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**CONCLUSION**

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**THE AUTHORITY OF  
GODS LAW TODAY**

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**“The question is this: by what standard are moral judgments to be made? How do we determine in any particular case what godliness requires of me or my society?”**

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There is much more to the study of Christian ethics than has been discussed in this book. There are foundational issues about the perception and production of godliness in ourselves and in our society which have not been touched. Nearly all of the specific moral questions which surround us have been given no applied answer. A lot has been left unsaid, and a lot more study is required. Nevertheless, the issue addressed by this book is systematically basic to Christian ethical reasoning. It asks a question which is impossible to avoid and which influences every other aspect of one's ethical theory. People may not reflect explicitly upon the question, and

people may not answer it well. But everyone proceeds upon some answer or another to that inevitable question in Christian ethics.

The question is this: *by what standard are moral judgments to be made?*<sup>9</sup> How do we determine in any particular case what godliness requires of me or my society? Other questions may be interesting and even important. But the Christian ethics — which is itself a reflection of the Christian faith — cannot be cogently developed and practically employed without an answer to the question of criteria. How should we live? What must we do? What kind of people should we be? It all depends upon the standard we use. Better: it all depends upon the standard that *God Himself uses* for judging good and evil. If we would know the divine norms of righteousness, then, Christian ethics **will** naturally depend upon God's self-revelation and the proper understanding of His word.

Has His word been correctly interpreted by those who “turn the grace of our God into lasciviousness” and argue that we may “continue in sin that grace may abound”? Not at all (Jude 4; Rem. 6:1-2). There should be no doubt whatsoever about the premise that New Testament believers, those who have experienced the grace of God, must “live soberly and righteously and godly in this present world,” being “zealous of good works” (Titus 2:11, 14). God's grace has created us in Christ Jesus “for good works that God has prepared that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10). The New Testament does not eliminate the call for holiness (I Pet. 1:15). Saving faith

must be a living, active, and working faith (Jas. 2:14-26). Therefore, we can assert it as beyond question that those who love the Savior must demonstrate lives characterized by obedience (Heb. 5:9; John 14:15).

Should this obedience extend to the *Old Testament*? Should those saved by grace have anything at all to do with God's *law*? And if they should, can the Old Testament commandments still be the standard of moral obligation for *society and the state* as well? If Christian ethics cannot avoid answering the normative question, as claimed above, then Christian ethics will eventually be forced to answer these questions of Biblical interpretation as well. The disturbing thing is that so many Christian teachers and writers answer them without sufficient Biblical proof or concern for consistency. It is as though personal feeling gives them a conclusion from the outset for which they subsequently seek some kind of "reason." Many Christians will just take the word of such respected teachers for granted on these matters —only later to find, upon reflection and examination, that their teachers had not been thinking clearly about the issues involved at all.

The many negative opinions about the law of God as a standard for Christian obedience in our day represent a setback from the theological insights of past generations of Christian scholarship, notably the tradition of the Puritans and the Westminster Standards. What is taken for granted today as the common and "obvious" answer to whether we should obey the Old Testament in modern civil affairs, for

instance, did not always enjoy that status in the eyes of earlier Christians. The winds of common opinion have shifted. Why? Has some radical new turn or discovery in Christian scholarship, some brilliant exegesis and persuasive reasoning, intervened between the Puritan age and our own today so as to account for this shift in widespread sentiment about the use of God's law in the Christian life? If so, it is hard to point to just what it might have been. It is rather *changed social circumstances and opinions*, not advances in scholarship, which have brought about the difference.

"But the word of the Lord abides forever" (I Pet. 1:25; Isa. 40: 8). If our Reformed and Puritan forefathers were basically correct in their approach to the Old Testament law of God, as I believe, then the truth of that position is still discernible in the objective revelation of God's word, even if it is an unpopular truth in a secularized age. Whether congenial to popular opinion today or not, the conclusions to which we have been driven in our study of God's unchanging word indicate that the standard by which Christians should live is not restricted to the New Testament, but *includes* the law of God revealed in the Old Testament. "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). With God "there can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning" (Jas. 1:17).

- Our studies have pointed to the conclusion that New Testament believers ought to maintain a *pro*-nomian, rather than *antinomian*, attitude. They should seek to purge themselves of "autonomous" ethical reasoning in favor of a "theonomic" approach to moral issues. They should presume that the com-

mandments revealed by God in the Old Testament are definitive of righteous living for themselves and their society, being careful not to “speak against the law and judge it” (Jas. 4:11). Those who teach that we may break even the least commandment in the Law and Prophets will be least within the Kingdom of God (Matt. 5:19).

The theonomic and pro-nomian approach which we have taken in this book to the normative questions about Christian living and the Old Testament law is conveniently summarized in the following ten theses:

1. Since the Fall, it has always been unlawful to use the law of God in hopes of establishing one's own personal merit and justification, in contrast or complement to salvation by way of promise and faith; commitment to obedience is but the lifestyle of faith, a token of gratitude for God's redeeming grace.
2. The word of the Lord is the sole, supreme, and unchallengeable standard for the actions and attitudes of all men in all areas of life; this word naturally includes God's moral directives (law).
3. Our obligation to keep the law of God cannot be judged by any extrascriptural standard, such as whether its specific requirements (when properly interpreted) are congenial to past traditions or modern feelings and practices.
4. We should presume that Old Testament

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standing laws <sup>1</sup> continue to be mot-ally binding in the New Testament, unless they are rescinded or modified by further revelation.

5. In regard to the Old Testament law, the New Covenant surpasses the Old Covenant in glory, power, and finality (thus reinforcing former duties). The New Covenant also supercedes the Old Covenant shadows, thereby changing the application of sacrificial, purity, and "separation" principles, redefining the people of God, and altering the significance of the promised land.

6. God's revealed standing laws are a reflection of His immutable moral character and, as such, are absolute in the sense of being non-arbitrary, objective, universal, and established in advance of particular circumstances (thus applicable to general types of moral situations).

7. Christian involvement in politics calls for recognition of God's transcendent, absolute, revealed law as a standard by which to judge all social codes.

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1. "Standing law" is used here for *policy* directives applicable over time to classes of individuals (e. g. , do not kill. children. obey your parents; merchants, have equal measures; magistrates, execute rapists), in contrast to particular directions for an individual (e. g., the order for Samuel to anoint David at a particular time and place) or positive commands for distinct incidents (e. g.. God's order for Israel to exterminate certain Canaanite tribes at a certain point in history).

8. 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.

9. The general continuity which 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. The civil precepts of the Old Testament (standing "judicial" laws) are a model of perfect social justice for all cultures, even in the punishment of criminals.

These propositions highlight the essential points and distinctive features of the position developed in this book. The precious truth of salvation by grace alone (#1 ) is the context within which every other thesis is developed and understood. "Theonomic" ethics is committed to developing an overall Christian world-and-Me-view (#2) according to the regulating principle of *sola Scriptura* (#3) and the hermeneutic of covenant theology (#4).<sup>2</sup> The new and better covenant established by Christ does offer Biblical warrant for recognizing changes in covenantal ad-

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<sup>2</sup> By contrast, dispensational theology holds that Old Covenant commandments should be deemed abrogated unless repeated in the New Testament. See Charles Ryrie, "The End of the Law," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 124 (1967) 239-242.

ministration (#5), but not changes in moral standards, lest the divinely revealed ethic be reduced to situationism or relativism—just one tribal perspective among many in the evolutionary history of ethics (#6). Righteousness and justice, according to Biblical teaching, have a universal character, precluding any double-standard of morality.

“Theonomic” ethics likewise rejects legal positivism and maintains that there is a “law above the (civil) law” to which appeal can be made against the tyranny of rulers and the anarchy of overzealous reformers alike (#7). Since Jesus Christ is Lord over all (cf. #2), civil magistrates are His servants and owe obedience to His revealed standards for them (#8). There is no Biblically based justification (cf. #4) for exempting civil authorities from responsibility to the universal standards of justice (cf. #6) found in Gods Old Testament revelation (3). *Therefore, in the absence of Biblically grounded argumentation which releases the civil magistrate from Old Testament social norms (cf. #4, #5), it follows from our previous premises that in the exercise of their offices rulers are morally responsible to obey the revealed standards of social justice in the Old Testament law (#10).*

In light of the theses leading up to it, the above conclusion does not seem so controversial after all. It makes perfectly good, ethical sense for a Christian. Besides, that conclusion has a great deal of practical value in our day. It is not accidental that the glaring socio-political and criminal problems of the late twentieth century concern matters where our society

has turned against the specific directives of God's law. Humanism has been taught in our schools and media; it has been practiced in economics, medicine, politics, and our courts. And the results have been a social disaster. Human life is treated as cheap. Sexual purity is an outdated concept. Truth and honesty have little place in the "real world" of business or politics. Repeat offenders and crimes which go completely unpunished belittle the criminal justice system. Prison reform is desperately needed. In short, humanism has proven its ineffectiveness in case after case. Where can we turn for socio-political wisdom which can effectively counter the degeneration and disintegration of our culture? The only acceptable answer will be to turn to God's directives for social justice, and those are (for the most part) found in the 'Old Testament commandments to Israel as a nation, a nation facing the same moral problems about life, sex, property, and truth which all nations must face, including our own.

Christians who claim that our ethical standards are restricted to the New Testament cannot, if consistent, deal with the full range of moral issues in our day. Ask them whether it is now immoral to have sexual relations with animals. They will gasp at the thought, but find nothing forbidding it in the New Testament scriptures. At best they can say "fornication" is condemned, only thereby presupposing what they originally denied — namely, that New Testament morality is identical with the standards of the Old Testament (in which case "fornication" applies to

the same outlawed acts in both dispensations).<sup>3</sup> Ask them whether it is now immoral for a woman to marry her father. They may say yes, but they will not find that specific case of incest dealt with in the New Testament scriptures. Ask them whether rape is a punishable crime. Again, no New Testament directive covers it. Ask them what the equitable punishment should be for rape. No New Testament answer. Ask them whether they can even show that murder should be a capital crime today. Once more they will find no specific New Testament answer to that question, despite the fact that many conservative believers assume that it is there.

It becomes ever so clear that it is easy to say one holds only to “New Testament ethics,” but nearly impossible to systematically and consistently *maintain* that position. In actual fact, Christians do not find it a workable policy to follow, departing from the espoused position whenever it seems convenient or necessary to do so. But that simply opens the door to arbitrariness.

The preceding book has attempted to provide a principled, systematic, and consistent approach to the question of whether and how the Old Testament law constitutes a standard for making moral decisions today.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. treatment of this issue in “The Bahnsen-Feinberg Debate,” a tape available from Covenant Tape Ministry (4155 San Marcos Lane, Reno, NV 89502). The debate was sponsored by the Evangelical Theological Society at its annual meeting for 1981 in Toronto.