



Chapter from Thesis

THE ROLE OF BIBLICAL LAW IN CONTEMPORARY GOVERNMENT: THEONOMY IN EVANGELICAL DIALOGUE

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Introduction

The Bible contains, among other things, law. This law, according to the Bible, was given by God. New Zealand also has law. In fact, without doing a survey it would be safe to assume that at least nearly every country in the world has law. One way or another, these nations have determined that certain behaviours ought to be commanded, while others ought to be forbidden. The question being examined in this work is, Should biblical law play a part in the formation of the laws of all nations everywhere? If so, what kind of role?

Christians have answered these questions in a variety of ways over the years. Some have said that God's Laws given to Israel reveal a standard of justice and fairness that is as changeless and timeless as God Himself, and ought to be upheld by all nations. Some say that the law still "applies" in some sense, but only to Christians, and that the penal code (i.e. laws regarding punishment) has disappeared. Others have said that the Laws given to Israel were *only* for Israel, and that other nations have never been required by God to uphold these laws, and moreover the authority that these laws once had has now expired with the first advent of Christ. Some have gone even further, suggesting that applying God's law in our day and age would be positively catastrophic, resulting in a veritable *holocaust*, or that attempts to do this in the past are to blame for the Inquisition.

To a considerable extent, the laws that we are governed by tell us how to live. Obviously we do not want to be told to do what is wrong, or to be forbidden from doing what is right. If we are persuaded, as most professing Christians are, that what the Bible conveys God's opinion on ethical matters, then it should matter a great deal to us whether or not the what Bible says has implications for the political arena, since this arena so greatly impacts our lives. We want to make sure that we are pursuing social justice and fairness that reflects God's standards of justice and fairness, rather than erroneously tolerating injustice and enforced wrongdoing. In outlining the issue this way, the scope of appeal has already been limited. We are dealing with political ethics from an explicitly Christian perspective. More than that, asking what the Bible has to say about the authority and scope of biblical law only seems to be useful if we assume that what the Bible teaches is something that ought to affect our opinions and behaviours. This means that Bible would need to be seen as having considerable *authority*, and so the findings of such a study will only have immediate relevance to the (broadly construed) "conservative" Christian mind. Nonetheless, while a liberal-minded person might not have the same regard for the

authority of Scripture, they are still quite capable of asking the question, “*What* does Scripture teach?” and there may still be some academic interest in the research presented here. Moreover, the initial question of bringing theological assumptions into the political arena will be of interest beyond the Christian community.

Involved in this question are (at very least) three issues, treated in three sections in this work. Firstly there is the question of the extent to which religious beliefs should be permitted to influence the public sphere. This is necessary because if we decide that religious beliefs have *no* place in the public sphere, we have clearly diminished any role that the Bible should have in the formation of modern law, inasmuch as the Bible is religious literature. This section is perhaps the most “secular” project being undertaken here, as it entails interaction with positions that are antithetical to religion, and is essentially an assessment of reasons for or against the very *presence* of religious convictions in the public decision making and government process. It also does not involve much (if any) discussion of the *content* of the religious beliefs that may or may not contribute to public dialogue, and as such explicit mention of biblical law is not required here.

Having looked at some of the philosophical issues we then need to turn to the exegetical and theological issues of biblical law. There are two primary issues involved. First is the question of the *scope* of the law. This is where we ask the question, “for whom was God’s law intended?” Was it for Israel alone, or are other nations called to account for violating it or called to obey it? The second question here and our third and final major question is the question of the *continuity* of the law in the New Testament era. Did the authority of the law expire with the coming of Christ? Did Jesus “replace” the law with another (perhaps a “higher”) law, or does the authority of the law continue today? Here in regard to this exegetical question is where most of the disagreement has raged in the recent debate. 20th century North American fundamentalism has been largely *dispensationalist*, seeing no continuity of the law beyond the Old Testament setting. On the other side has been the (non theonomic) Reformed position, seeing a limited continuity of the law, many aspects being replaced by “spiritual” counterparts, and many parts being regarded as having ceased with the coming of Christ. A relative newcomer onto the discussion is what is loosely termed the “New Perspective on Paul,” a movement that, among other things, has sought to counteract a very negative view of the law in both Luther and dispensationalism, although it is a movement that has not made much of the *political* implications of the law as God’s will for society. Finally we turn to the movement that has caused the controversy that give rise to this work – the Theonomic position, advocating the contemporary application of all of the moral and civil law of God in modern society. We will examine the arguments for theonomy, followed by the biblical and theological arguments against Theonomy.

Framing the biblical debate this way clearly provides a way of limiting the scope of traditions and scholars with whom we will be interacting. The “schools of hermeneutics” that we will be dealing with are those that have directly interacted with the issue of Theonomy, meaning that we are dealing with traditions which in contemporary theology might not be considered particularly “mainstream.” If we were to creatively postulate the kinds of interaction that *could* be had between Theonomists and other contemporary traditions, our scope might be somewhat broader (and our thesis considerably longer), but we have limited ourselves to *actual* interaction. This means that the arena of hermeneutical (not political) debate is that of relatively conservative evangelicalism (with a few possible exceptions).

The three areas that need to be covered are well summed up by Norman Anderson in a series of questions:

Is God’s revealed will, in matters moral and legal, incumbent on man as man or only on the Christian as one who has accepted God’s sovereignty? Should the precepts in which this will find its expression be enforced, so far as this is possible, on believer and unbeliever alike? How far, indeed, is it ever appropriate to call the criminal law in to aid to enforce moral precepts? And are God’s standards of moral behaviour, and indeed of penal sanctions, absolute and unchangeable, or do they vary – to some degree at least – from age to age and civilization to civilization?¹

Like the proverbial stool, for Theonomy to have anything like a strong case, there must at least be three legs: A good case for appealing to religious convictions in the public arena, a good case for a broad scope of the authority of God's law, and a good case for strong continuity of the law in the New Testament era. The task of this work is to ask whether such a case exists.

Footnotes

¹ Norman Anderson, "Public Law and Legislation," in B. N. Kate and G. J. Wenham (eds), *Law Morality and the Bible* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1978), 234.

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