irrelevance for Jesus,” which he likens to the pop evangelicalism that drove him to Reformed theology in the first place (146). According to Wilson, R2K is more at home with the “anabaptists and revivalists” than the Reformed faith.

Wilson, on the other hand, understands his own position as being in lockstep with Reformed stalwarts like Knox, Bucer, Calvin, Kuyper, and Edwards (147). The assertion that Christ is King over everything implies that Christianity must be political, like John the Baptist when he took it to Herod over having his brother’s wife (120). The kings of the earth must kiss the Son (Ps. 2, 123). “To say that the temporary governments of this world are not the church of God is not the same thing as saying that they should not, or need not, be Christian. ‘Temporal’ and ‘secular’ are not synonyms” (123).

For Wilson, though, discipling the nations simply “means preaching the gospel in the narrow sense, saving souls, planting churches, building parish life” (125–126). “I believe that Christian republics and commonwealths are formed by preaching, baptizing, and discipleship, not by campaigning, legislating . . . and so on” (157). Still, Wilson aims at a culture shaped by the Christian cultus (121). “I want to live in a baptized civilization. That is what I mean by mere Christendom” (143). He wants “a culturally potent and world-transforming faith” (147). He sees this in Daniel’s victory in Babylon and Joseph’s success in Egypt (151). Anything less would be equivocation. “Christians who argue for a secular public square are caught on the horns of a dilemma. Either Jesus wants this or he doesn’t” (155).

For Wilson, the bracing truth is “Jesus is King of Kings . . . President of Presidents. . . It is already the case. The world will gradually come to recognize this, and will become Christian,

and this is good news indeed. This is *the* good news” (157). That sounds an awful lot like he’s saying Christendom is the gospel, not a *result* of the gospel. Clearly, Wilson’s postmillennialism is front and center in his celebration of inevitable mass conversion and the Christianization of nations, as nations, around the world.

On Wilson’s lay of the land, “the church is formal worship, the cultus. The Kingdom is the culture that surrounds the church, having grown out of it. The reformatory work of reclaiming education or the fine arts is Kingdom work, done by Christians, to be distinguished from the formal work of the church, done by ministers, elders, deacons, and congregants” (184). Still, the suggested pace of transformation is gradual, even generational—reform, not revolution.

In Wilson’s mere Christendom, “Muslims could come from other lands and live peaceably. . . What they could not do is argue that minarets have the same rights of public expression that church bells do. The public space would belong to Jesus” (176).

At the end of the day, Wilson is “trying to persuade Christians that we will win the race and that we should run it as those who intend to win it. . . We should want Christians to know this now—they don’t have to do it all now” (195). And “societies need to know God just as individuals do. . . When Jesus Christ is declared to them, *in their office of nationhood*, the biblical process of biblical transformation gets underway. . . Jesus said to baptize the nations. Jesus said to disciple the nations. Whatever do you suppose he meant by it?” (259).

This sounds like a muscular alternative to a feminized faith. The problem is what Wilson means by mere Christendom: “By mere Christendom I mean a network of nations bound together by a formal, public, civic acknowledgement of the lordship of Jesus Christ and the fundamental truth of the Apostles’ Creed” (9). The brief rationale is: “Religious neutrality is an impossibility. So mere Christendom stands in contrast to sectarian Christendom on the one hand and complete secularism on the other” (9). In fact, for Wilson, “mere Christendom. . . provides the only real antidote to American exceptionalism on the one hand and radical Islam on the other” (28, *cf.* 47).

To his credit, he’s unmistakably clear. “I am arguing for a Christian America . . . [and] referencing the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the Constitution . . . would make me happy, for starters” (160). “[The magistrate] should propose an amendment to the Constitution that consists of the text of the Apostles’ Creed” (193). “I am simply saying that our nation—our leaders, our judges, our poets, our jesters, and our people as a whole—must confess that Jesus is Lord. They must confess that only Jesus is Lord. Other nations are called to do the same and, as they do, they would of course recognize one another as sister nations in Christ” (33). Of course, he says . . .

Some evangelicals tend to lionize such talk. But is “mere Christendom”—amendments in national constitutions and all—really the best forward? Even when made dependent on gospel advancement, should Christians really expect the kind of success

Wilson guarantees? And should Christians equate that success with the gospel itself, as Wilson appears to do? I think Wilson's argument raises more questions than it answers.

### Critique

For example, what about common grace under the Noahic Covenant (Gen. 9:1–7) as the space Christians share with unbelievers under the triune God as Creator and Preserver of all? God's covenant with Noah was preservative, not redemptive. It's with all creation, not just God's people or even humanity in general. Its symbol is the common rainbow. It provides for marriage, pro-creation, food provisions, and retributive justice, the latter implying that this is the realm of state oversight, accountable to the triune God as Creator and Preserver.

This divine covenant with creation remains until the end of time. Therefore, the New Covenant does not abrogate the Noahic Covenant. Rather, the Noahic Covenant is the temporal and spatial atmosphere in which redemption lives and moves and has its being.

Noahic space is common-grace space. It is common both in the sense of shared by all humanity regardless of religion, and common in the sense of outside the cultus. It is secular, profane—not wicked or obscene, but not holy in the sense of devoted-because-redeemed. Yet it is also gracious in the sense that it postpones final judgment to create time and space for redemption, and it is provided by God, so all beneficiaries are still accountable to God, redeemed or not.

“Precisely here is where theonomy is in danger of becoming a new legalism—demanding of the church what Jesus does not demand and what the church cannot in any case do.”

A Noahic framework is the theological umbrella that accommodates God's plan of redemption alongside his patience with a still-unbelieving world, as seen by David VanDrunen, Meredith Kline (*Kingdom Prologue*, 153–160), Stuart Robinson (*The Church as an Essential Element of the Gospel*, 84–88), Herman Bavinck (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:216–222), and Herman Witsius (*Economy of the Covenants*, 2:239–242). In other words, we Christians can share public space with unbelievers under God's covenant, while not giving up our convictions. Jesus is King over all of it, but in different ways, for different ends. The one he rules as Creator-Sustainer, the other as Savior-Redeemer. Jesus rules . . . even if Christians don't.

Wilson's dismissiveness of a Noahic framework leads to confusion between the preservative and the redemptive, the common and the holy. Meredith Kline discerns the irregular heartbeat of the theonomic pulse at just this point, “their failure to understand the biblical concept of common grace culture” (*Kingdom Prologue*, 157). This

oversight leads to the anomaly of theonomy; it skips a beat.

The anomaly is that Jesus is said to redeem what God has only promised to temporarily preserve—the common or civic realm. Yet this is the realm whose destruction is forewarned by the flood, by Sodom and Gomorrah, and by the *herem* ban of the conquest in Joshua and Judges—the end of all common grace for the unbelieving world (Luke 17:26–29; 2 Pet. 2:5–9; 3:8–13). This is the realm whose destruction is signified in the downfall of Babylon and its supersession by the New Jerusalem descending from heaven (Rev. 18).

Precisely here is where theonomy is in danger of becoming a new legalism—demanding of the church what Jesus does not demand and what the church cannot in any case do. Because there is no recognized common realm, the argument of *Empires* takes the Great Commission to necessitate that the church disciple nations as nations (95), which means Christianizing their governments. In Wilson’s words: “‘But you want the government to be explicitly Christian?’ You have understood our position exactly” (121).

Yet it’s only *individuals* from among ethnicities who are taught and baptized in Acts, never nations as such. John’s grammar in Revelation 5:9 confirms this: “You ransomed a people for God *from* every tribe and language and people and nation” (so also in Rev. 7:9). He did not ransom multiple nations. He ransomed one new international people from among the nations. Preaching the gospel to societies “*in their office of nationhood*” (259,

emph. orig.) simply is not what Jesus commissioned his church to do.

It is only by overlooking the common-grace space that theonomy can misspeak about the identity of the Christian nation. Peter thinks Christians in the world are like Israelites in Babylon—exiles (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11). What’s more, Peter labels the multi-ethnic church itself as the *kingdom* of priests, the holy *nation* (e;qnoj a[gion), a *people* (lao,j) for his own possession—not the modern nation-state or the culture within it that grows up out of the church (184; cf. Rev. 1:6; 5:10). The church itself is to be a holy nation within a common nation—that is, within a non-Christian nation, accountable to God in Christ, not under the New Covenant with God’s people, but under the Noachic Covenant with all creation. When Christians overlook common grace, the impulse is to christen the state, rather than to reform the church.

Wilson critiques J.D. Hunter’s “faithful presence” take on Jeremiah 29:4–7 (150–151) for giving short shrift to the cultural reversal and triumph of Daniel 6:23–28. But God’s counsel to the exiles in Babylon was “‘build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce’” (Jer. 29:4–7). Noticeably absent from God’s counsel to the exiles is any command to re-work Babylon into a New Jerusalem. Israel’s exiles find their welfare in the welfare of Babylon as Babylon, not vice versa. What’s more, God commands them to build and plant in Babylon, knowing that in seventy years he will destroy the same city whose welfare they are to seek.

For Wilson, “The church turns the world into what the world ought to be” (183). This is where I part with the post-mill vision. It’s not that Christians cannot or should not have cultural impact. It’s that such impact is only a preservative and temporal byproduct of the gospel, not a redemptive aim for Christians that will produce eternal results, and certainly not *the* gospel itself (157). We shouldn’t be pessimistic or insular. We still work together for biblical justice and mercy in economic, political, and social ways. We still build and plant, but we do so as salt, a temporary preservative. Such work is significant, even if only temporary; important, even if not redemptive.

The pastoral concern here is that many neo-Calvinist Kuyperians put what VanDrunen calls “an eschatological burden” on cultural transformation that simply is not there, whether in the Bible or in Reformation thought.<sup>1</sup> Our vocational work in the world is part of our responsibility under the Noahic covenant—temporary, preservative work; not eternal, redemptive, kingdom work (*contra* Wilson, 149–150). Our evangelism, discipling, and church planting is part of our responsibility under the New Covenant—redemptive work, true kingdom work. Confusing those categories courts disillusionment by seeking eternal significance from temporal vocations. More importantly, it courts confusion over what counts as evangelism.

The exiles’ presence in Babylon might be redemptive for individual Babylonians, but it is not redemptive for Babylon the nation. Daniel’s rise to power in exile did no more to

“redeem” Babylon than Joseph’s did to redeem Egypt. In fact, God redeemed his holy people in the very act of judging the common nation that conquered them. God still destroys Babylon and the rebel world it represents (Rev. 18:1–24). Wilson argues from Joseph and Daniel that we’ll win the culture war (151–153). Yet there’s nothing for us to win in Babylon but souls.

True, as more people in a society become Christians, more people might voluntarily vote for amendments in constitutions. But that also seems more like Christianized democratic populism. That’s a tough sell to the Syrian Christian whose home was bombed by Bashar al Assad, or the Middle Eastern Christian living under Shariah Law. Jesus is the one who must turn the world into what it ought to be. And when he does, he will finalize what Adam failed to do. That is what faith believes. It is not “unbelief to place the fulfillment outside the course of history” (194). It is patient hope against all appearances to the contrary.

*Empires* assumes a Preterist eschatology. Another reading of New Testament eschatology, though, with more explanatory power, sees Babylon (the world in opposition to God and his people) as growing stronger (2 Tim. 3:13; Rev. 12–17.) At the same time, the church is also growing stronger. Though the conflict ebbs and flows, it crescendos to a climax until Jesus returns to destroy Babylon, save the church, and make all things new, all by himself.<sup>2</sup>

Babylon’s destruction by God in Revelation 18, then, envisions God’s future judgment of the world in

opposition to Christ, at the end of time, and indicates that Christians are not to renovate it. We seek the kingdom; we see, serve, and enter the kingdom; but we don't build it in extra-ecclesial, culturally transformative ways from the raw materials we now have. Babylon is not rehabilitated or refurbished by Christians. It is succeeded by the New Jerusalem.

Wilson elsewhere affirms, "The fulfillment of the Great Commission . . . requires the establishment of a global Christendom."<sup>3</sup> What Wilson argues for in this book is "a baptized civilization. That is what I mean by mere Christendom" (143). Yet the kind of baptism he assumes is aberrant. In 2017, Wilson dissociated himself from the *term* Federal Vision, but not from his own theology which went by that name. "This statement represents a change in what I will *call* what I believe. It does not represent any substantial shift or see change in the *content* of what I believe. . . I would still want to affirm everything I signed off on in the Federal Vision statement."<sup>4</sup>

We can't re-litigate the whole Federal Vision here, but Wilson still affirms, "All who are baptized into the triune Name are united to Christ in His covenantal life, and so those who fall from that position of grace are indeed falling from grace. . . The connection that an apostate had with Christ was not merely external."<sup>5</sup> He also affirms "that God formally unites a person to Christ and to His covenant people through baptism into the triune name."<sup>6</sup> Wait. Baptism unites you to Christ? How is that not sacramentalism?<sup>7</sup>

Just to be clear, for Wilson's Mere Christendom to work for you—which he defines as "a baptized civilization" (143)—you must be okay with baptism as, somehow, a nationalized sacrament that in some way unites people to Christ, yet can be jeopardized by post-baptismal sin and only finalized by post-baptismal obedience. Wilson has presented his Mere Christendom as non-sectarian, but he's based it on a sectarian view of baptism as a nationalized sacrament—a limber move for a self-styled Westminster Puritan.

Of course, Mere Christendom is not the only brand of post-mill on offer today; you can be post-mill without buying this version of it. But Mere Christendom appears to be the Federal Vision for federal governments, which is why it is a kind of post-mill that should be rejected. On this view, there's one covenant of grace (with no covenant of works, yet somehow Christ's obedience is still credited to the believer), and all citizens of the state are physically baptized into a kind of election that is not necessarily saving, into the general regeneration of Matthew 19:28 that might still die on you, and into a spiritual union with Christ that might still rupture. The blessings you're baptized into are contingent on your post-baptismal obedience. This looks like supersized covenantal nomism—get in by grace, stay in by works.

## Conclusion

Wilson opines, "I want to live in a baptized civilization" (143). Me too. But we'll both have to wait until the day when the New Jerusalem comes down

from heaven, adorned as a bride for her husband, because only then will it be the case that “*nothing unclean will ever enter it*” (Rev. 21:27). That will be the truly baptized civilization. But only Jesus can bring it. And praise God, he will.

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1. David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 349-350, 367.

2. See William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940, 1967, repr. 2015).

3. <https://federal-vision.com/ecclesiology/joint-federal-vision-statement/> in “*The Next Christendom*”.

4. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170117182033/https://dougwils.com/s16-theology/federal-vision-no-mas.html>

5. <https://federal-vision.com/ecclesiology/joint-federal-vision-statement/>

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Wilson elsewhere clearly affirms justification by faith alone. To give him the benefit of the doubt here, he’s willing, in paedobaptist fashion, to affirm that some people (namely, infants) are united to Christ, belong to the covenant, and might be designated as “Christians,” but only as an objective identifier, not a subjective one. In other words, he believes that the church, like ancient Israel, is a mixed community by blueprint design, unlike Baptists who believe that the church, by design, always aspires to be entirely regenerate and that “in Christ” means in Christ objectively and subjectively. The trouble is, such language is at best confusing, risks contradicting his affirmation of sola fide, and at best yields rampant nominalism, with a “church” no more healthy than ancient Israel as they chased after other gods.*



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# What is the mission of the church?

Provoked by secularism's growing dominance in culture, a growing number of Christians have begun arguing the church needs to undertake nation building through culture war. Some identify as Theonomists, others as Magisterial Protestants, many as Christian Nationalists. Differences exist between these groups, but all of them want all Ten Commandments or the Apostles' Creed placed front and center in a nation's founding documents. Many would also shrink the scope of religious liberty. Yet is this what Jesus had in mind when he sent his church into the world to make disciples? This issue of *Church Matters* will argue that it isn't. These authoritarian systems fail to recognize that nations can't be saved; only people can. And it's saved people gathering in churches who bear Jesus's name, not governments. Jesus promised victory to his Church, not to the countries where his churches live as exiles and pilgrims.

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“Whether we are from Nigeria or Nepal, Britain or Bahrain, believers in Jesus across nations share the most important thing in common with each other—that we have been brought from spiritual death to life and share an eternal inheritance. ११

*Jamie Southcombe*

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