

The Reformed Theocrats: A Biblical Theological Response

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In this essay I intend to sketch a biblical theological argument against a theocratic view of “church and state” – a view held by many Reformed fundamentalists and some of the smaller Reformed denominations. “Theocracy” must be defined. Typically it is understood to be a form of political government under the direct control of priests or clergy who claim to be authoritative representatives of God or some divine being (or beings). On this definition the ancient kingdom of Israel would not have been a theocracy, since the priestly office and the kingly office were clearly distinguished.

A better definition would be a form of political government in which (a) the civil authority confesses, in its official and civil capacity, commitment to a religious system of belief, (b) such confession being understood as necessary to the civil power’s rightful authority, and (c) thus entrusting to the civil power the duty of enforcing that religious system of belief in the public realm. (What forms such enforcement takes may vary from extreme intolerance of alternative expressions of religious belief and practice, to a high degree of religious tolerance as long as citizens do not engage in treasonous attempts to undermine the state’s official religious character.)

Theocratic principles of civil government may take a wide variety forms, and in fact have historically been the dominant mode of civil government throughout human history. There is nothing that prevents theocratic principles from being applied in any number of political and economic systems – including dictatorships, absolute or constitutional monarchies, republican states, capitalist or socialist democracies, and so

on. Theocracy in itself does not specify the form in which civil authority is exercised, or the extent to which it is based on the popular beliefs of the majority. For example, it is theoretically possible – given the presence of a large enough of a majority of Americans, and the ratification of three fourths of the states – for the Constitution to be amended so as to require all federal employees to be practicing Muslims, to include the confession, “There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet,” in the oath of office for President and all other elected officials, and to prohibit public funds from being used to promote the teaching of any other religious viewpoint. The United States would then become a theocracy, but one that was instituted by democratic means (and which could, presumably, by de-instituted by the same means).¹

In addition to “theocracy,” another key term begs for definition – and that is “fundamentalism.” The Reformed theocrats who are the critical focus of this essay are a tiny group possessing little real political power. Thus, their theocratic aspirations are unlikely to be implemented in the near or distant future in a culturally diverse and religiously pluralistic nation like the United States. What, then, fuels their energy? The answer to this question lies in the sociological phenomenon of fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism exists within a wide spectrum religious communities and is not to be equated with the specifically Protestant variety that rose in the United States during

¹ This hypothetical is an illustration of the oft-noted “tyranny of the majority.” When Christian theocrats vociferously object that they are pursuing their political agenda by democratic means, their protests do little to reassure us. Meredith Kline remarks, “Queried about their goal of theocratic top-down domination of humanity, they tend to divert attention to the bottom-up process proposed for attaining it: likely victims of the contemplated purge are reassured that their Christian friends are going to vote for it all-nice-and-democratic-like.” “Review of *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse? An Analysis of Christian Reconstructionism*, by H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice,” *Journal of Church and State* 31 (1989) 577-78.

the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s. However, that terminological polarity between fundamentalism and modernism is a useful conceptual scheme as long as it is not restricted to the cultural and theological split within American Protestantism. As a broader religious phenomenon fundamentalism is essentially a reaction against modernity and the perceived secular drift of western society. The media would like us to believe that fundamentalists are uneducated, poor, and from the backwaters of the earth untouched by modernity. But all varieties of fundamentalism (as a broader psychological and sociological phenomenon) flourish in constant reaction to modernity, and are in some ways created by it. Thus fundamentalism is most attractive to those with religiously conservative values who feel surrounded and besieged on all sides by a hostile, secular dominant culture. Without this sense of alienation from a culturally dominant secularism, fundamentalism would collapse into privatized religious piety.

This observation is useful, because it shows the difference between fundamentalism and religious conservatism. The former is engaged in a war with a secular society, a war whose victory is defined in nothing less than the dislodgment of the secular powers-that-be and their replacement by a new social order that is in essential conformity with the dictates of their religious worldview. Non-fundamentalist religious conservatives, by contrast, may hold to the same religious values in their personal lives, families, and religious communities, but without the driving pursuit of cultural clout and political power. Those whose worldview demands that their religious values be given cultural and societal expression, but who lack the power to achieve that goal and who feel that their values are being continually eroded and assaulted by the dominant culture – fit the classic fundamentalist profile to a T.

Due to this intermeshing of cultural, political, and religious factors, theocratic political ideals are often found among fundamentalists. Like the Islamic fundamentalists who exists as a subgroup within mainstream Islam, so there exists within American evangelicalism a significant segment of militant evangelicals (i.e., fundamentalists) who believe that the Christian religion provides more than a way of salvation for the individual, and that its values demand concrete expression not only in the community of fellow believers in the church, but in society as a whole. Among the fundamentalists there is a smaller sub-group who hold to the Reformed theology of John Calvin, John Knox, and the Puritan Westminster Confession of Faith. These Reformed theocratic fundamentalists are concerned to uphold the notion that Christianity is not a privatized religious experience but a comprehensive world and life view with implications for civil government and public policy.

The *God and Politics* Debate

Who are the Reformed theocrats? There are a number of ways to answer this question, but we can get our bearings by considering a volume titled *God and Politics: Four Views on the Reformation of Civil Government*, edited by Gary Scott Smith. This book arose out of a conference held on June 2 and 3, 1987, titled “Consultation on the Biblical Role of Civil Government,” held at Geneva College in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. Over 100 conservative Reformed Christians were in attendance at the conference. The conference planners identified four major positions within the Reformed community with regard to the biblical teaching on civil government, and leading representatives of each view were invited to defend their position. The four views

identified were: theonomy, principled pluralism, Christian America, and national confessionalism. The papers, as well as responses from other Reformed spokesmen, were published in book form in 1989 by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company.²

The four views, in brief, may be summarized as follows:

Theonomy teaches that all the standing laws prescribed for Israel in the Mosaic Law are still binding today as a blueprint for socio-political ethics, unless explicitly rescinded by later revelation.

Principled pluralism is the view that the civil government should allow religious diversity within society and that Christians should adopt and promote public policy based on the biblical notion of social justice and concern for the poor. Of the four views represented at the conference, this was the only non-theocratic Reformed option on church and state given a platform.

Christian America holds that America used to be a Christian nation, founded on the basic morality of the Bible as summarized in the ten commandments, and that we ought to be politically active in seeking to restore America to that foundation.

National confessionalism asserts that not only individuals but entire nations have a duty to profess the Christian faith. When the Constitutional Congress created this nation, it failed to explicitly acknowledge the Kingship of Jesus Christ. Therefore, in contradistinction from the Christian America view, national confessionalism denies that America ever was a Christian nation. However, it agrees that it ought to be. The National

² *God and Politics: Four Views on the Reformation of Civil Government*, ed. Gary Scott Smith (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1989). Hereafter cited as *GAP*.

Reform Association³ has proposed the following amendment to the Preamble of the Constitution in order to make America a Christian nation:

We the people of the United States, humbly acknowledging Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Governor among the nations, and His revealed will as of supreme authority, in order to constitute a Christian government ... do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.⁴

Such a corporate confession of Christ as “the Governor” the nations and of the Bible as the “supreme authority” would certainly qualify as theocratic. One national confessionalist in *God and Politics* candidly identifies his position: “I have always preferred to refer to myself as a ‘Christian theocrat’ rather than a theonomist.”⁵

As you might imagine from this brief sketch, the spokesmen for three of the views found that they had much in common. Although differing among themselves on the application of the Mosaic judicial laws to modern society, on eschatological expectations, and on the question of whether America ever was a Christian nation to begin with, the

³ The National Reform Association, based in Pittsburgh, PA, was founded in 1864 by Reformed theocrats, including many from the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, the American descendants of the Scottish covenanters. Recently the NRA has been ramping up its political activism by means of “Operation Potomac,” which involves regular visits with key Republicans in the Bush administration as well as the House of Representatives. For example, a recent visit to Washington D.C. on April 25, 2001 is described as follows: “Concentration for this operation centered on the Department of Justice and the White House. In the morning our team met with Attorney General John Ashcroft’s policy advisors wherein we discussed various issues, distributed copies of ‘Explicitly Christian Politics’ and ‘Messiah the Prince’ along with copies of ‘The Christian Statesman’ and a framed proclamation which outlines the NRA’s positions for Christian civil government.” NRA president Jeffrey Ziegler explains that these efforts “are but part of a total revitalization of the National Reform Association. When combined with state chapters, additional publications, media production, and the eventual inauguration of a legal lobbying arm, the NRA will once again become the driving force for an explicitly Christian vision of government” (from the NRA website, www.natreformassn.org).

⁴ *GAP*, p. 189. Such an amendment was actually debated (and rejected) by the House of Representatives in 1874 and again in 1896.

⁵ *GAP*, p. 69.

advocates of theonomy, Christian America, and national confessionalism were united in their condemnation of principled pluralism. Without downplaying their differences, it is legitimate to call these three views *theocratic* since they all agree that the civil government ought not to be religiously neutral.

Further evidence of the underlying theocratic unity of these three views may be found in their respective responses to Bahnsen’s theonomic essay. For example, H. B. Harrington wrote that he agreed with Bahnsen in many respects and expressed the “fervent desire that theonomists and national confessionalists will be able to consolidate their agreements and work out their disagreements at least to the degree that we will be able to cooperate fully with each other.”⁶ It turns out that these words were somewhat prophetic, for since the 1987 forum the two groups (theonomists and national confessionalists) have developed an alliance. For example, the editor of *The Christian Statesman* (the journal of the National Reform Association) during much of the 1990s was Andrew Sandlin, who is also an editor of *The Chalcedon Report*, a theonomic journal founded by R. J. Rushdoony. And the current president of the National Reform Association since 1999 is Jeffrey Ziegler, a fervent theonomist who vigorously promotes theocratic political activism on a radio program that claims to be “one of the most provocative and evocative of its type.”⁷

The advocates of Christian America are also fundamentally “on board” with this theocratic agenda. Kevin L. Clauson states in his response to Bahnsen that the question of

⁶ *GAP*, p. 68.

⁷ According to the NRA website, Christian Statesman Radio is broadcast throughout Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and parts of Canada (e.g., on WHK - 1220 AM - in Cleveland from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m. on a daily basis). Syndication of the program is being discussed.

whether or not America ever was a Christian nation is not nearly as important as whether or not it should be one in the future. His position on the latter question is clear:

America and other nations can be Christian if they adopt biblical laws in state, church, family, and all other entities and associations. We cannot trust man (individually or collectively); we must trust God and His immutable law. If civil magistrates will not apply the Old Testament law, then what will they apply? The law of man. If we will not be ruled by God, we will be ruled by tyrants.⁸

These words could very well have been written by Bahnsen himself without altering a single syllable.

In view of the substantial unity among “the theocratic triumvirate” (whose differences amount merely to the exegetical details of how to translate their vision into reality), it is somewhat surprising that only one non-theocratic alternative was represented in the book – that of principled pluralism. And in this case the contribution by Gordon Spykman was not principally opposed to theocracy, lacked cogent exegetical and theological argumentation, and tended to focus on his own unique interests in the area of social welfare for the poor.

In this essay I set forth the case for a fifth view which was not represented at the conference, and which merited only one footnote.⁹ This is what I call the biblical theological view. It has affinities with principled pluralism – as evidenced, for example, by the fact that it has also regularly provokes the wrath of Reformed theocrats. But this view is distinct enough from it to warrant separate treatment. Surely, if the rather fine

⁸ *GAP*, p. 67.

⁹ Bahnsen dismisses Meredith Kline’s biblical theological understanding of civil government as a version of “the sacred-secular dichotomy” which Bahnsen laments as having recently “infected” the Reformed community. *GAP*, p. 22; also cf. footnote 3 on that page.

distinctions among the other three views warranted separate treatment, then another biblical case for pluralism does too.

An uncrossable gulf lies between those views which advocate a self-consciously religious role for civil government and those views which advocate a religiously neutral role for the civil government. It is my goal in this essay to make that gulf clear and to attempt to persuade the reader of the biblical theological approach to the question of “church and state” is a more biblical option.

A Sample Theocratic Argument: Theonomy

In *God and Politics* the theonomic view is ably defended by Greg L. Bahnsen. For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen Bahnsen as my sample Reformed theocrat, since (in addition to R. J. Rushdoony and Gary North) Bahnsen is one of the well-known authors from the theocratic camp. The fundamental thesis of theonomy – in spite of minor differences of interpretation among the leaders of the movement – contains two prongs: (1) the Mosaic Law provides an unchanging, divinely-revealed standard for socio-political ethics, and (2) the civil government has a moral duty to conform its laws and actions that unchanging standard. Concerning the first prong, I quote Bahnsen:

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 ... The general continuity that we presume with respect to the moral standards of the Old Testament applies just as legitimately to matters of socio-political ethics as it does to personal, family, or ecclesiastical ethics.¹⁰

As to the second prong, Bahnsen states:

¹⁰ *GAP*, p. 24.

Civil magistrates in all ages and places are obligated to conduct their offices as ministers of God, avenging divine wrath against criminals and giving an account on the Final Day of their service before the King of kings, their Creator and Judge.¹¹

Where do civil magistrates find the political dictates of God? Surely not in varying subjective opinions, personal urges, the human wisdom of some elite group, the majority vote, or even a natural revelation that is suppressed and distorted in unrighteousness.¹²

In the exercise of their offices [civil] rulers are morally responsible to obey the revealed standards of social justice in the Old Testament law.¹³

Sometimes theonomists give the impression that these matters are simple and clear-cut; the only impediment is disobedience. But theonomists do not claim to have answers to all policy questions, and they recognize that much more work needs to be done in the area of interpreting the Mosaic Law and applying it to modern society. Bahnsen recognizes the hermeneutical challenge of applying laws given to an ancient agrarian society (Israel) to the modern nation-state with its technological advances. Nevertheless, the challenge is not inherently insurmountable and, in principle, all our modern social and political problems can be solved by the straightforward methods of grammatical-historical exegesis and culturally sensitive biblical application.

It is illuminating from a comparative religious standpoint to note the parallels between theonomy and the religio-political ideals of the Islamist movement. Islamism, or Islamic fundamentalism, seeks the rule of the Shariah (Islamic law as defined by the various legal schools of Koranic interpretation) in all Islamic nations, and in principle the

¹¹ *GAP*, p. 24.

¹² *GAP*, p. 31.

¹³ Greg L. Bahnsen, *No Other Standard: Theonomy and Its Critics* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991). Hereafter cited as *NOS*.

whole world. This movement is theocratic because it envisions a non-pluralistic society, the fundamental fabric of which is religious. According to Islamic fundamentalists, Islam demands concrete social and civil “incarnation.” They claim that their sacred texts provide a blueprint for this ideal society that is both sufficient and comprehensive. It is thought to be sufficient, because the authority of the Koran and the Hadith does not need to be supplemented by human ideas, tradition, reason, science, or input from any other source of knowledge or experience. Comprehensive, because the Koran is believed to provide the principles necessary for the divinely authorized shaping of every area of life – not only the personal religious and ethical life of the individual believer, family, or religious community (mosque), but that of society as a whole, in all of its complex operations and functions.¹⁴ Approximately the same understanding of the role of the Bible as “a comprehensive world and life view” applies to theonomic fundamentalists, *mutatis mutandis*.

To illustrate how the theonomic viewpoint would be fleshed out in practice, if a nation were to adopt the theonomic platform, it is valuable to point out Bahnsen’s response to the question of the application of the death penalty mandated in the Mosaic Law to those who are found guilty of engaging in homosexual acts.

Paul says in Romans 1 that homosexuals know that what they are doing is worthy of death. He adds in 1 Timothy 1 that the law is lawfully used when homosexuals are punished to restrain their activity ... Some people object, however, by saying that if you execute a homosexual then you have no chance to evangelize him. The same is true if you execute a murderer. But that is not for us to determine. If a person is going to be converted, he will be converted in God’s due time. It is not

¹⁴ For more on the origins and historical development of Islamic fundamentalism as a reaction to Islamic modernism see “Islam Passes through the Shadows,” chapter 20 in Ninian Smart, *The World’s Religions*, 2nd revised ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

for us to adjust the requirements of His law because we want to provide occasions for a person to repent.¹⁵

Another important implication of theonomy is that civil rulers must enforce the Christian religion and suppress alternative religious expressions deemed subversive of the state-protected Christian church. Bahnsen writes, appealing to the Reformed tradition:

The pluralism which was promoted and defended by our Reformed forefathers was not a civil tolerance which countenanced and protected all religions equally, but rather a civil tolerance for all branches and denominations within the circle of Christianity.¹⁶

He favorably quotes Puritan theologian John Owen (1616-1683) who stated that ...

The supreme magistrate, in a nation or commonwealth of men professing the religion of Jesus Christ, may and ought to exert his power, legislative and executive ... to forbid, coerce, or restrain such principles and practices as are contrary to [the faith and worship of God] and destructive of them.¹⁷

To be fair, we must note that Bahnsen is careful to add the following qualifications. First, the civil power should not be exercised against unbelievers merely for their lack of faith in Christ, apart from criminal acts that might flow from that unbelief.¹⁸ Bahnsen appeals to the uncircumcised stranger who dwelled within the borders of Israel, and who was allowed to exist unmolested even if he refused to participate in the religion of Israel. Thus unbelievers would not be persecuted or punished merely for their unbelief, or for refusing to profess faith, or for not attending church. Only *public* religious crimes, such as public acts of idolatry, false prophecy, public blasphemy, offering one's

¹⁵ *GAP*, p. 266.

¹⁶ *NOS*, p. 185.

¹⁷ *NOS*, p. 185. Bahnsen quotes Owen, “Two Questions Concerning the Power of the Supreme Magistrate About Religion and the Worship of God” (1659), in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (London & Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1852), vol. XIII, p. 509.

¹⁸ *NOS*, p. 187.

services as a medium – would be punishable by the civil magistrate.¹⁹ Religious crimes punishable by the civil power are “always public misdeeds as defined by God’s revelation.”²⁰

Second, the civil power should not be exercised with respect to the affairs of the church, thus maintaining the distinction between church and state.²¹ The civil magistrate is not competent to exercise the power of the keys of the kingdom, to exercise church discipline, to judge heretics, or to settle doctrinal disputes between different schools of Christian thought. It is a common misunderstanding to say that theonomy blurs the distinction between church and state. Such institutional distinctions are not violated, Bahnsen argues, when the magistrate exercises his authority to punish those who have committed religious crimes.

The third qualification is that the morally proper way for Christians to seek to have these principles implemented in society today is not by the use of force or revolution, but by means of peaceful persuasion and education, gradual legal reform, and democratic mechanisms, all in dependence on the regenerating work of the Spirit.²² Thus Bahnsen answers another common misconception of the theonomic thesis.

When the above qualifications and distinctions are observed, we must recognize that in the theonomist’s ideal world, there would be a certain degree of religious liberty. There would be tolerance for non-Christians so long as they did not actively subvert the civil order by means of public acts of idolatry, and there would be toleration for all

¹⁹ *NOS*, pp. 136, 174, 186.

²⁰ *NOS*, p. 175.

²¹ *NOS*, p. 188.

²² *NOS*, p. 13; cp. *GAP*, p. 24-25.

denominations of Christians. None of this would compromise the church-state distinction, or require Christians to use the sword to achieve their political goals.

In spite of these qualifications, theologians insist that it is the magistrate’s responsibility, indeed “his chief and supreme care and duty,” to see to it that the true worship of God is protected and promoted in society, to prevent “the appointment of any thing inconsistent with it.”²³ So yes, theologians believe in religious toleration of persons who keep their beliefs and practices to themselves and “in no way interfere with”²⁴ the true Christian religion! But non-Christians would *not* be legally permitted to attempt to convert others to their religious beliefs, to publish any writings that attack Christianity, or in any way to exercise freedom of (religious) expression in the public arena.

Even professing Christians would not be permitted to publicly voice criticisms of the theocratic principles and foundation of the state. Non-theonomic Reformed Christians (like the author of this essay) who publicly promote their critique of theonomy would be a particular threat to a theonomic state, since their critique could well be deemed a “political defection from, or subversion of, the law order of ... society by renouncing its highest authority.”²⁵ Bahnsen provides the theological justification for the persecution on non-theonomic Christians when he identifies their pluralistic viewpoint as idolatry:

By contending that civil policy should not be based upon or favor any one distinctive religion or philosophy of life ... pluralism ultimately takes its political stand with secularism in refusing to “kiss the Son” and “serve Jehovah with fear.” The pluralist approach transgresses the first commandment by countenancing and deferring to different ultimate authorities (gods) in the area of public policy ... a kind of “political polytheism.” The Bible warns us how our ascended and supreme

²³ *NOS*, pp. 185f, again quoting John Owen, “Two Questions,” pp. 510-11.

²⁴ *NOS*, p. 185.

²⁵ *NOS*, p. 178.

King, Jesus Christ, will react to political refusal to do homage to Him and to obey His law: He will become “angry [with a wrath already kindled] and you will perish in the way” (Ps. 2:12).²⁶

Any theological-political viewpoint which provokes the wrath of the ascended King should logically be proceeded against by the King’s earthly representative, the civil magistrate. If the theonomists were ever to succeed in gaining political ascendancy, the theonomic police would certainly seize this essay as irrefutable evidence of my political refusal to do homage to King Jesus, and I could potentially “perish in the way.”

Reformed Roots of Theonomy

Theocratic ideals of the civil government go all the way back to the decree of Theodosius in AD 380 which made Trinitarian Christianity (defined at the council of Nicea in AD 325) the official religion of the Roman Emperor. Such ideas continued throughout the middle ages and were reaffirmed by the magisterial reformation. In the British Isles, theocratic ideas held particular sway among the Reformed. The Westminster Confession (1646), authored by an assembly of about 100 Puritan theologians, affirms that it is the duty of the civil magistrate to enforce the Christian religion in the public sphere:

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 he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses of worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed* (WCF XXIII:3).

²⁶ *GAP*, p. 30. Words in brackets are Bahnsen’s.

However, these views did not last long. In 1788 the American Presbyterian church as a corporate body self-consciously rejected its theocratic/establishmentarian heritage by revising the Confession to teach religious liberty and civil pluralism. The fact that the Confession itself was revised, rather than merely continuing the tradition of Presbyterian allowance of non-theocratic views of the civil magistrate (as had been done for about sixty years prior to the revision), suggests that this new, American, non-theocratic tradition was a unanimous, corporate conviction.

A couple of theocratic phrases were deleted, but the most extensive change was the drafting an (almost) entirely new third paragraph of chapter XXIII:

Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith. Yet, as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretence of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever: and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.

These changes did not alter the fundamental Reformed or Calvinistic theology of the Westminster Confession, but they did constitute an about-face on the issue of theocracy.²⁷ In the providence of God, the eighteenth century American Presbyterian

²⁷ Bahnsen attempts to downplay the significance of the American revisions, claiming that it was merely an attempt to “clarify” the original Confession’s stance on church-state relations, not an “intentional repudiation,” although he wishes they had left it unchanged. *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and

church declared in no uncertain terms that it now found the theocratic views of its Reformed forefathers to be unbiblical and erroneous, and determined corporately to confess a more biblical approach. This was the general consensus of the American Presbyterian position on church-state relations. It emerged after the Revolutionary era and continued relatively unchallenged until the rise of theonomy in the late 1960s.²⁸

After the American Presbyterian revisions to the Confession, the revival of the theocratic tradition in the twentieth century may seem unexpected, but it is simply the Reformed version of the more general phenomenon of fundamentalism. This Reformed fundamentalist-theocratic reaction was triggered by a sense of the erosion of the Judeo-Christian values that had hitherto shaped public morality and policy, by the rapid onslaught of a secularization process that took place in modern society throughout the twentieth century, and by the resultant loss of the cultural clout and political influence previously possessed by the evangelical community in the nineteenth century.²⁹

The American Presbyterians of the post-Revolutionary era – partly influenced by the changing attitudes toward church and state relations, and partly due to a sound biblical instinct concerning the spirituality of the church – are to be applauded for amending the Confession to rid it of outdated theocratic elements. Nevertheless, the biblical case for their amending the Confession was not as fully articulated as it could have been. A full-

Reformed, 1984), pp. 541-44. Gary North is more critical of the 1788 revisions and candidly expresses his opinion that the American Presbyterians “guttled” the original Confession and thus “moved forthrightly onto a long road that leads into culturally muddled theology.” *Theonomy: An Informed Response*, ed. Gary North (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), p. 344.

²⁸ Prior to theonomy, few Presbyterians in the United States espoused theocracy, except for the tiny Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (Covenanters).

orbed theological and exegetical rationale for the rejection of the idea of Christian theocracy did not emerge until the closing quarter of the twentieth century by Reformed biblical theologians in response to the revival by Reformed theocrats of the anachronistic ideal of Christendom.

A Biblical Theological Response

The term “biblical theology” has various meanings. Its most common usage is to describe the exegetical methodology that seeks to determine the theology espoused by the biblical authors, as distinct from dogmatic theology which seeks to guide the church’s contemporary formulation. In this essay “biblical theology” refers to a specific tradition within that general methodology. The father of Reformed biblical theology is Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949), professor of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. The tradition of Vos has been carried on at Westminster Theological Seminary by such theologians as John Murray, Edmund P. Clowney, and Richard Gaffin.

The most important biblical theological developments since Vos – particularly in relation to the development of a sound biblical critique of theonomy – have been produced by Meredith G. Kline. In an important and often-cited article that appeared in *The Westminster Theological Journal* in 1978, Kline sets forth a biblical theological argument against theonomy (which he refers to as “the Chalcedon theory”).³⁰ The

²⁹ George M. Marsden narrates the rise of this 19th century pan-evangelical cultural influence (which he calls “the benevolent empire”) in *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (Yale, 1970).

³⁰ Kline, “Comments on an Old-New Error,” *WTJ* 41 (1978) 172-89. Founded by R. J. Rushdoony in 1965, the Chalcedon Foundation is a Christian Reconstructionist/theonomic educational institute which publishes *The Chalcedon Report* (www.chalcedon.edu).

arguments presented there will form the basic structure of the following precis, supplemented along the way by other writings by Professor Kline, as well as by other Reformed biblical theologians in the Vos tradition.

(1) The redemptive historical purpose of the Mosaic Law

The most obvious biblical error that lies at the heart of theonomy is its decovenantalized conception of the Mosaic Law. Theonomy treats the Mosaic Law given to Israel as universally binding on all nations, even though they were not originally party to Israel’s covenant with Yahweh. “Plainly, the duties of a given covenant are only obligatory on those who are parties to the covenant. For Theonomy, however, all peoples in all times are obliged to these duties.”³¹ Because of God’s special act of divine redemption displayed at the exodus, and the subsequent special revelation at the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai covenant, Israel was constituted God’s people with a national constitution (the Mosaic Law). Lacking such direct divine intervention in the form of a nation-forming divine redemption accompanied by special, covenantal revelation, the nations of the earth outside of Israel have no right to place themselves under the specific obligations of the Law given at Sinai.

Kline writes:

While the Bible says Israel was separated from the other nations to be a unique, holy kingdom, Bahnsen says that God’s kingdom Israel was just another civil government... To accept the Chalecon theory, one would have to read the biblical record [of Israel’s divine election, special vocation, and redemptive deliverance]

³¹ T. David Gordon, “Critique of Theonomy: A Taxonomy,” *WTJ* 56 (1994) 23-43.

as though it were not the history of the particular kingdom of Israel but an historicized myth about Everynation.³²

By treating the Mosaic Law as a generic civil code for Everynation, theonomy must suppress the clear teaching of Scripture concerning the exclusively redemptive historical purpose of the Mosaic Law. According to the teaching of Paul, the Law – with its punishments and its earthly blessings and curses – was “a ministry of condemnation” (2 Cor. 3:9), a harsh disciplinarian to prepare us for the coming of Christ. Now that Christ has been born under the Law and become a curse for us, the Mosaic Law has served its purpose in redemptive history.

Galatians 3:1—4:7 What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. 18 For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.

19 Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made ... For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. 22 But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. 23 But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. 24 Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor ...

Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, 2 but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. 3 So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. 4 But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

³² Kline, “Comments,” p. 178.

The Law has clear temporal boundaries, both a historical beginning and a historical terminus. It came 430 years *after* the Abrahamic promises. And it was “added *until* the Seed should come . . . Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the pedagogue (i.e., the Law).” From the outset God gave it with the coming of Christ in view. He gave the Law to provide the proper covenantal context in which Christ would accomplish our redemption.

Kline explains:

In accordance with the terms of his covenant of works with the Father he was to come as the second Adam in order to undergo a representative probation and by his obedient and triumphant accomplishment thereof to establish the legal ground for God’s covenanted bestowal of the eternal kingdom of salvation on his people. It was therefore expedient, if not necessary, that Christ appear within a covenant order which, like the covenant with the first Adam, was governed by the works principle (cf. Gal 4:4). The typical kingdom of the old covenant was precisely that. Within the limitations of the fallen world and with modifications peculiar to the redemptive process, the old theocratic kingdom was a reproduction of the original covenantal order. Israel as the theocratic nation was mankind stationed once again in a paradise-sanctuary, under probation in a covenant of works. In the context of that situation, the Incarnation event was legible.³³

The issue is redemptive-historical legibility. The incarnation and the cross of Christ have meaning only in the context of a covenantal order in which the probationary works principle is clearly in force. Imagine how inscrutable the incarnation and death of Christ would have been apart from the covenantal context provided by the Mosaic Law. It would have been an isolated “brute fact” without rhyme or reason. But the Mosaic Law republished on a grand scale the principle of works imbedded in the Adamic covenant. Israel’s obedience to the Torah was the condition of her retention of the earthly kingdom, which was a type of the everlasting kingdom of heaven. Only within this legal framework

³³ Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2000), p. 352. Hereafter cited as *KP*.

do we understand “the significance of [Christ’s] mission as the accomplishing of a probationary assignment in a works covenant in behalf of the elect of all ages.”

Kline charges theonomy with “a misreading of the Bible on a massive scale,” since it fails to “recognize that the socio-geopolitical sector of the Israelite kingdom of God was a part of the total system of kingdom typology established through the covenantal constitution given to Israel in the law of Moses – just as much so as was the cultic sector.”³⁴

The cultic sector of the Mosaic Law are those laws pertaining to the restoration of sinners through a complex ritual system involving blood sacrifice. Theonomy recognizes that the cultic sector is exclusively typological. To re-enact the cultic legislation today by requiring sacrifices would be to deny that Jesus Christ is the final atonement for sin, whose sacrificial death brought the entire cultic system to its crowning conclusion. It is a redemptive historical fulfillment that does not reinforce the cultic law but terminates it.

Kline’s point is that the same typological principle applies to the political sector of the Mosaic Law – the judicial laws defining sins meriting the execution of justice by the theocratic officers of the nation. Just as the cultic sector is fulfilled by Christ’s work as the final high priest, so the political sector is fulfilled by Christ’s work as the son of David, Israel’s long-awaited anointed King. This fact is not based on a subtle or profound reading of the OT but something “big and plain and simple.” Scripture tells us that the establishment of the Israelite kingdom was a result of the redemptive deliverance of Israel

³⁴ Kline, “Comments,” p. 175.

from Egypt. The Bible portrays the “Israelite king and kingdom as a redemptive, theocratic prototype of Christ and his redemptive kingdom.”³⁵

The Mosaic Law, then, was not given to provide a blueprint for all the civil governments of the world, but to provide the historical, covenantal context for the incarnation of Christ who was “born under the Law” in order to bring it to its perfect fulfillment (Matt. 5:17). As Paul says, Christ is “the *telos* [goal, fulfillment, terminus, completion] of the Law” (Rom. 10:4). If Paul is correct about the exclusively redemptive historical purpose of the Law as teleologically terminating in Christ, and if “the Law is good if one uses it lawfully” (1 Tim. 1:8), then Bahnsen’s claim that “civil magistrates in all ages and places” are obligated to enforce the terms of the Mosaic Law is an unlawful use of the Law.³⁶

(2) A biblical theological definition of theocracy

Kline’s second argument against the attempt to erect Christian theocracies is that this self-assumed project involves an unbiblical notion of God’s theocratic Kingdom. Kline argues that, according to the teaching of Scripture, God’s theocratic Kingdom can never be equated with the kingdoms of man. God’s theocratic kingdom is a unique institution established by God himself, thus relegating all pretended “theocracies” erected by men to be false imitations of God’s holy kingdom.

The peculiar kind of kingdom established in Eden at the beginning (and later redemptively renewed) differs radically from other kinds of world kingdoms that arose after the Fall. Whatever analogies exist between the theocracy and the other

³⁵ Ibid., p. 177.

³⁶ *GAP*, p. 24 (quoted above).

kingdoms, however many falsely proclaimed theocracies there may be, there is only one genuine theocratic kingdom under the special rule of the living God.³⁷

Theocracy is the kingdom of God – not merely in the general sense of God’s providential reign over all of history, nor in the sense of a spiritual reign of God in the hearts of his people. Kline distinguishes between the kingdom of God *as reign* and *as realm* and argues that “though everything is embraced under the *reign* of God, not everything can be identified as part of the kingdom of God viewed as a holy *realm*.”³⁸ Theocracy, then, is not simply God’s reign, but God’s reign coming to expression in a holy realm. Theocracy exists in a visible, concrete form, having clearly identifiable geopolitical boundaries. In other words, theocracy presupposes a special land that God the King claims in a special way as his own by “setting up his royal residence in the midst of the theocratic land.”³⁹

Another distinguishing characteristic that sets a theocratic kingdom apart from God’s general providence is the “institutional coalescence of the cultic and the political” aspects. Kline calls this “the theocratic principle.”⁴⁰ This can be seen most clearly in the person of the theocratic king, who governs both the political and the cultic realms, and in whom both dimensions meet. “His palace is holy; his temple is royal. His temple and palace are one.” Cult and culture⁴¹ may be governed different theocratic officers, who

³⁷ *KP*, p. 49.

³⁸ *KP*, p. 170.

³⁹ *KP*, p. 49.

⁴⁰ *KP*, p. 51.

⁴¹ *Cult* is the priestly activity of worship. In Israel, cult was formally institutionalized in the Levitical ordinances of worship that were observed daily in one centralized tabernacle/temple where God placed his name. *Culture* is the kingly activity of exercising dominion over creation – human civilization in its totality. Israel’s kingly or

serve under the direction of God – i.e., priests who govern the temple and direct its cultic functions, and kings who serve as human representatives of God’s royal authority.

However, these distinguishable human functions, no matter how formally organized, would not become separated into discrete institutions (like the church and state) but would remain institutionally integrated as two functional components of the one holy institution of the theocracy. Theocracy is not a combination of church and state institutions. It is a simple unique institution, a structure *sui generis*. It is the kingdom realm whose great king is the Lord, where all activity is performed in the name of the God-King enthroned, confessed, and worshipped in the cultic epicenter, whence theocratic holiness radiates outward, permeating all, so that the whole realm, land and people, is a sanctuary of the Creator-Lord.⁴²

While it may exist in various modes throughout history (whether in the pre-fall form, or in post-fall redemptive renewals of the kingdom) – God’s theocratic kingdom can only be established by God’s sovereign intervention in history, and after the fall this only occurs through the historical accomplishment of the divine work of redemption. In the time before the coming of Christ, redemption occurred historically at the exodus, leading to the creation of the nation of Israel. This was only a first-level, typical redemption, not the ultimate reality, and the Israelite political kingdom was only a prototype of the coming kingdom of the Messiah. With the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, we now have the second-level, anti-typical redemption – the reality itself, to which the exodus pointed. Just as the exodus led to the historical establishment of the Israelite theocratic kingdom, so the Christ-event has resulted in the inauguration of the eschatological kingdom of Christ. This was the kingdom that Jesus announced, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” He was not announcing the political

cultural work was subordinate to the priestly task and was therefore consecrated as holy unto God, with the eschatological goal of filling the earth as God’s theocratic kingdom.

⁴² *KP*, p. 51.

deliverance of Israel from the Roman occupation, but the eschatological deliverance of the new Israel from the dominion of sin and death.

But what has happened to the geopolitical dimension of the kingdom as “holy realm”? The kingdom heralded and inaugurated by Christ is a theocracy, but one that unfolds in a two-stage pattern. As a semi-eschatological theocracy, the church’s theocratic dimension is bound up with the mystery of the “already” and “not-yet” character of the reign of her exalted theocratic King. Presently, the church is seated with Christ in the heavenly places, reigning with him as a kingdom of priests. The earthly, visible manifestation of Christ’s theocratic reign (and the church’s participation therein) awaits future consummation at his second coming. The earthly, geopolitical dimension of the kingdom awaits the day when the King of kings, the ruler of the kings of the earth, returns in visible glory and power to rule the nations with a rod of iron.

This means that in the interim, while we wait for the coming of Christ in glory and judgment, the church is not to seek an earthly, political expression of Christ’s present theocratic reign. According to the apostle Paul, “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20). As the author of Hebrews says, “We have not here an abiding city, but we seek after that which is to come” (Heb 13:14). All earthly cities – Babylon, Rome, the United States – shall be shaken (Heb 12:27; Ezek 38:20). As Clowney points out, the author of Hebrews is not only reminding us that the cities of this present age are passing, but he wants to drive home “the truth that Christians are not given one.”⁴³ We are called to go with Christ outside the city, bearing his reproach (Heb 13:12-13).

⁴³ Edmund P. Clowney, “The Politics of the Kingdom,” *WTJ* 41 (Spring 1979) 291-310, quote from p. 303.

On this biblical-theological understanding of the theocratic kingdom, we are enabled to address the crucial question concerning the relationship of the church to the kingdom of God. All Reformed theocrats agree that the kingdom of God is broader than the church, that the church is but one institutional form of the kingdom of God, and that other institutions (including the state) may and ought to be additional institutional expressions of God’s sovereign reign in history. A biblical theological approach demands that in the present age, between the first and second comings of Christ, the one and only institutional form of the kingdom of God on earth is the non-coercive, voluntary assembly of believers fashioned into the organic, spiritual body of Christ.

Clowney argues that the church is the only sphere that can be regarded as an institutional expression of the kingdom of God prior to the return of Christ, because only “the church has the spiritual and eschatological form that the kingdom demands.” One must make a clear-cut “distinction between the state as the form of the city of this world and the church as the form of the heavenly city ... Since the church anticipates the form of the world to come, it transcends the social and political forms of this world.”⁴⁴ The much-maligned equation “kingdom = church” turns out actually to be valid in this particular epoch of redemptive history.

The world cannot be sacralized ... to form the community of love Christ came to establish. The world lacks the new life of the Spirit who sheds abroad the love of Christ in human hearts. It cannot be governed by the spiritual structure of Christ’s kingdom. It is the church that possesses the Spirit, and indeed is possessed by the Spirit to manifest on earth now the realities of heaven and the age to come.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 306f.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 309.

In the final analysis, all attempted Christian theocracies, past and future, are doomed to fail because the state is simply not capable of being Christianized. It is too frail a vehicle for the heavenly powers of the age to come that have been set in motion through the cross and resurrection of the Son of God.

The second argument against the Reformed theocrats is that their vision of a Christian theocratic state would not qualify as a true theocracy in the first place, since the theocratic kingdom of God always comes by God’s sovereign work of redemption in history, and always involves a holy realm set apart by the dwelling of God in the midst of the land. Furthermore, the notion that Christ’s kingdom must achieve societal/political expression prior to the second coming of Christ involves a massive failure to do justice to the semi-eschatological, two-phase deployment of Christ’s theocratic kingdom.

(3) A biblical theological definition of the state

Totally distinct from the theocratic kingdom is another biblical theological concept, also revealed in Scripture, namely, the common grace state ordained by God for man’s civil government.

Kline appeals to the account of “the mark of Cain” recorded in Genesis 4 as the revealed record of God’s provision of the common grace city-state.⁴⁶ After murdering his brother Abel, we are told that the LORD confronted Cain and issued the following edict, in effect a judicial pronouncement of guilt with the accompanying penalty:

⁴⁶ Kline, “Oracular Origin of the State,” pp. 132-41 in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies: Essays in Honor of William Sanford LaSor*, ed. Gary A. Tuttle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

“What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to Me from the ground. Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth” (Gen. 4:10-12).

In reply, Cain expresses his fear that banishment from the protection of society is too great a punishment, for left unprotected he will be left exposed to unrestrained and capricious vigilante justice:

Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is too great to bear! Behold, You have driven me this day from the face of the ground; and from Your face I will be hidden, and I will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me” (vv. 13-14).

The divine response to Cain’s complaint is full of significance for the biblical theology of civil government.

So the LORD said to him, “Therefore whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on him sevenfold.” And the LORD appointed a sign for Cain, so that no one finding him would slay him. Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden (vv. 15-16).

God corrects Cain’s false assumption that he was being driven into a situation of lawless vengeance. Kline argues that the statement in verse 15 that God “set a mark on Cain” is best translated, God “appointed a sign for Cain.” Kline sees this not as a physical mark but as a “divine oath of judicial oversight.” This opens up the possibility that God’s promised protection was not intended for Cain alone, and was thus tantamount to the establishment of a system of civil justice. Why should Cain have been singled out for civil protection from lawless vigilantism? The protection given to Cain would certainly have been needed by his family as well. Accordingly, the afforded to Cain extends not only to him individually but as a public person, the head of the ungodly line.

In fact, there is evidence in the context that all men are embraced in the oracle of Genesis 4:15. In the narrative immediately following, Cain is exiled from the presence of God but he is not “a restless wanderer on the earth” (verse 12). He builds a city, the city of man (verses 16-17). Thus, the oracular oath of divine vengeance establishes a legitimate common grace order in which Cain can freely live, propagate, and build a culture in spite of his criminal past. Though he justly deserves the punishment of exile into the lawless hands of vengeance-seeking men, God graciously provides the Cainite civilization a legitimacy sanctioned by his own authority and judicial protection. Lamech’s boast to his wives picks up on the tradition about the divine avenging of Cain: “I have killed a man for wounding me, and a boy for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold” (verses 23-24). This implies a dynastic succession of the city of man, begun by Cain and continued through the generations. Genesis 4:15, therefore “contemplates the establishment of an institutional structure for a legitimate judicial office in man’s fallen world.”

After the flood, the civil authority original established among the Cainite civilization was reinstated along with the formal enactment of the covenant of common grace:

Genesis 9:5-6 Surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it. And from every man, from every man’s brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God he made man.

Kline offers an insightful exegetical observation. The clause, “for in the image of God he made man” does not explain why murderers must not go unpunished, but why man is being entrusted with the God-like function of exercising judicial authority over his fellow

man. This fits in with the judicial aspect of the image of God as recorded in Genesis 1:26, where the man is said to be like God because he is being entrusted with lordship and dominion over creation.

Note as well, that this civil government, initially established in Genesis 4 and reestablished after the flood in Genesis 9 is not theocratic. This is evident from the context of Genesis 9, which recounts the establishment of the covenant of common grace that God makes with “every creature” on the earth. God does not entrust the judicial task of administering justice to the covenant people of God, but to mankind in general, since man is made in God’s image, irrespective of his religious confession or lack thereof. Civil government is given for the benefit of all mankind, inclusive of both the elect and the reprobate. Further supporting the non-theocratic nature of the civil institution in Genesis 9:5-6 is the fact that God ascribes no cultic functions to this institution.

In sum, civil government is not holy, nor should it be identified with God’s holy kingdom of salvation. Civil government offers only temporal “salvation” in the sense of certain physical and legal protections, but by its very nature it cannot grant eternal salvation. In his common grace benevolence, God gave the good gift of civil government so that man’s social life might be regulated by a civil order, and not be “abandoned to chaotic lawlessness.”⁴⁷

Having established the distinction between God’s holy theocratic kingdom and the common grace institution of civil government, Kline then draws the logical conclusion that there is a “cultic boundary” separating the two spheres that may not be violated.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *KP*, pp. 163f.

⁴⁸ *KP*, p. 179.

The cultic boundary may be defined as follows. Any and all cultic activity – e.g., religious instruction, public confessions of faith in God or any alleged pagan deity, cultic rituals such as sacrifice, the building of temples for the gods – has no place in the common grace state. The state was ordained and established by God, and he designed that institution – not in order to by a means of the establishment of his theocratic kingdom (a task that he reserves for himself and which he alone executes by sovereign interventions in history) – but in order to provide for a pragmatic cooperation between believers and unbelievers for the achievement of certain temporal ends such as physical safety, rule of law, criminal justice, and self-defense. In order to fulfill these common purposes, the state must be religiously neutral, that is, confessing allegiance neither to the God of the covenant people nor to the gods of the unbelievers.

Every form of state participation in religious confession, whether through constitutional affirmation, official pronouncement, public ceremony, or the like, is a transgression of the boundaries set in the divine ordering of the distribution of cultural and cultic functions among the institutions of the postlapsarian world. Such cultic activity on the part of the state, if it is not in confession of the living God, is, of course, idolatrous. But even if it is in acknowledgment of the God of the Christian faith, it is guilty of a monstrous confusion of the holy kingdom of God with the common, profane city of man.⁴⁹

Respect for the cultic boundary would entail major changes in the policy goals of many on the religious right, e.g., abandoning legislative attempts to restore school prayer. It would demand that the church adopt a civil libertarian position calling for the removal of civil confessions of faith in the public arena, e.g., “in God we trust,” “God bless America,” “one nation under God,” and the public posting of the ten commandments. It would also mean that in policy debates on subjects like abortion and same-sex unions,

⁴⁹ *KP*, p. 180.

Christians must abandon appeals to Scripture and employ publicly accessible arguments grounded in religiously neutral, secular objectives.⁵⁰

The church must resist the impulse to have the ethical standards of God’s covenantal revelation in Scripture legislatively enforced in the civil sphere. Only when the church honors the cultic boundary between the common grace institution of the state and the holy kingdom of God, does the church truly honor the Lordship of Jesus Christ, for as Lord over all creation, including the civil sphere, he himself is the one who has ordained that cultic boundary (Matthew 22:21; John 18:36). What God has separated, let not man join together.

(4) Premature eclipse of common grace

Kline’s final argument is that theocratic conceptions of the state are unbiblical because they necessarily involve a premature eclipse of common grace. Because it holds that the OT prophecies describing the visible, earthly kingdom of the Messiah are to be fulfilled prior to the second coming, theonomic postmillennialism postulates the premature abrogation of the common grace order. In the golden age, nations not subject to the Christocracy would be prematurely deprived of the divinely covenanted blessings of common grace.⁵¹ On the other hand, if a state does submit to the reign of Christ, “that

⁵⁰ One obvious secular objective that should be a starting point for discussion is the protection of the civil liberties/rights of all citizens – both the born and the unborn, irrespective of sexual orientation, religious allegiance, and ethnic or racial origin. To see how the political principles espoused in this essay might be applied with regard to the debate over homosexuality, see Misty Irons, “A Conservative Christian Case for Civil Same-Sex Marriage” (<http://www.musingson.com/ccCase.html>).

⁵¹ See, e.g., the postmillennial interpretation of a passage like Zechariah 14:16-19. The common grace blessings of rain (and thus of the provision of crops and food for the populace) would be held in abeyance as divine

too would mark the end of the institution of the common state and with it of the common grace order ... Chalcedon’s postmillennialism in effect attributes unfaithfulness to God, for God committed himself in his ancient covenant to maintain that order as long as the earth endures” (Gen 8:22).⁵²

Kline’s argument may be set forth logically in the form of two premises and a conclusion.

Premise 1: In accordance with the covenant of common grace established after the flood, punishment of idolatry and unbelief has been suspended until the day of judgment.

There are two parts to this premise. First, the fact that God has established a covenant of common grace with mankind:

Genesis 8:22; 9:8-17 While the earth remains, Seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease ... 9:8 Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying, 9 Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth. 11 I establish My covenant with you; and *all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth ...* 14 It shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow will be seen in the cloud, 15 and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and *never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh.*

The second part is that the divine punishment of unbelief and idolatry has been suspended until the day of judgment:

judgment against those nations that refuse to pay cultic homage God (as symbolically depicted in going up to the annual Feast of Booths).

⁵² Kline, “Comments,” p. 184.

Romans 2:4 Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? 5 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, 6 who will render to each person according to his deeds.

Romans 9:22 What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?

2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 ... and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Premise 2: In accordance with the principle of common grace, during this present time of the delay of judgment, God's present attitude toward the unbeliever is one of longsuffering patience, as evidenced in the free offer of the gospel.

John 3:16-17 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

2 Corinthians 5:18-20 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

1 Timothy 2:3-6 This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

Kline points out that the longsuffering patience and kindness of God toward unbelievers sets the pattern to be imitated by the believer. This is precisely what Jesus taught his disciples:

Matthew 5:43-45 You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” 44 But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Kline comments:

The believer’s attitudes toward the unbeliever are conditioned by the principles of common grace. During the historical process of differentiation which common grace makes possible ... the servants of Christ are bound by his charge to pray for the good of those who despitely use and persecute them. Our Lord rebuked the Boanerges when they contemplated consuming the Samaritans with fire from heaven (Luke 9:54; cf. Mark 3:17). We may not seek to destroy those for whom, perchance, Christ has died.⁵³

Conclusion: The enforcement of the true religion by the civil magistrate would involve a premature eclipse of the order of common grace and would contradict the free offer of the gospel as expressed in the church’s great commission of proclaiming God’s love to a lost and dying world.

The establishment of a Christian theocracy in the church age is incompatible with the free offer of the gospel as committed to the church by Jesus in the great commission. For if the civil magistrate has a mandate from God to enforce the Christian religion, namely, to be the agent of the execution of God’s wrath against unbelief and idolatry – then God has given contradictory commissions to these two institutions of church and state. To the church he has entrusted the task of being his ambassador to the world,

⁵³ Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1989), p. 161.

offering to all men the message of free amnesty from the risen King: “If you turn now and repent, you shall be saved!” Meanwhile, to the state he has entrusted the task of destroying those very unbelievers who are the current recipients of the King’s offer of amnesty. As Kline says, “It is the dilemma of what would be a contradiction within God’s preceptive will, a head-on conflict between two of God’s major mandates.”

Reformed theocrats demand that their religious values and worldview find visible and legislative expression in the public arena. But the religious values for which they seek civil expression are grounded in the moral demands of the Law rather than in the free offer of the gospel.⁵⁴ Since the gospel calls men to living and personal faith in Jesus Christ, the gospel simply cannot be translated into a civil form without inevitably distorting it into a set of moral demands. The instrument by which all civil authority is exercised is the instrument of law and civil sanctions (enforcement). The spiritual nature of God’s kingdom – established by a mighty act of historical redemption in the Christ-event with individuals brought under the sway of the kingdom through the secret operation of the Spirit by means of the preaching the gospel and the means of grace – is logically inconsistent with civil coercion. To wish to have the gospel of the kingdom expressed in coercive, civil form is necessarily to transform the church’s great commission of bringing the good news of God’s love for sinners into a theocratic conquest aimed at exterminating those very sinners whom Christ came to seek and to save.

⁵⁴ Notice that the hot-button issues that preoccupy the political activism of the religious right in the United States tend to be matters of morality – abortion, homosexuality, pornography, family values, etc.

Fully Involved Detachment

How should we then live? Should we spend all our time, money, and energy exclusively on this great commission, and thus ignore all political and cultural engagement as a waste of time? The answer is No. To properly appreciate this answer, however, we need to examine the eschatology of the New Testament.

In a key ethical-eschatological text, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 7:29-31 But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; 30 and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; 31 and *those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away.*

Richard Gaffin describes this attitude as one of “fully involved detachment.”⁵⁵

Gaffin argues that this basic attitude flows from one’s conception of New Testament eschatology. The first coming of Christ was the inbreaking of the eschatological age to come into the midst of history, while the second coming will be the final consummation of that which was set in motion by Christ’s death and exaltation. This inbreaking of the future into the present relativizes the significance of the present age.⁵⁶ Marriage, earthly happiness and sorrow, material possessions – these things belong to the present age that is “already on its way out.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Theonomy and Eschatology: Reflections on Postmillennialism,” pp. 197-224 in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

⁵⁶ For more on the already/not-yet structure of NT eschatology, see Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991); Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975); Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987); Andrew T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

⁵⁷ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 342.

But Paul does not draw the ascetic conclusion that Christians should never marry or enjoy material possessions. Instead he calls for a total reorientation of our attitude in light of the age to come that has been inaugurated in Christ. Oscar Cullmann captures the nuance of Paul’s position:

Even in the passage that seems most strongly to justify the assertion of world denial, I Cor. 7:29ff, we must hear not only the negative conclusion: “As though they made no use of the things of the world,” “as though they had no wife,” “as though they wept not,” “as though they did not rejoice,” “as though they possessed not,” but we must also hear the compelling reference to the fact that they nevertheless use the things of the world, nevertheless have a wife, nevertheless weep, nevertheless rejoice, nevertheless buy ... The believer lives in a world concerning which he knows that it will pass away, but he knows that it still has its divinely willed place in the framework of redemptive history and is ruled by Christ. In so far as he knows that it will pass away, he denies it; in so far as he knows that it is the divinely willed framework of the present stage of redemptive history, he affirms it ... Simple world denial is not possible, but world affirmation is also limited ... [since the believer knows that] the form of this world passes away.⁵⁸

Not only has the present age been dealt a decisive death blow upon the cross, after the fall there is no possibility anyway that man could ever fulfill the creation mandate in a global or eschatological sense. The creation mandate is achieved only by Christ, the second Adam, through his active and passive obedience, and through the exercise of his kingly power at his coming, when he destroys all his and our enemies, and ushers in the new heavens and new earth. Thus, none of our cultural endeavors in the present age prior to the appearing of the second Adam will enter into the eternal city which comes down “from heaven” as a divine gift totally of God, not of man.

The blessings of common grace endure only to the close of history. At Christ’s return, pre-Consummation culture will have served its historical function and will no longer be relevant to the new order. It will be replaced by the introduction of a

⁵⁸ Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), pp. 212f.

new Glorification-culture, the New Heavens and New Earth, produced by the supernatural intervention of God. No human labor, redeemed or unredeemed, is capable of contributing to the realization of this climactic event of redemptive history.⁵⁹

With this eschatological perspective, there is an inevitable “detachment” in the Christian’s attitude toward the common grace culture of this present age. Yet, the present age along with its common grace culture, though terminal, is the arena in which believers bear witness to the age to come as they actively engage in the daily realities of life in this world. It is not a waste of time for Christians to be engaged in the cultural, social, and political dimensions of human existence here and now. Indeed, the Christian must not separate himself from cultural activity as if it were sinful in itself, or utterly insignificant. Along with his or her attitude of eschatological detachment, the Christian ought to be “fully involved” in at least three ways.

First, the Christian must do everything to the glory of God in light of his or her union with Christ. It is incumbent upon the Christian to use his unique gifts to make a difference in whatever sphere of labor Christ has put him – and that, for many Christians, includes politics. Paul exhorts the slaves at Ephesus to serve their masters as if they were serving Christ himself (Eph. 6:5-8). Cultural common grace activity like political engagement is therefore “consecrated” to God by an internal act of faith. It is not consecrated objectively in the sense that the activity itself will survive the fiery ordeal of judgment. Yet this internal consecration – the attitude of our heart, by which we engage in it as unto Christ – is not without eternal significance. For Christ will reward his

⁵⁹ Mark W. Karlberg, “Covenant and Common Grace,” pp. 297-307 in *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective* (Wipf and Stock, 2000). This essay is an incisive review of Gary North’s *Dominion and Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress* (1987).

servants for all that they have done in his name. The reward will not be a meritorious quid-pro-quo but an acknowledgment from Christ that we are his faithful servants. Thus, although our cultural activity will not obtain eschatological consummation, it does possess eschatological significance.

Second, believers should cooperate with unbelievers to work for the improvement of people’s lives in the present age. Involvement in the political arena is valid, not because we seek to transform the city of man into the city of God, but as a form of service to our fellow man in this life. We aren’t bringing in the kingdom, but we are helping the city of man to get along better in different aspects of its social, economic, political, and cultural ordering.

Appealing to the non-theocratic politics of the patriarchs as they dwelled in the land of promise as a paradigm, Kline calls such political cooperation with unbelievers “pilgrim politics.” Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were given the promise that their seed would one day possess the land in theocratic glory. But until the day when God intervened by sovereign intervention to set up his kingdom by means of the exodus under Moses and the conquest under Joshua, the patriarchal family lived in the land as “sojourners” (Gen. 21:23, 34; 23:4; 26:3; 35:27; 47:9).⁶⁰ They were resident aliens, beholding the kingdom from a distance, and confessing that they were but strangers and exiles upon the earth (Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16). Thus, Abraham did not take the land by force, “not even a foot of ground” (Acts 7:5), but paid Ephron the Hittite for the burial

⁶⁰ A “ger is a man who, either alone or with his family, leaves his village and tribe, because of war, famine, pestilence, blood-guilt, etc., and seeks shelter and sojourn elsewhere, where his right to own land, to marry, and to participate in the administration of justice, in the cult, and in war is curtailed.” William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 64.

plot of Machpelah (Gen. 23). Unlike the later theocratic command prohibiting Israel from making covenants with foreign nations (Exod. 23:32), according to the principles of pilgrim politics the patriarchs did enter into alliances with the inhabitants of the land.⁶¹

Theirs was a time for the cultivation of common grace relationships, a time for toleration and cooperation with the occupants of the land ... Tolerated pilgrims, not triumphant possessors – such is the life of the nontheocratic community of faith, waiting while the kingdom is withheld ... It is not for them, impatient with the unrealized eschatology of their day, to attempt to force the birth of the theocratic kingdom prematurely. Perseverance in faith and patience in tribulation – such graces become the sojourning servants of the Lord in an age of pilgrim politics.⁶²

This means that we must cooperate with our fellow citizens in the earthly city – consciously including those who are not members of the holy kingdom of God by saving union with Christ – for the purpose of making the city of man a more habitable place for all its citizens. Our goals are purely temporal, and pertain only to the interim order of common grace established by God for the benefit of all mankind during the time of the delay of eschatological judgment. The political activities of Christians must not appear to be self-serving, seeking the legislative implementation of our own religious ideals upon an unwilling, pluralistic populace. Instead, all that we do must be service-oriented, as we seek like good Samaritans to bind up the wounds of our fellow man, showing neighborly concern for his temporal welfare. We have no illusions of grandeur as we go about seeking such temporal goods. We know that Ecclesiastes is ultimately right, that, this side

⁶¹ See Abraham’s and Isaac’s covenants with the Philistine king Abimelech for the purpose of settling disputes over wells (Gen. 21:22-32; 26:12-33). Also Genesis 14:13 mentions three Amorite brothers (Mamre, Eschol, and Aner) who were “allies [lit. masters of a covenant] with Abram.” This federation obviously included promises of mutual defense, as can be seen in the subsequent story of their successful military campaign against Chedorlaomer and his alliance of kings.

⁶² *KP*, pp. 356-60.

of heaven, all of our work is striving after wind, since it is plagued by sin, by the ravages of the fall and the curse, and by our own shortcomings. Common grace work can't remove the effects of the curse. It can't provide ultimate happiness – contrary to the utopian ideals of many secularists on the left. The ideal form of civil existence, free of all suffering, discord, and unhappiness, must wait until the coming of our Savior in glory at the end of time. But while we wait, we must serve Christ by serving our fellow man and bearing witness to a greater and more lasting hope in heaven.

Third, cultural and political engagement on the part of Christians is valuable as part of our witness to the world. Insofar as people see us doing these things for the good of our fellow man, constrained by the love of Christ, these become good works that cause men to glorify our Father in heaven. They observe that we are seeking to serve others rather than looking for triumphalistic victory. Unbelievers take note that, unlike the utopians of the left, we are prepared for a mixture of failures and successes. When unbelievers see that we are not totally despondent when we encounter disappointment and difficulty, we explain the reason: we have a better hope in heaven. When they see that we are not elated by (momentary) success, again it is because we have a better hope in heaven. Although we may use such service as an opportunity to bring to our neighbor the good news of eternal welfare available only in Christ the Savior, such witness bearing is ancillary and does not sacralize the concrete policy goals that we pursue in cooperation with the unbeliever.

In all of this, our ultimate priority will remain the work of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ by means of the preaching of the gospel and the building up of the church. The

kingdom does not advance through political means, but through the preaching of Christ and him crucified.

The saving rule of God’s kingdom spreads among the nations through his weak but faithful servants, who proclaim the folly of the cross in the hidden power of the Spirit. And it calls us, even as we pursue evangelism and justice in the present age, to look ahead to the only perfect disclosure of the kingdom’s righteousness, at the coming of the King, Jesus Christ.⁶³

We must be heavenly-minded, living in the conscious awareness that we are a pilgrim church on the path to a heavenly city. This does not mean we retreat from the world in pious detachment, but that we live as disciples of Jesus Christ – living for the same purpose for which he lived and died: to seek and save the lost. Our “political agenda” is to build the New Community, the colony of heaven on earth, the church – by evangelism, worship, Christian nurture, and ministries of mercy. Only as the church conforms to this heavenly pattern, will it be “a city set on a hill” and “the salt of the earth.”⁶⁴

Conclusion

National confessionalist William Edgar laments what he considers to be a defeatist attitude prevalent among many American Christians:

Over the last two hundred years the church has endured so many defeats that believers no longer think that it is Jesus’ plan to call whole nations to be Christian. The most that American believers hope for is to convert individuals, establish Christian families, influence a few minor institutions on the fringes of society, and slow down society’s moral degradation. American Christians have

⁶³ Dennis E. Johnson, “The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Mosaic Penal Sanctions,” pp. 171-92 in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (see footnote 55).

⁶⁴ Clowney, “The Politics of the Kingdom,” p. 302.

been so affected by defeatist theologies ... that they unthinkingly reject the possibility or desirability of a Christian nation.⁶⁵

According to the Reformed theocrats apparently, it is not enough to “convert individuals, establish Christian families,” and (presumably) labor toward the ongoing reformation of the church. To “settle” for such non-triumphalistic goals is “defeatist.” The only satisfactory goal is that America become a Christian nation. For these theocrats, the Christian church will – by definition – continue to endure defeat and discouragement until the day when Christian values have been adopted at the highest levels of national government. It is not sufficient that we see growth in the realms of personal and family morality and of voluntary associations of like-minded believers (i.e., the church and other institutions like private Christian schools). Why not? Because these arenas of religious expression are voluntary (as opposed to coercive), private (as opposed to public), permitted (as opposed to legislatively favored), and benevolent (as opposed to triumphalistic).

Thinking that the disestablishment of the church is the cause of its cultural ineffectiveness, Reformed fundamentalists long for a revival of Christian theocracy. But if the humble proclamation of the King’s gracious amnesty is the present function of the church (and thus the present form of the kingdom of Christ prior to the second coming), then coercive, public, legislatively favored and triumphalist means of advancing Christ’s kingdom must be renounced. Otherwise the church’s witness to the gospel of grace and to a coming eschatological kingdom not of this world, will be transmogrified into a grotesque perversion of that gospel and of that kingdom. Ironically, then, it is the

⁶⁵ *GAP*, p. 191.

wholesale *rejection* (not revival) of theocratic principles that is desperately needed today if the church is to be faithful to the task of gospel witness entrusted to her in the present age. It is only as the church is conformed to her Head, the Suffering Servant, who came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many – it is only as the church learns to be satisfied with God’s eschatological timetable, and thus puts aside the lust for worldly influence and power – that she will be a positive presence in society.

J. Gresham Machen said, “Reasonable persuasion can thrive only in an atmosphere of liberty. It is quite useless to approach a man with both a club and an argument. He will very naturally be in no mood to appreciate our argument until we lay aside our club.”⁶⁶ If we approach the world as homeless pilgrims rather than as club-wielding triumphalists, perhaps more “reasonable persuasion” will thrive in our culturally polarized society. Perhaps our message will not be dismissed as a merely self-serving agenda. Thus stripped down, we will only be better ambassadors for Christ, as though God himself were making his appeal through us, beseeching all men and women to be reconciled to God. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

⁶⁶ Quoted by Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 403.