

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

August 1992

Copyright 2003 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692

Email: Jrob1517@aol.com

Website: www.trinityfoundation.org

Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

Will the Real Greg Bahnsen Please Stand Up?

John W. Robbins

No Other Standard: Theonomy and Its Critics, Greg L. Bahnsen. Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991, 345 + xv pages, indexes, notes, \$25.00.

This is Dr. Bahnsen's third book on the subject of Theonomy, and it is intended as a reply to his critics. It contains a Publisher's Preface by Gary North, 15 chapters, 2 appendixes on *Matthew 5* and Vern Poythress, and two indexes. The chapters are arranged topically, rather than by critic, although the critics are sometimes accorded several pages of criticism.

Two Views of the Law

As I demonstrated in my review of Dr. Bahnsen's earlier book, *By This Standard* ("Theonomic Schizophrenia," *The Trinity Review*, February 1992), he sets forth two differing, two contradictory, views of God's law, which I call the Theonomic view and the Confessional view. The Theonomic view asserts the "abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail" (the phrase is Bahnsen's), and the Confessional view, expressed in Chapter 19 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, asserts that some Old Testament laws have expired, others have been abrogated, and still others are valid today. These two views are obviously contradictory. They cannot both be true. The father of Reconstructionism, Rousas Rushdoony, apparently realized this and dismissed the Confessional view as

"nonsense" in his *Institutes of Biblical Law* (551). Dr. Bahnsen, however, continues to advocate both views in this book, though the discussion of the distinctive Theonomic Theorem is relegated to an appendix.

As examples of his contradictory statements in this book, let me offer these: Espousing the Theonomic view, Bahnsen declares, "Jesus bound us...to every jot and tittle of the Old Testament legislation of God's will, not allowing us to subtract even the least commandment" (221). "Jesus warned against dismissing even the least Old Testament commandment,... Not a single law, word, or stroke can be violated with impunity..." (99). "Christ did not intend to have the slightest stroke of that law altered" (121). "*Matthew 5:17-19*, for instance, teaches the abiding validity of every Old Testament precept..." (165). Espousing the Confessional view Bahnsen writes: "The underlying principles of the Old Testament civil law are the abiding moral standards which should continue to guide civil magistrates in our day. That is why the Mosaic law is a 'model' to be emulated, not a code to be simply quoted or read into modern statute books" (160). "Since some of these [Old Testament] laws are obviously not to be observed today..."(93).

Bahnsen's present advocacy of the Theonomic view is so muted and de-emphasized in this book, when compared to his earlier volumes, that Bahnsen seems to be quietly changing his mind. That is completely understandable, for several reasons. Let

me name three. First, the two views are blatantly contradictory, and one can continue to advocate both only by becoming willfully blind to the contradiction involved or by explicitly repudiating logic. As Bahnsen has de-emphasized his Theonomic view, however, he talks more and more about logic. Rather than explicitly repudiating logic, he lards this book with so many references to logic, to reasoning, fallacies, and consistency that it becomes almost pedantic. He writes like a child eager to show off a new toy. I hope, however, that he is doing more than playing with logic.

A second reason why Bahnsen may be quietly abandoning Theonomy is more political in nature: Bahnsen, by taking an ordination vow as a minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, is legally committed to the Confessional view, not the Theonomic view.

A third reason for his apparent abandonment of Theonomy may be this: The initial plausibility of Christian Reconstructionism and the support it has received were derived, not from the Theonomic Theorem, that is, the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail, but from the Confessional view. Were the Theonomists logically consistent in expounding the Theonomic Theorem, all would easily recognize them as beyond the pale of Christianity. If all the details of the Old Testament law are binding today, as the Theonomic Theorem asserts, then the coming of Christ and the writing of the New Testament are of no effect. If the details of the law are binding (as the Theonomists say), and circumcision is required by the law (as the law says), then we must all be circumcised. Theonomy is the ideology of the Judaizers. The reason this has not been more widely recognized is that the Theonomists themselves refuse to draw some of the conclusions logically implied by their Theorem. To remain Christians, they have had to refuse to make logical deductions from their false premises. As a consequence, some of them have attacked logic, rather than their false premises, as the source of the problem.

Confused Theonomists

Bahnsen's frequently repeated complaint against his critics in this book is that they are confused and misunderstand Theonomy. Undoubtedly some of them do. But the Theonomists must bear their share of the blame for that confusion, for the Theonomists themselves are confused. The contradictory premises of the movement have split it into at least two major and several minor groups, each of which claims to be the true Theonomists. There are the Tylerites, the Rushdoonyites, the Bahnsenites, and so on. They fight and bicker among themselves, splitting families and churches, and some of them would even deny the names *Reconstructionist* and *Theonomist* to the others. Their opinions on any specific issue vary widely. It is no wonder that some of Theonomy's critics are confused.

Bahnsen mentions a few of the disagreements within the Recon camp:

"The attempt to interpret and apply the details of God's commandments is a very necessary task [but on pages 19-26 and 57-62 Bahnsen dismisses criticism of details as illegitimate--JR], but one which leaves much room for controversy and disagreement. I myself do not agree at a number of points with the exegesis or reasoning attempted by many who have been identified as Theonomists. [Notice Bahnsen's reluctance to call them Theonomists—JR.] A notorious example is R. J. Rushdoony's view that believers ought to observe the dietary laws today [which observance is obviously required by the Theonomic Theorem that the Old Testament law is binding in exhaustive detail – JR], but they are not subject to discipline (even by the church) for failing to observe the law's Sabbath regulations...[which discipline seems to be implied by the Theonomic Theorem – JR]. A whole host of secondary, detailed disagreements in interpretation or application could be mentioned: e.g., Gary North's endorsement of literal stoning as the method of execution today [which is required by the Theonomic Theorem – JR]...or David Chilton's treatment of the

head tax as the province of the civil government.... Especially troublesome are certain hermeneutical abuses: for instance I cannot concur with the fanciful stream-of-consciousness connections, allegorical flights, and even numerology proposed by James Jordan...or the artificial imposition of an imagined, blanket outline (with imprecise, pre-established categories) on Biblical materials suggested by Ray Sutton..." (20n.-21n.).

Bahnsen's last complaint about hermeneutical flights of fancy in Jordan and Sutton is right on the mark. Once one has curbed or abandoned logic, as most Van Tilians have done, there is no reason to object to Jordan's and Sutton's views at all. The major tool of Biblical exegesis, which no seminarian learns today, is logic. Hermeneutical flights of fancy are to be expected from such deliberately irrational teaching. (As an aside, it should also be noted that Bahnsen's rejection of Sutton's five-point covenant "outline" makes Bahnsen an antinomian, according to Gary North, for that is how North defines "antinomian." Odd how North continues to publish the books of antinomian Theonomists.)

What no one has yet observed is the major reason for the differences among the Theonomists: The differences between one school of Theonomists and another (insofar as they are not merely rival personality cults) stem largely from the fact that one school wakes up earlier than the rest to the Biblical or logical absurdity of some particular Theonomic belief. At that point the school becomes inconsistent by unwittingly abandoning its false premises or by accepting conclusions less disturbing or anti-Christian than those that logical deduction from their Theonomic premises would demand. But no school of Theonomy has yet had either the honesty or the courage to admit that the Theonomic Theorem itself is wrong, that the Old Testament law is not valid today in exhaustive detail, and that any interpretation of Scripture to the contrary must be incorrect.

Historical Parallels with Neo-orthodoxy

I have been watching the Recon movement for about 20 years. In the early days of the *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* I contributed a few essays and book reviews to that publication. But when it became clear to me where the movement was going (e.g., Bahnsen published his first book on Theonomy in 1977; James Jordan began publishing his irrational blathering, etc.), I stopped. Several years later, when Gary North invited me to write a book for his Blueprint series, he found my views unpublishable. Among other things, I refused to adhere to Sutton's newly discovered five-point covenant structure.

The Recon movement is, in some ways, reminiscent of the neo-orthodox movement, which burst on the theological scene in the 1920s, and at first attracted the attention and support of some orthodox Christians. Neo-orthodoxy vigorously opposed the theological liberalism of the churches. Some conservative Christians saw neo-orthodoxy as an ally in the defense of the faith. The theological, social, and political optimism of theological liberalism had been dealt a serious blow by the first World War; Hitler was to deliver a mortal blow 20 years later. Neo-orthodoxy was a frontal attack on theological liberalism after World War I; it was an uncompromising defense of supernaturalism. It claimed to be and at first seemed to be the new orthodoxy. After a few years though, some Christians began to have serious misgivings about the movement, and as Barth and Brunner and later Bultmann published their books, it became more and more clear that what they were promoting was not orthodoxy at all, but a different religion that merely sounded orthodox. The neo-orthodox split into camps: Barth and Brunner had different views on some matters; they were at times critical of each other. The later Barth soft-pedaled, but did not repudiate, the irrationalism of the early Barth. Brunner, more consistently irrational, championed it.

The Recons arrived on the scene fifty years later in the 1970s, rode the wave of social and political

optimism in the 1980s, and they too attracted some attention and support from the orthodox. Reconstructionism was a frontal attack on antinomianism, and it was uncompromising in its defense of God's law. This was sweet music to many ears who had been forced to listen to situation ethicists like Joseph Fletcher, an Episcopal priest. But as the Theonomists published their books, it became clear to some that this was not a revival of the old orthodoxy of the Westminster standards, but something new. God's law had certainly been ignored by modern churches, but the opposite extreme, asserting that the Old Testament law was valid in exhaustive detail, was also a departure from Christianity. Perhaps the late twentieth-century American Protestant churches were living in Corinth, but the cure for Corinthianism is not Galatianism, but Christianity. The Theonomists were not the heirs of Paul, Jesus, the Puritans, or the Westminster Assembly.

Theonomy is not neo-orthodoxy, of course. But it is not Christianity either. Some Theonomists may make it to Heaven, although as a group they seem uninterested in the place, having their minds focused, to use their phrase, "in time and on Earth." But their distinctive theology will mostly be charred rubble. Just as the original dispensationalists (C. I. Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer) taught two methods of salvation, and later dispensationalists, embarrassed by that fatal flaw in their theology, sought to back away from that view, so the original Theonomists (Rushdoony and Bahnsen) taught the abiding validity of the Old Testament law in exhaustive detail, and now at least one of them seems to be trying to back away from that view.

The Critics of Theonomy

In this book, Bahnsen answers Theonomy's critics, and there are a lot of them: O. Palmer Robertson, Bruce Waltke, Richard Lewis, David Neilands, Thomas Ice, Carl Henry, Paul Fowler, William Barker, David Basinger, Jim Bibza, Walter Chantry, Rodney Clapp, Albert Dager, Tremper Longman III, Robert Godfrey, Laird Harris, Wayne House, Dennis Johnson, Walter Kaiser, Jr., Meredith Kline, Robert Knudsen, Robert Lightner, Gary Long, Dan McCartney, Lewis Neilson, Paul Schrottenboer,

James Skillen, Robert Strong, John Zens, and Raymond Zorn, among others. Bahnsen answers some of them well, but he too frequently fails to quote enough from his critics so that the reader may decide whether he is quoting them accurately or not. In some cases he simply paraphrases his critics. In many cases, both Bahnsen and the critics are wrong.

That is a major problem in the debate between the Reconstructionists and the dispensationalists: Both are wrong. Oddly enough, in some cases they are wrong because they share some of the same beliefs. Take this proposition from Bahnsen's book, for example: "As an indivisible unit the Law is not to be divided with some of it operative today while other parts are not" (95). Sounds like a Theonomist asserting the continuing validity of the law in exhaustive detail, doesn't it? Indeed one can find similar sentences in Greg Bahnsen's books. I have quoted some in my review of his earlier book, *By This Standard*. But the quotation is not from a Theonomist. Would the reader believe that the quotation is from the dispensationalist Robert Lightner?

In *No Other Standard*, Bahnsen de-emphasizes his Theonomic views. He seems to want very much to be orthodox, which is good, but for years he has taken a public position that is clearly unorthodox: The jots and tittles of the Old Testament law are binding today. Much of the space in this book is taken up denying the logical implications of the Theonomic Theorem. But by not explicitly repudiating the Theorem, he ends in hopeless self-contradiction: The details of the Mosaic law both are and are not valid today.

The Contradictions of Theonomy

Bahnsen has tried to answer the charge of self-contradiction by saying that he is merely qualifying a general proposition. That is, he is merely saying, "The law is still valid, except for..." then follows a list of the exceptions. His explanation fails, however, because that is not what he is doing. Bahnsen's contradictory statements are about particulars. The self-contradiction arises because his statements are about the details of the law: All the details (jots and tittles) are valid; some of the details

are not valid. He makes contradictory statements about the details of the law; he is not making a general statement and then qualifying it. Thus his argument on page 27, "If I say 'There is a barn north of the field,' I have certainly not qualified-away my statement or challenged its truth by later specifying it further with 'There is a red barn north of the field,'" misses the point entirely. What Bahnsen has actually said is this: "There is a barn north of the field. There is no barn north of the field." All the details of the Mosaic law are valid; some of the details are not valid. This book is less than honest, for Bahnsen is trying to mislead his readers about what his past statements have been.

That attempt to mislead becomes rather obvious when Bahnsen lists a dozen principles that he says are Theonomy's essential tenets and distinctives (11-13). Not one of the dozen principles is distinctly Theonomic. The first principle, for example, is this: "1. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are, in part and in whole, a verbal revelation from God through the words of men, being infallibly true regarding all that they teach on any subject." Yes, that's the whole thing. There is absolutely nothing Theonomically distinctive about it. It is not even distinctively Reformed. It is a statement with which any variety of Christian might agree.

The relevant idea missing from this list of twelve principles, the idea conspicuous by its absence, the idea that should have been number one, is the Theonomic Theorem: the abiding validity of the Old Testament law in exhaustive detail. Instead we find the following: "5. We 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." Bahnsen has deliberately omitted from his list of twelve Theonomic principles the one principle that makes Theonomy Theonomy, the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail.

Why is it missing? Why does Bahnsen give us instead a list of "Theonomic" principles that non-Theonomists can agree with? Why, except to try to win the debate by surreptitiously changing its terms? Perhaps Bahnsen realizes that the Theonomic Theorem is both logically and Biblically

indefensible, for he now seems to be trying to divert attention from it and to substitute different view of the law, the Confessional view, for the Theonomic view. Bahnsen, by omitting the Theorem from his list of principles, by relegating his discussion of *Matthew* 5:17-19 to an appendix, and by downplaying the distinctive Theonomic position throughout the book, unwittingly signals his growing abandonment of Theonomy.

But perhaps I am giving Bahnsen too much credit. Perhaps he does not understand that the Theonomic Theorem and the Biblical view of God's law are contradictory. Judging by what he says on page 76, he may not understand what a contradiction is. Consider his argument: "If the changes [in God's management of his household] are progressive refinements and further information, then that would be one thing. But if the changes represent contradictions (e.g., under this dispensation it is obligatory to do X, but under that dispensation it is not obligatory to do X), then the household affairs [of God] are really in disarray."

But that is precisely what has happened in history, and God's household is not in disarray. Under the old dispensation it was obligatory to do many things, X, Y, and Z, that it is no longer obligatory to do; one of them is circumcision. But that is not a contradiction as Bahnsen alleges, since we are speaking of different obligations at different times. It would be contradictory to say that it is obligatory to do X and not to do X at the same time. That, in fact, is Bahnsen's position on the present validity/invalidity of the details of the law. Furthermore, Bahnsen apparently forgets that God is *ex lex*, and if he wants to change his law, he can. A change in the law does not imply any change in God at all. Had Abraham reasoned as fallaciously as Bahnsen does, he would never have obeyed God and prepared to sacrifice Isaac.

The law, in fact, seems to be so important to Bahnsen that God operates *under* the law, rather than being the sovereign giver of the law. Bahnsen writes: "None of God's penalties is arbitrary (*Heb.* 2:2). They all require only what justice demands for each crime: 'an eye for an eye,' etc. Those who are punished with death in God's holy law are so

punished only because they have 'committed a sin worthy of death' (e.g., *Deut.* 21:22). It is moral principle that requires the penalties to be what our holy God has prescribed them to be..." (256). Bahnsen seems to think that God conforms his penalties to what "justice demands" and "moral principle requires." But God's penalties are just simply because God imposes them, not because "moral principle requires" them. God is sovereign, not the law.

Matthew 5 and Bruce Waltke

Bahnsen's misinterpretation of *Matthew 5* would make Christ contradict himself. Bruce Waltke takes Bahnsen to task for this, writing, "Jesus cannot be establishing every jot and tittle of the law, as Bahnsen's thesis declares, and at the same time abrogate some of the laws...."

Bahnsen's reply to Waltke is completely irrelevant, but indicative of his debating style: "[A]s a Biblical exegete, Waltke knows better than this. You may not avoid or alter the *linguistic meaning* of a text by looking at *other* Biblical teachings out of the corner of your eye. You may import whatever theological distinctions and qualifications which are appropriate into that matter as an interpreter and preacher of the text, but you *may not* read them *into* that text..." (274n.-275n., Bahnsen's emphasis).

Bahnsen is wrong. All sound exegesis is done, not by "looking at other Biblical teachings out of the corner of your eye," but by looking at them directly, comparing scripture with scripture. It is called the "analogy of faith," and it is based on the principle that the Bible, being the Word of God, does not and cannot contradict itself. Bahnsen's mention of *linguistic meaning* is beside the point: We are not talking about translations, but exegesis. Should Bahnsen argue that translation and exegesis cannot be rigidly separated, the decisive response is this: If a word in the original text has several possible translations, one of which results in a logical contradiction, then that is the wrong translation. Bahnsen's peculiar interpretation of *Matthew 5* makes the Scriptures contradictory; therefore, his exegesis is wrong.

Vern Poythress

Space does not permit me to go into any further detail about the numerous secondary contradictions in Bahnsen's book, both self-contradictions and contradictions of other Theonomists, nor can I discuss his odd view of the relationship between church and state, nor his misinterpretation of other passages of Scripture. But his discussion of Vern Poythress deserves our attention, for two reasons: First, Bahnsen sees some of the major problems in Poythress' writings, problems that Gordon Clark pointed out years ago in his posthumously published book, *Clark Speaks from the Grave*. Poythress is a graduate of Westminster Seminary and is now on the faculty there. He and Bahnsen were both students of Cornelius Van Til. The second reason for attending to Bahnsen's critique of Poythress is that much of his critique applies to himself, but he seems oblivious to it. For example, Bahnsen writes on page 296: "The incoherence of claiming to agree with both Theonomy and [Meredith] Kline's intrusionist position has, in principle, devastating consequences for Poythress' theology. As logicians know very well, from contradictory premises one is able to prove *anything whatsoever*.... Thus if a system of thought incorporates inconsistent premises or principles – which Poythress does – it may arbitrarily lead to any conclusion or application one wishes. This arbitrariness, depending upon which side of the contradiction one wishes to stand upon at any given moment, would render the system of thought unreliable and irrational."

Of course it would, and that is precisely the problem with Theonomy.

A few pages later (311-312) Bahnsen writes: "The most serious criticism which can be made of the reasoning pursued by Poythress is that his use of certain key principles of theological argument is inconsistent. Indeed given the way in which Poythress appeals to such principles at some times but at other times does not appeal to those same principles, or at yet other times appeals to conflicting principles, there is no predictability to the conclusions which are reached (or can be reached).... The reasoning can be pressed to prove

that a certain Old Testament command is to be applied by civil magistrates today – or, equally, that the same command is not to be applied in modern states. A methodology which is this random or arbitrary is simply lacking in cogency and bears no authority for drawing theological conclusions."

Those words are a fitting epitaph for Theonomy itself.

Dr. Bahnsen had better watch out: His use of logic is already irritating some Van Tilians; if he becomes more consistent, he will abandon Theonomy and Van Til altogether and, horror of horrors, become a Clarkian. The pressure of logic and Scripture will drive him to Clark's position. And if Dr. Bahnsen never makes it there, it will only be because he has kicked against the pricks and lapsed into the neo-orthodox habit of curbing logic and misinterpreting Scripture.