

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.

February 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

Theonomic Schizophrenia

John W. Robbins

By This Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today. Greg L. Bahnsen. Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985. 372+ xxx, glossary, index, \$4.95.

In his Prologue to this book, Gary North triple dog dares anyone to criticize it:

"No theologian of repute (or even disrepute) has successfully challenged Dr. Bahnsen's defense of Biblical law during the last eight years. I will go further. No theologian or Christian social thinker in our generation is capable of successfully challenging Dr. Bahnsen's general thesis.... I will take it even one step farther: We will not see any prominent Christian philosopher even attempt it. Nobody is excited about the prospects of going up against Dr. Bahnsen in print.... Now, who will be the sacrificial lamb? Who wants to attempt to prove in print that this little book is the work of a heretic, or an incompetent?... Stay tuned for 'Bambi Meets Godzilla, Part II' " (xxv-xxvi).

Having set the scholarly and serious tone for the book. Dr. North turns it over to Dr. Bahnsen, who, if he were half the rigorous thinker North thinks he is, ought to be blushing crimson by now. Further, both Dr. Bahnsen and Dr. North ought to consider themselves fortunate that they have not attracted the

attention of a prominent philosopher: It is all too easy to lay waste their arguments.

North writes; "Dr. Bahnsen studied apologetics...and theology under Dr. Cornelius Van Til.... Dr. Bahnsen is a trained philosopher and a rigorous logician; indeed he writes more precisely than Van Til..." (xv-xvi). North then goes on to emphasize the logical (yes, logical) rigor of Bahnsen's thinking.

Despite the bragging and taunting, North cautions the reader that the book "is not definitive. It should not be regarded as a final statement of the theonomic position" (xviii). Indeed, it is rumored that there may be a new, revised edition of this book already in the press, but I suspect that it will not be the "final statement," either.

All of which brings me to my first complaint about the Reconstructionist (Recon) movement; It keeps rapidly moving and changing. Their books are like Heraclitus' river: Never the same twice. Fortunately for us, all these changes, retractions (limited liability corporations, for example, used to be immoral, illegal, and un-Biblical; now they're okay), and variations are recorded and footnoted in the books and essays that the Recons obligingly produce for us. They are not as bad as Clark Pinnock, to be sure, who has been all over the theological landscape (except in the land of the orthodox). But pinning the Recons down on anything specific has become almost as difficult as

nailing jello to the wall: Anyone who criticizes their views is answered by the retort: "But you missed Dr. X's treatment of that in the revised edition of his book published just this morning." The implication is: "How could you be so sloppy, ignorant, and unfair?" But the real question is, Why was Dr. X so sloppy, impulsive, or ignorant as to publish a book full of poorly thought out ideas in the first place? The fact that he did so makes his book fair game. Therefore, this review concentrates on one book; where Bahnsen differs from himself in another book is a subject for another review.

Dominion Theology

Despite the variation in successive books, one false Recon notion, an idea that crops up in almost every Recon book, is "dominion." Gary North mentions it in his Prologue: "Christians have been afraid to exercise dominion. They have been bullied into submission by professional humanist guilt manipulators who have persuaded Christians that Christianity, when applied to politics, has led to tyranny and war." The reader should read North's defense of tyranny in *Westminster's Confession*, 273-276; see also "Joseph's Apes," *The Trinity Review*, November/December 1991.)

"Dominion," in Recon literature, as in the quotation above, means rigorous political rule. In fact, the Recons identify the so-called cultural mandate and the great commission. Yet Christ himself condemned dominion theology: "You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you..." (*Matthew* 20:25-26). Dominion over men is an anti-Christian notion.

The Recons' confusion on this point is basic to their whole enterprise. In *Genesis* 1, dominion is given to man – all men, not just Christians – over the whole non-human creation (angels excepted): the fish, the fowl, the cattle, all the Earth. No dominion over men is given. Adam is not instructed to subdue men, but to subdue the Earth. Treating men like animals is precisely what Christian politics ought to oppose, not endorse.

The great commission, as opposed to the so-called cultural mandate, is addressed only to Christians, not to all men, and it is a command to preach, baptize, and teach through peaceful persuasion; it is not a command to exercise dominion. Christ's servants do not fight, precisely because his kingdom is not of this world. His method of establishing his kingdom, preaching and teaching, is foolishness to the world, and apparently to some Recons as well.

In sum: The persons addressed by the two commands are different; the commands themselves are different; and the objects of the commands are different. To confuse the two commands should put one back into Remedial Theology 101. Yet that elementary confusion is basic to the thinking of several men with advanced degrees in theology, divinity, philosophy, and history. Confusion is rampant among the Recons. R. E. McMaster, who financed Bahnsen's book (Bahnsen thanks him on page xxix), wrote on page 2 of his newsletter, *The Reaper*, in January 1988: "I would not be at all surprised if communism is seen as an aberration in the long, proud history of the industrious Chinese. The Chinese should return to their roots in Confucius, and from that base build a major civilization. Confucius, whose basic operating principle is 'reciprocity,' is the Eastern version of what we call in the West, 'covenant' or 'contract'.... The Chinese are thus grounded philosophically." Thus one Recon, the financier of Bahnsen's book, endorses paganism.

Contradictory Views of Law

In his first chapter, "Specification of Purpose and Position," Bahnsen both asserts and repudiates the Recon position on Biblical law. That is the pattern he follows for the rest of the book, and it is a pattern that he apparently learned from his mentor, Cornelius Van Til.

It is important to realize what the distinctive Recon position on law is, and I quote Bahnsen: "the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail." Or, as Bahnsen puts it on pages 2 and 3, "not one stroke of the law will become invalid until the end of the world." Theonomy thus stands in sharp contrast to both the dispensationalist position and the position

of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, whose 19th chapter, with its distinction between moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws, was dismissed as "nonsense" by Rushdoony in his *Institutes of Biblical Law* (page 551).

But this clear (the Recons criticize the *Confession* for its "vagueness") and clearly wrong position on the law doesn't last a paragraph in Bahnsen's book, for he writes that "all Old Testament laws are presently our obligation *unless* further revelation from the Lawgiver shows that some change has been made.... [T]here are important ones changes" (3). Thus on page 3 he slips out of Theonomy and back into the *Westminster Confession*. (He also implicitly contradicts his exegesis of *Matthew 5:17-19*.)

Let me exercise a little logical rigor here, since Dr. Bahnsen fails to do so: Either "not one stroke of the law will become invalid until the end of the world" or "some changes have been made." Dr. Bahnsen cannot maintain that the Old Testament food laws are still valid but not binding. Dr. Bahnsen cannot eat his Theonomic pork and have it too.

Bahnsen then begins to list what laws have become invalid: "[C]ertain aspects of the Old Covenant are not authoritative today. For instance... localized imperatives,... cultural details,..." (5), and he gives several examples. He writes, "What is of permanent moral authority is the *principle* illustrated, and not the cultural detail..." (5). This, please note, is the position of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 19, which refers to the "general equity" of the law.

Bahnsen writes, and note well, "Thus we ought *not* to read the case laws of the Old Testament as binding us to the literal wording utilized..." (5). This from the man who asserts the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail and teaches that "not one stroke of the law will become invalid until the end of the world"!

But Bahnsen goes on with his list of invalid laws: "certain administrative details...are not normative for today..." (5). Please read carefully to understand what these "certain administrative details" are: "the type or form of government, the method of tax

collecting, the location of the capitol [*sic*]. These aspects of Old Testament life were not prescribed by standing laws, and they do not bind us today" (6).

Please note that in one sentence Bahnsen has lumped together "administrative details" like the form of government and the location of the capital. The latter seems less an administrative detail than a "localized imperative;" and the former, the form of government, is about as important a matter as one can discuss in political science. The form of government is hardly an administrative detail. Can one imagine Bahnsen saying this about the form of church government? If it is not normative to have a republican form of government – and one of the leading Recons says it is not – they have given away the whole game. That means, note well, that the Recons are indeed free – free from the law, O blessed condition – to impose their peculiar views of God's law on the nations by force.

But let us continue with the analysis. Bahnsen mentions "other discontinuities" (read: invalid laws): "ceremonial laws of sacrifice" (6), "provisions regarding the land of Palestine... family plots, location of cities of refuge, the levirate institution... other examples could perhaps be given..." (6).

On page 7 we come to Bahnsen's repudiation of Theonomy's simplicity (as opposed to the *Confession's* alleged "complexity"): "*We* need to be sensitive to the fact that interpreting the Old Testament law, properly categorizing its details (for example, ceremonial, standing, cultural), and making modern day applications of the authoritative standards of the Old Testament is *not an easy or simple task*" (7). Question: Why bother categorizing the details if they are all still valid anyway?

Bahnsen informs us that "these studies do not advocate the imposition of God's law *by force* upon a society..." (9). My question is simply this: Why not? If the Recons believe that the form of government is not mandated in Scripture and is an administrative detail, why do some of them hesitate at imposing God's laws from the top down? Certainly no mere individual or mere majority has

the right to thwart God's law. And if the form of government does not matter, can majority rule add anything to God's law? Is the Recons' present reluctance to impose God's law simply a matter of political expedience? Or is there a lack of frankness here, similar to the lack of frankness one finds in certain Roman Catholic writers?

Theonomy Again

On page 26, Bahnsen forgets what he had written earlier in the book about the law changing, becoming inapplicable, not being binding, and not being authoritative, and he becomes a Theonomist again: "we must take the *whole* Bible as our standard of ethics, including *every* point of God's Old Testament law.... [E]very Old Testament scripture – even every point of the law – has a binding ethical authority in the life of the New Testament Christian" (26). If one really believed that, he should not eat shrimp, nor wear polyester and wool suits, and he should call the local Episcopal or Roman priest (or Theonomic Practitioner) to get rid of his mildew.

Bahnsen elaborates: "Perhaps the best place to go in Scripture to be rid of the theological inconsistency underlying a negative attitude toward Old Testament law is to the very words of Jesus himself on this subject, *Matthew* 5:17-19. Nothing could be clearer [note the appeal to clarity]... again, nothing could be clearer than this: not even the least significant aspect of the Old Testament law will lose its validity until the end of the world" (27).

But Bahnsen has already told us that many important (let alone the "least significant") aspects of Old Testament law are not. "authoritative," "binding," or "normative" for today. He wrote on page 6 that "the position taken herein is *not* that every last detail of Old Testament life must be reproduced today as morally obligatory...."

Dr. Bahnsen has learned his theology lessons well. He has been schooled in the paradoxical yes and no theology of Cornelius Van Til, who both affirmed and denied the use of logic in theology, both affirmed and denied the Trinity, both affirmed and denied the validity of the proofs for the existence of

God, and ended by teaching that all Scripture is (apparently) contradictory. The enormous confusion one finds in Van Til's students is no accident.

Bahnsen slides deeper into error: "Christ's coming did not abrogate *anything* [note well] in the Old Testament law, for *every single stroke* of the law will abide until the passing away of this world; consequently the follower of Christ is not to teach that *even the least* Old Testament requirement has been invalidated by Christ and His work" (27, emphasis added).

Perhaps Dr. Bahnsen will try to defend himself against my charge of self-contradiction by asserting that while some Old Testament laws are not "binding," "authoritative" or "normative;" and while they are "inapplicable," "out of gear," and "inoperative;" they are, nevertheless, still "valid." That, however, is simply playing with words. *Valid* means "good or adequate in law; possessing legal authority or force; legally binding or efficacious" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The contradictions in Dr. Bahnsen's book are patent, numerous, basic, and insuperable.

Oblivious to the contradictions, Bahnsen slogs on: "If something was sinful in the Old Testament, it is likewise sinful in the age of the New Testament [Doesn't this imply that eating pork today is sinful?].... the advent of the Savior and the inauguration of the New Age do not have the effect of abrogating *the slightest detail* of God's righteous commandments" (37, emphasis added).

"The establishment of the New Covenant does *not* imply the abrogation of the Mosaic law or its depreciation in any [note well] sense" (43). Let me insert another definition: Abrogate: "To repeal (a law, or established usage), to annul, to abolish authoritatively or formally, to cancel" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes William Tindale in its illustration of the definition: "Heb. viii.13 In that he sayeth a new testament, he hath abrogate the olde." As for "depreciation," Bahnsen told us on page 4 that the New Covenant is an "advance" over the Old.

As opposed to what he had written earlier about certain administrative details not binding us today,

Bahnsen now writes: "To lay aside any [note well] of God's law or view its details as inapplicable today is to oppose God's standards of holiness..." (51). But on page 6 "inapplicable" was the very word he used to describe certain parts of the law. Therefore, Bahnsen opposes God's standards of holiness. *Q. E. D.*

In one of his more lucid moments Bahnsen wrote, "What has been said above is simply that the *presumption* should be that an Old Testament law is binding in the New Testament. This does not in any way preclude or reject *many radical differences* between the Old and New Testaments. Changes do indeed come through the course of redemptive history so that there certainly are exceptions to the general continuity that characterizes the relation between Old and New Covenants. God has the right to make alterations for the New Age. In the transition to this New Age we observe that advances are made over the Old Covenant, with *some laws laid aside* and some laws observed in a new fashion" (4, emphasis added).

But on page 87 he barter his lucidity for Theonomy: "the Lawgiver has not altered His law – indeed, the Son of God has confirmed that law for His followers – it must remain valid for us today."

In case anyone missed it, Bahnsen writes on page 88; "Moreover the validity of God's law extends to *all* of His righteous commandments. [Are there unrighteous commandments with God?] None can be subtracted... such subtraction has no Biblical warrant.... Accordingly, Christ emphatically taught that His advent did not in the least abrogate one jot or tittle of the Old Testament law...." One could list dozens of similar assertions in Bahnsen's book.

Categories of Law

In chapter 14, Bahnsen discusses "the categories of God's Law." He asks, "If the validity of the law (or a portion thereof) has expired in the New Testament, as some claim, then what are we to make of scriptural assertions that God does not alter His covenant word, does not allow subtraction from His commandments, is unchanging in His moral character (which the law reflects), and does not

have a double-standard of right and wrong? Why then is the writing of the Old Testament law on our hearts central to the New Covenant?..." (133). He continues with many more questions, all designed to bolster his assertion that the law is binding in exhaustive detail. None of the correct answers to these questions supports his peculiar views, which means that Bahnsen does not know the correct answers to these questions.

Bahnsen also has the bad habit of obscuring the distinction between the moral law and the other categories of the law. To answer one of his questions properly, and not the way he wants it answered, The ceremonial law is *not* written on our hearts, nor are the dietary laws. The moral law is. The jots and tittles are not. Theonomy is simply not Biblical.

Bahnsen has another bad habit of quoting others who do not or did not hold his views about the abiding validity of the whole law, as though they supported his Theonomic views. They write about the moral law, but Bahnsen implies that their words are about all the law. These quotations are very misleading to an unsuspecting reader.

To answer another of his rhetorical questions, *we* may not subtract or add to the law, but *God* can, and he has. As for the questions about the everlasting and unalterable covenant, Bahnsen has as defective a view of the covenant as those dispensationalists who think that Palestine was the Promised Land. Neither, apparently, has understood the argument of Hebrews, and the Recons have failed to grasp Galatians.

Discussing the categories of the laws, 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" (135).

Speaking of the ceremonial laws, he says: "None of these laws is observed today in the manner of the Old Testament shadows, and yet they are confirmed for us" (136). Another definition: Confirm: "to make firm, or more firm, to add strength to, to settle, establish firmly" (*Oxford English*

Dictionary). Another verse: *Colossians* 2:14: Christ "wiped out the handwriting of the requirements." Bahnsen does not seem to realize that Christ was the last Jew, that his obedience to the Mosaic Law ended its jurisdiction.

Bahnsen continues: "The *principle* they [ceremonial laws] taught is still valid" (136). But this is not Theonomy: Theonomy asserts "the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail." It is the *Westminster Confession* that deals in principles. Bahnsen writes: "For instance, the ceremonial law prescribed the necessity of shed blood for atonement (*Lev. 17:11*), and accordingly when Christ made atonement for our sins once for all, 'it was therefore *necessary*' that He shed His blood for us (*Heb. 9:22-24*)...."

The reference, indeed the whole argument, simply does not support the Theonomic position, but it does support the Confessional position. Christ shed his blood *once for all*. He fulfilled the law's requirements completely; the law no longer requires the shedding of blood, either animals' or Christ's. That is what *Matthew* 5:17 means. (The sacrifices, Hebrews teaches, could not take away sin anyway; they were reminders [*Hebrews* 10:3-4.]) No man, Jew or Gentile, is required to sacrifice animals in 1992; indeed, if he does so, he is despising the unique and unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ. At best, Bahnsen's position on the abiding validity of the law in detail would lead to something like the Roman Catholic view of the priesthood and the Mass, which is a real sacrifice, apparently unbloody but really bloody, required by the law and performed by the priests.

The ceremonial laws, concludes Bahnsen, are "out of gear" (137), but "confirmed forever by Christ" (137). I find such contradictory statements to be meaningless.

Case Laws

Turning his attention to the case laws of the Old Testament, Bahnsen abandons Theonomy again and writes: "The Puritans termed these case-law applications of the Decalogue 'judicial laws,' and they correctly [!] held that we are not bound today

to keep these judicial laws as they are worded..., but only required to heed their underlying principles (or 'general equity,' as they called it)" (137-138). Then Bahnsen abandons logic: "therefore, we conclude that Jesus has forever confirmed the moral laws [as well as the ceremonial laws] of God, their summary expressions as well as their case law applications. By recognizing the various categories of God's Old Testament law we can readily understand the continuing validity of every stroke of God's commandments for today" (138). First it is only "general equity" that is binding, then it is "every stroke." It cannot be both, no matter what Dr. Bahnsen learned in his anti-rational Theology classes in seminary.

Conclusion

I could go on with this list of contradictions in Bahnsen's book, but I think the reader has probably gotten the point by now: Bahnsen advocates two irreconcilable views, one represented by chapter 19 of the *Westminster Confession*, and the other by the Theonomists. The two views are not only different, they are contradictory. The Recon view is that every stroke of the law is valid (remember *valid* means legally *binding*) today; the Confessional view is that some of the laws have been "abrogated" and others have "expired." Bahnsen's Theonomic view seems to be a novelty that has no support in Scripture. It is, in fact, anti-Christian.

Let me conclude with some comments about the word "Theonomy." I like the word. I don't know who first used it; the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites its first appearance in 1890 in a book translated from the German by J. F. Smith. But the perversion of God's law that the Theonomists are advocating will provoke further antagonism to the Biblical view of God's law.

Bahnsen explains in the opening pages of his book that there are basically three positions on the Old Testament law: no change, some change, everything has changed. Throughout his book he alternates between the first position (Theonomy) and the second position (*Westminster Confession of Faith*). The third position is generally labeled dispensational. But if the first position is not

Scriptural, and it is not, it does not deserve the name
Theonomy. The rule of God's law, properly
understood, is the position of the *Westminster
Confession*. Both the Recons and the dispies are
wrong.