BIBLICAL ETHICS AND THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS
BY W. GARY CRAMPTON, THD.

Introduction

The Westminster Assembly of divines (men who studied and taught "divinity" or theology) was summoned in 1643 by an act of Parliament to unite England, Scotland, and Ireland through the composition and adoption of a single creed. This Assembly (which consisted of more than 140 Puritan, Calvinist theologians) and its multiyear consultation produced several documents, including the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), and the Larger (1648) and Shorter (1648) Catechisms. Together these documents are referred to as the Westminster Standards. The Standards are still today the adopted standards of conservative Presbyterian churches as well as a number of other Reformed churches throughout the world. They are widely recognized as one of the finest systematic summaries of Holy Scripture ever produced in creedal form. They are, in the words of B. B. Warfield:

The final crystallization of the elements of evangelical religion, after the conflicts of sixteen hundred years...They are the richest and most precise and best guarded statement ever penned of all that enters into evangelical religion and of all that must be safeguarded if evangelical religion is to persist in the world.

As noted, the Westminster Standards are written in the style of a systematic theology. This is especially noticeable in the Confession of Faith. The Confession propounds for us, in a comprehensive, precise, and orderly fashion, the system of doctrine taught in the Bible. This being the case, there is a logical order followed by the Puritan divines in the creed. According to the Puritans (as with John Calvin before them), the Christian worldview begins with epistemology (the theory of knowledge). It does not begin with how we know that there is a god, and then go on to seek to prove that this god is the God of Holy Scripture. The doctrine of God follows epistemology. The central question has to do with how we know what we know. Every theological and philosophical system necessarily begins with an indemonstrable first principle or starting point, i.e., an axiom from which all else is deduced. If this premise could be proved, then it would not be a first principle. According to the Puritans, the Christian's axiomatic starting point is that the Bible is the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God, and it has a monopoly on truth.

Scripture, then, was the axiomatic starting point of the Westminster Assembly. Epistemology was the issue that first needed to be addressed. Thus, chapter 1 of the Confession has to do with our source of knowledge: "Of the Holy Scripture." The following 32 chapters are erected upon the foundational principle of Biblical revelation. In "Of the Holy Scripture" the Westminster theologians discuss (among other things) the necessity of Scripture, the identity of Scripture, the inspiration of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, the self-authentication of Scripture, the sufficiency of Scripture, the clarity or Scripture, the transmission and preservation of Scripture, the interpretation of Scripture, and the finality of Scripture, all of which are necessary for a proper understanding of the Word of God. It is because of these essential marks or attributes of Scripture that the Reformers and the later Puritans held to the principle of sola Scriptura: "Scripture alone." This is why the Preface of the 1611 King James Version described the Bible as "A Pandect [complete body] of Profitable Laws, against Rebellious Spirits."

The All-Sufficiency of Scripture

The Bible and the Westminster Standards teach that God has revealed Himself to mankind in two ways: general revelation and special revelation. The former is general in audience (all mankind) and limited in content. The latter is more restricted in audience (those who read the Bible) and much more detailed in content. Special revelation is now found in Scripture alone. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1:1) explains this as follows:

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which
is necessary unto salvation: therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which makes the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God’s revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.

As the Bible teaches (Romans 1:18-21; 2:14-15), and the Confession confirms, as sufficient as general revelation is to reveal God to all men, leaving them without excuse, it is insufficient “to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation...which makes the Holy Scripture to be most necessary.” Without special revelation, i.e., the propositional truth of God’s Word, sinful man is unable to come to a sound and saving knowledge of God, through Jesus Christ. The necessity of special revelation rests on the insufficiency of general revelation.

This being so, general revelation, or any system of thought based on general revelation without the specific statements of special revelation, such as a “natural law” theory of ethics, is not sufficient to guard us “against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world.” Such a secular theory will not tell mankind how he is to conduct himself in God’s world. This makes special revelation “most necessary” for ethics.

There are, however, some Christian theologians who have opted for a “natural law” theory of political ethics. They declare and assert that such a theory is possible because in general revelation God has revealed Himself to all mankind, and given them an innate knowledge of His moral law. Therefore, it is alleged, the nations of this world are to use “natural law” as the basis for their system of ethics.

As we have seen, it is true that in general revelation God reveals Himself to all men. And, as the Confession (4:2) maintains, it is also true that God created man “after His own image, having the law of God written in their hearts” (see Romans 2:14-15, which the Westminster divines used as a Scripture proof-text for this teaching). “The fact is,” said Greg Bahnsen, “that all of the Mosaic laws (in their moral demands) are reflected in general revelation...Scripture never suggests that God has two sets of ethical standards or two moral codes, the one (for Gentiles) being an abridgment of the other (for Jews).” The Bible is replete with examples of this. The problem here, however, is that even before the Fall general revelation was not sufficient as an ethical basis for man. Even in the Garden of Eden, man needed special revelation to tell him how to conduct himself in God’s world (Genesis 2:3). Since the Fall, this is much more necessary (Genesis 3:14-19; Romans 8:19-25). John Calvin pointed out the unbiblical position of a natural law theory of ethics:

And if we want to measure our reason by God’s law, the pattern of perfect righteousness, we shall find in how many respects it is blind! Surely it does not at all comply with the First Table [of the law]; such as putting our faith in God, giving due praise for His excellence and righteousness, calling upon His name, and truly keeping the Sabbath....What soul, relying upon natural perception [i.e., natural law], ever had an inkling that the lawful worship of God consists in these and like matters? For when profane men desire to worship God, even if they be called away a hundred times from their empty trifles, they always slip back into them once more....Men have somewhat more understanding of the precepts of the Second Table [of the law]...because these are more closely concerned with the preservation of civil society [i.e., political ethics] among them. Yet even here one sometimes detects a failure to endure. A man of most excellent disposition finds it utterly senseless to bear an unjust and excessively imperious domination, if only he can in some way throw it off. And this is the common judgment of human reason....But in all our keeping of the law we quite fail to take our concupiscence into account. For the natural man refuses to be led to recognize the diseases of his lusts. The light of nature is extinguished before he even enters upon this abyss.

Jonathan Edwards was of the same view regarding natural law ethics. He taught that “were it not for divine [special] revelation, I am persuaded, that there is not one doctrine of that which we call natural religion, which, notwithstanding all philosophy and learning, would not be forever involved in darkness, doubts, endless disputes, and dreadful confusion.” Apart from special revelation “the very notion of such a Being [God] is all mystery, involving nothing but incomprehensible paradoxes, and seeming inconsistencies.”

A natural law theory of political ethics is doomed to failure. Such a theory is based far more on the epistemology of men like Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, and Thomas Reid and Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, than it is on the Biblical epistemology endorsed by the Westminster Standards. Ultimately it is nothing more then “the assertion of the moral and judicial neutrality of the mind of covenant-breaking man,” which is openly opposed to the teaching of Holy Scripture.

It should also be noted that a natural law theory of ethics is (at least) implicitly pluralistic. “Pluralism” is that theory of ethics which avers that the civil government is obliged to honor and protect all religious belief systems as equal. Such a theory is
so obviously anti-Christian that a refutation would hardly seem necessary. A pluralistic system of government is in direct violation of God’s commandment not to add to or take away from His law (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Proverbs 30:5-6; Revelation 22:18-19), and undermines the teaching of Jesus Christ in Matthew 5:19 (“whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these [God’s] commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven”). Pluralism also flies in the face of Christ’s teaching that “He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters” (Luke 11:23). Is it even conceivable, within a Christian worldview, that the civil government should honor and permit Satanism (with its occult practices) as the equal of Biblical theism? To ask the question is to answer it. Surely it is not. Pluralism is anti-Biblical thinking, and it has no place in any system of ethics that purports to be Christian.

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 the apostle Paul writes: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction on righteousness, that the man of God may complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” And in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1:6) we read:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

Notice the universal terms used in these two statements (2 Timothy 3:16-17 and the Confession [1:6]): “all,” “complete,” “thoroughly,” “every,” “whole,” “all,” “nothing,” “at any time.” The Bible, infallibly, and the Westminster Confession, in compliance with the Bible, both teach the all-sufficiency of Scripture: sola Scriptura.

Paul teaches us that the Word of God written thoroughly equips us “for every good work.” The Westminster divines have a similar view. In the Larger Catechism (Q. 3) we read that “the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience.” In the words of Calvin: “I confess that both the whole rule of right living, and also instruction in faith, are most fully delivered in the sacred Scriptures.”

Moreover, the Confession (1:6) asserts that “the whole counsel of God” is contained in the Bible. “All things necessary” for every area of “faith and life” are found in Scripture. And notice is made that the truth of God’s Word is not restricted to the explicit teachings of Scripture. Those things which may be deduced “by good and necessary consequence” are also God’s truth. The Bible truly is a “Pandect of Profitable Laws” for every area of life.

This is very important for us to understand when we come to the study of Biblical ethics. The discipline of ethics (which comes from the Greek ethikos, meaning “morals”) is concerned with how mankind “ought” to live, i.e., how men “ought” to conduct themselves. Biblical ethics deals with how we “ought” to live according to the teaching of God’s inspired, infallible, inerrant Word. If the Word of God written thoroughly equips us for every good work, then the principle of sola Scriptura must be our guide in every area of life.

The Scripture teaches us that there are three basic Biblical institutions: the family (Genesis 2:18-24; Ephesians 5:22-6:4), the church (Matthew 16:13-20; 1 Timothy 3:14-15), and the civil magistrate (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17). These institutions are separate as to function, but not as to authority. The Word of God is the sole authority by which each institution is to be governed. When it comes to Biblical ethics, then, the Word of God is to be the authoritative guide.

What does the Bible teach us about ethics in the realm of the civil magistrate? It teaches us a “theonomic” view of ethics. The word “theonomy” comes from two Greek words: Theos, “God,” and nomos, “law.” A theonomic view of ethics that God’s law (which is a transcript of His immutable moral character; Leviticus 20:7-8; 1 Peter 1:15-16), as it is revealed in His inspired, infallible, inerrant Word (the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments), is the sole and unchangeable standard by which all persons and things in all areas of life are to be judged and governed. The law of God alone is to be determinative as to the rightness or wrongness of any action. Only God has the authority to say what anyone “ought to do” and “ought not to do.” There is “no other standard” than God’s Word. Theonomic ethics, wrote William Einwechter, “sets forth God’s law as the supreme standard of truth and righteousness, and seeks to apply the precepts of God’s holy law to every action of man and to every sphere of life. Theonomy is simply the extension of the doctrine of sola Scriptura into the realm of ethics.” The Bible is to be “the great Law-Book of the nations.”

Theonomy, then, is nothing other than the application of the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 93) teaching: “The moral law is the declaration of the will of God to mankind, directing and binding every one to personal, perfect, and perpetual conformity and obedience thereunto.” If these things which we have studied are so (and they are), then ultimately, there are only two alternatives: theonomy (God’s law) or autonomy (self-law, i.e., a secular theory of ethics with everyone doing what is right in his own eyes; Judges 21:25). There is no third alterna-
tive. One is either for God and His Word, or he is against Him (Luke 11:23); he cannot “serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24).

Sola Scriptura and Biblical Ethics

The Bible and the Westminster Standards both have a great deal to say about the responsibility of the civil magistrate in the area of ethics. In Romans 13:1-7, which is the locus classicus of New Testament revelation on this subject, the apostle Paul writes:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror of New Testament revelation on this subject, the apostle Paul writes:

Moreover, Deuteronomy 17:14-20 relates that a civil ruler who would honor God is, first, to be a godly man (i.e., a Christian); second, he is to “write for himself a copy of this [God’s] law in a book...and it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God”; and third, he is to “be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes.” David wrote that those in positions of civil leadership are to rule “in the fear of God” (2 Samuel 23:3). The reason being, as Isaiah 33:22 tells us, “The LORD is our Judge, the LORD is our Lawgiver, the LORD is our King; He will save us.” And, says the Psalmist, how “blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD” (Psalm 33:12). Ecclesiastes 12:13 avers that “the conclusion of the whole matter,” for every person and Biblical institution (including the civil magistrate), is “fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” In Daniel 4 we read that Nebuchadnezzar learned the hard way that “the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever He chooses” (verses 25, 32). And in his trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus Christ told the governor that the power which he possessed “had been given [to him] from above” (John 19:11).

As already referenced, no place is this teaching set forth more trenchantly than in Psalm 2, where we are told that all of the “kings” and “judges of the earth” are commanded to “be instructed” by God’s law, “to serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling,” as they pay homage to Christ as the Son of God (verses 10-12). Herein, commented Joe Morecraft, God gives “notice that political institutions world-wide are to bow in submission before the supremacy of God’s Son and His rule.” And “it is the duty of nations as the subjects of the Lord Christ to make His civil laws, revealed in His Bible, as the basis and source of their own laws.” Jesus Christ is the “Ruler over the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5), and His Law-Word is to be the standard by which these kings are to reign.

An overall study, then, of the Biblical teaching on political ethics reveals at least “six definite implications.” First, all Biblical institutions, including the civil magistrate, are ordained by God. The authority to rule and govern any people, therefore, comes from God alone. Second, the civil ruler is God’s representative, His minister. This means that all such rulers are under the authority of God and they serve by His holy commission. Third, the civil magistrate is, therefore, necessarily to base his rule on the standard of God’s Holy, immutable Word. There is simply no other standard by which he is allowed to rule if he would please God. Fourth, God has not only given the state His authority by which to rule, but He has also set forth Biblical teachings on the penology that is to be followed in dealing with lawbreakers: “The judgment is God’s” (Deuteronomy 1:17). Fifth, as we read in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, only God-fearing men should serve as rulers in a God-honoring society. As...
Calvin has pointed out, only godly men should be appointed to this office. And sixth, the political covenants and constitutions of any state or nation should "explicitly recognize" the absolute sovereignty of the triune God over that institution. As seen in Psalm 2, Christ is the reigning King over all creation and the nations of this world are to pay homage to Him.

This is what is taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith (23:1):

God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, has ordained civil magistrates, to be under Him, over the people, for His [God's] own glory, and the public good: and to this end, has armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers.

Moreover, as the Confession (23:3) goes on to say, even though the magistrate "may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven," which duties are relegate to the church of Jesus Christ alone, nevertheless, God has given the state both the authority and obligation to work together with the church, "that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented and reformed; and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed." In other words, as God's minister, the magistrate is responsible to work with the church toward the establishment and advancement of the kingdom of God on this earth.

Further, the standard that is to be used by the magistrate in carrying out his duties is none other than the law of God, i.e., "the truth of God" which is to "be kept pure and entire." Chapter 19 of the Confession correctly teaches that there are three general categories of the law of God: moral, ceremonial, and judicial. First, the moral law of God, i.e., the Ten Commandments, which is "a perfect rule of righteousness" for all mankind, is continually binding on all men, "as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof." Second, the ceremonial law which God gave "to the people of Israel, as a church under age," is "now abrogated, under the New Testament" era. And third, there is the judicial law which God gave to Israel "as a body politic." According to the theologians of the Westminster Assembly, "the general equity" (i.e., the general principles) underlying the "sundry judicial laws" which God gave to Israel "as a body politic" is still binding (as are the Ten Commandments). The "sundry judicial laws" function as the "second" or "political" use of the law, wherein the law restrains sin, sinners, and criminals (1 Timothy 1:8-10), and shows us how the magistrate is to carry out his duties within the community.

The Westminster theologians understood, as stated in the Shorter Catechism (Q. 41), that "the moral law is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments." The Decalogue gives us a summary of what God requires of man in his relationship to God and to his fellow man; it is a broad statement of the standard of righteousness by which man is to live. The judicial laws function as "case law" and expand upon this teaching. They are more specific and give us further instruction (including penal sanctions) concerning God's standard of righteousness. In this sense, the judicial or case laws illustrate and help us "exegete" the Ten Commandments. Herein they, as well as the Decalogue, remain perpetually binding on mankind. According to the Westminster Confession, then, as God's minister, the civil government throughout the world is duty bound to enforce and apply the Ten Commandments and the "general equity" of Israel's judicial law as the law of the land in which it ministers. This is the theonomic view of Biblical ethics.

The reason that the Westminster divines were able to argue as they have is that they were following the hermeneutical principle of Biblical exegesis that unless the New Testament abrogates an Old Testament law (such as the ceremonial law), then that Old Testament law is considered to be still binding in the New age. As explained by Greg Bahnsen: "The methodological point, then, is that we presume our obligation to obey any Old Testament commandment unless the New Testament indicates otherwise. We must assume continuity with the Old Testament rather than discontinuity." This is precisely what Christ is teaching us in Matthew 5:17-19.

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

In chapter 19 of the Westminster Confession, where the Puritan theologians speak of the continual binding nature of the Ten Commandments and the "general equity" of the judicial laws (which illustrate the Ten Commandments and therefore are an extension of the moral law), they cite the words of Christ in Matthew 5, as a Biblical proof-text in support of their teaching. Jesus Christ did not come to do away with the full-orbed law of God; rather, He came to "fill-it-full," to confirm and validate it as the sole, unchangeable standard for Biblical ethics. Says the Confession (19:5): "Neither does Christ, in the gospel, in any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation" of keeping God's law as the standard for every area of life. J. Gresham Machen wrote: "The gospel does not abrogate
God’s law, but it makes men love it with all their hearts.” And in Calvin’s words: “With respect to doctrine, we must not imagine that the coming of Christ has freed us from the authority of the law: for it is the eternal rule of a devout and holy life, and therefore must be unchangeable, as the justice of God, which it embraced, is constant and uniform.” God cannot change (Malachi 3:6; James 1:17); therefore, neither can the moral law, which is a transcript of His moral character (Leviticus 20:7-8; 1 Peter 1:15-16). In Hebrews 8:6, we read that the New Covenant is a “better covenant, which has been established on better promises,” but not on better commandments. The abiding moral law of God cannot be improved upon. In the New Covenant, says Paul in 2 Corinthians 3, the same law which was written on tables of stone in the Old Covenant era, is now internalized and written “on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.” It is the same law in both the Old and New Covenants.

This means that the “general equity” of the civil precepts of the Old Covenant administration, along with the Ten Commandments, are to be recognized as a Biblical model for all nations. Commenting on Deuteronomy 4:8 (“What great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?”), Matthew Henry stated: “The law of God is far more excellent than the law of nations....The having of these statutes and judgments set before them is the true and transcendent greatness of any nation or people.”

It should also be noted that in chapter 19 of the Confession the Westminster divines are clearly distinguishing between Israel, in her unique status as a “theocratic” nation (as a church-state), and all of the other non-theocratic nations of the world. In the history of the world there has never been, nor will there ever be, a “chosen” nation like Israel. Israel is the only nation that could rightfully and ultimately say that she was “one nation under God” (Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 7:6-26). In the New Testament era, the “one nation” is the church (not the church-state) of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:9-10); the church as “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16), is a “spiritual” nation. But even under the Old Testament economy, the “state” (i.e., national) aspect of Israel was distinguished from the “church” aspect (2 Chronicles 19:4-11). And this is what the Westminster theologians are referring to when they speak of Israel, on the one hand as the “church under age” (19:3), and on the other hand as a “body politic” (19:4).

Yet, even the non-theocratic nations under the Old Testament era were held accountable by God to the same “moral” standards as was Israel (see Genesis 19; Leviticus 18:24-30; Deuteronomy 4:6-8; Psalm 2:10-12; Isaiah 24:5; Jonah 1-4; Romans 1-3). As stated in Proverbs 14:34, “righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.” In this sense, Israel stands as a paradigm for Biblical (and political) ethics, and that is why the “general equity” of the judicial law remains binding on the nations of the world today.

Sadly, in our benighted age, many consider the theonomic view of Biblical ethics to be somewhat farfetched and outlandish. It is an intrusion, we are told, of Old Testament ethics into the New Testament era. How anyone who loves the law of God could seek to replace it with some man made law is hard to grasp. Nevertheless, we are reminded of Paul’s Jewish critics in Rome who considered Biblical Christianity as nothing more than a sect which “is spoken against everywhere” (Acts 28:22). The fact is, however, that the theonomic view of ethics is not new at all. It has been the view of ethics espoused by the Reformed church for centuries. “The name ‘theonomy’ may be new,” commented Einwechter, “but the principle of theonomic ethics is not. Theonomy was the ethical system of the Reformed Church in Scotland, and of the English and New England Puritans.” One vociferous opponent of theonomy, Meredith Kline, is enough of a scholar to admit that even though he believes this to be an ill-advised direction for ethics, it was the view of the Westminster divines and the Puritans in general. Kline calls theonomy “an old-new error.” Laird Harris is another opponent of theonomy who recognizes that it is not “really new.” Rather, it is a view adopted, in general, by the Reformers and the Scottish Covenanters who were involved with the Westminster Assembly.

John Calvin (1509-1564) was an advocate of the theonomic ethic. He was convinced that the civil magistrate is obliged to enforce both tables of the Decalogue. The state is to prevent open idolatry, swearing, cursing, illicit forms of dance, Sabbath disobedience, as well as promote proper marital relationships, sanctity of human life, etc. The state was to work toward the establishment of a holy commonwealth on earth, under the law of God.

In his Sermons on the book of Deuteronomy Calvin’s strong adherence to the binding nature of the general equity of the Mosaic law (including the Biblical teaching on penology) is very obvious. As Christopher Strevel has conclusively shown, in these sermons Calvin “advocated the death penalty for adultery, idolatry and apostasy, incorrigible children, and false prophets.” Too, in his Commentaries on Deuteronomy, in accordance with Biblical judicial law, he called for the death penalty for adultery, idolatry, and blasphemy. It must also be remembered that the Genevan favored the death penalty for the blasphemous Servetus. Philip Schaff wrote:

Calvin’s plea for the right and duty of the Christian magistrate to punish heresy by death stands or falls with his theocratic theory and the binding authority of the Mosaic code. His argu-
ments are chiefly drawn from the Jewish law against idolatry and blasphemy, and from the examples of the pious kings of Israel.

Martin Luther (1483-1546), commenting on the law in Deuteronomy 21:18-21, regarding the stoning of an incorrigible and blasphemy, and from the examples of the pious kings of which is being As noted, the theonomic view of ethics is chiefly drawn from the Jewish

can describe an approach more equitable and wholesome to the commonwealth than that which God describes in His laws. Some, however, have questioned this due to the statement of the Confession in 19:4, where we read: "To them [Israel] as a body politic, He [God] gave sundry and judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require." According to the Westminster divines, it is alleged, the judicial law of Israel has "expired," therefore it can no longer be binding on the nations of the world.

This, however, is not the case at all. First, notice is made that in 19:3 of the Confession, the divines say that the "ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the New Testament." According to the theologians at the Assembly, the ceremonial laws have been "abrogated," whereas the judicial laws have "expired." There is an obvious difference in these two words, the reason being that there is a qualifier given in 19:4 that the "general equity" of the judicial law is "required" and therefore binding on the nations. As explained by Kenneth Gentry, "an 'expired' law still 'requiring' a 'general equity' is fundamentally different from an 'abrogated' law (as per the ceremonial laws)." This is corroborated in chapter 20 ("Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience"), where the Confession (20:1) states: "But, under the New Testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish Church was subjected." What is significant here for our study is that no mention is made here of the "yoke" of the judicial law. According to the Assembly, it is the ceremonial law, not the judicial law, which the believer is no longer "yoked" by.

Second, the expiration spoken of by the Assembly in 19:4 has to do with "the State of that people," i.e., the "State" of Israel as a nation in the land of Canaan. So when the Jewish "State" expired, the judicial or case laws, as they literally applied to that particular people, in that particular time, within the land of Canaan, expired with that "State." The nations of the world today, then, are not required to maintain "cities of refuge" (Numbers 35:9-34) in the land of Canaan, nor are they obligated to build "a parapet for your roof" (Deuteronomy 22:8). The "general equity" of the judicial law, i.e., the general principles underlying specific judicial laws, however, would require one to maintain proper procedures for persons involved in accidental death suits, and to maintain proper safety precautions around their respective living quarters. As stated by Foulner:

Theonomists interpret the words of the Confession as meaning that though the precise situations addressed by the case law may no longer be found in modern society, there are parallel cases to which they do apply, and where these parallel situations are found, the case laws are binding.

Einwechter's teaching is the same:

Theonomy does not teach that one should take the laws given to Israel, and without a weighing of the theological or cultural factors unique to Israel, make these laws ours for today...theonomy believes that the moral principle which informs (underlies) each command is universal and unchanging, and that this principle (once ascertained by careful exegesis) can and ought to be applied to our day and culture.

Third, as noted, a number of the opponents of theonomic ethics fully admit that "theonomy" is the position that was adhered to by a number of Reformers and the original framers of the Westminster Standards. This is confirmed by a study of the proof-texts used by the divines in the Westminster Standards themselves, as well as an overview of the writings of the Puritans who attended the Westminster Assembly. Along this line of thought, first, the Westminster Standards freely cite the case laws of Israel to justify their teachings. An overview of the Confession (19:4; 20:1, 4; 22:3; 23:3; 24:4) and the Larger Catechism (Q. 28, 108, 109, 128, 136, 139, 141, 142, 145) will show that case laws against Sabbath-breaking, false religion, idolatry, blasphemy, unlawful divorce, incest, fornication, bestiality, restitution for theft, etc., are adduced as Scripture proofs. If the case laws had altogether "expired" then this proof-text usage would be meaningless.

Second, other writings of the framers of the Westminster Standards confirm that they adhered to the binding nature of the "general equity" of the judicial laws of the Mosaic code. The Scottish Commissioner to the Assembly, George Gillespie (1613-1648), believed that Christ, in Matthew 5, not only validated and confirmed the continual use of the moral law, but "of the judicial law" as well, "it being a part of the law of Moses." Again, "I know some divines hold that the judicial law of Moses, so far as [it] concerns the punishments of sins against the moral law, idolatry, blasphemy, Sabbath-breaking, adultery,
theft, etc., ought to be a rule to the Christian magistrate; and, for my part, I wish more respect were had to it, and that it were more consulted with." Gillespie also said "I heartily yield that a lawful magistrate, whether Christian or heathen, ought to be a keeper or guardian of both tables [of the law]; and as God's vicegerent, has authority to punish heinous sins against either table, by civil or corporal punishments, which proves nothing against a distinct church for keeping pure the ordinances of Christ."

Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) was another Scottish divine at the Assembly. He wrote: "As the king is under God's law both in commanding and in exacting active obedience, so he is under the same regulating law of God, in punishing or demanding of us passive subjection, and he may command what he will, but what the King of kings warrants him to command, so may he not punish as he will, but by warrant also of the Supreme Judge of all the earth."

Westminster divine Herbert Palmer (1601-1647) commented "that whatsoever Law of God, or command of His, we find recorded in the Law-book, in either of the volumes of God's statute, the New Testament or the Old Testament, remains obligatory to us, unless we can prove it to be expired, or repealed. So it is with the statute-law of this nation, or of any nation." Another divine, William Reyner (died 1666), wrote: "This duty is principally incumbent upon the magistrate, who is to execute judgment of the Lord, not arbitrarily as he himself pleases; but according to the rule of the Word, both for matter and manner."

George Hutcheson (1626-1674), a contemporary of the Westminster theologians, said that "the law concerning the putting of adulterers to death is clear from Leviticus 20:10 [and] Deuteronomy 22:22." It is still binding. He also wrote: "For it cannot be shown that any part of that power which magistrates had under the Old Testament is repealed under the New, neither can any convincing reason be brought, why it should be of narrower extent now nor then. Are not blasphemies, heresies, and errors dishonorable to God, and destructive unto souls as well now as of old?" And at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (August 1642), the Assembly agreed that "all Presbyteries [are] to give up to the justice [civil magistrate] the names of the adulterers, incestuous persons, witches and sorcerers and others guilty of such gross and fearful sin within her bounds that they may be processed, and punished according to the laws of the kingdom."

One final Westminster contemporary, and England's greatest theologian, John Owen (1616-1683), wrote:

Although the institutions and examples of the Old Testament, of the duty of magistrates in the things and about the worship of God, are not, in their whole latitude and extent, to be drawn into rules that should be obligatory to all magistrates now, under the administration of the gospel...yet, doubtless, there is something moral in those institutions, which, being unclothed of the judicial form, is still binding to all in the like kind, as to some analogy and proportion. Subduct from those administrations what was proper to, and lies upon the account of, the church and nation of the Jews, and what remains upon the general notion of a church and nation must be everlastingly binding. And this amounts thus far, at least, that judges, rulers, and magistrates, which are promised under the New Testament to be given mercy, and to be of singular usefulness, as the judges were under the Old, are to take care that the gospel church may, in its concernment as such, be supported and promoted, and the truth propagated wherewith they are entrusted; as the others took care that it might be well with the judicial church as such.

Two more (nineteenth century) theonomists and advocates of the Westminster Standards are quoted. James Thornwell (1812-1862) said: "Nevertheless we, the people of the Confederate States, directly acknowledged our responsibility to God, and the supremacy of His Son, Jesus Christ, as King of kings and Lord of lords; and hereby ordain that no law shall be passed by the Congress of these Confederate States inconsistent with the will of God, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures." And Robert Dabney stated: "The law of Moses, therefore, very properly made adultery a capital crime; nor does our Savior, in the incident of the woman taken in adultery [John 8:1-11], repeal that statute, or disallow its justice. The legislation of modern, nominally Christian nations, is drawn rather from the grossness of pagan sources than from Biblical principles."

Further, commented Dabney:

The application of the Lex Talionis [the law of retaliation] made by Moses against false witnesses was the most appropriate and equitable ever invented. Whatever the pain or penalty the false swearing would have brought on the innocent man maligned had the law followed the false witness unprotected, that penalty must be visited on the perjurer maligning him. Let the student compare the admirable symmetry of Moses' provision with the bungling operations of our statute against perjury. He discriminates the different grades of guilt with exact justice. We punish the perjurer who swears away his neighbor's cow with imprisonment, and the perjurer who swears away his neighbor's honor and life, still with imprisonment.

Finally, it is noteworthy that there are numerous New Testament quotations and citations of the Old Testament case laws (e.g., Matthew 18:15; Mark 10:19; Romans 12:20; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 9:9; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:18; Hebrews 2:2;
10:28; James 5:4), including the penology of the Old Testament (Matthew 15:4-5), without a hint that these laws are no longer binding in the New Testament era. This New Testament support of the case laws fully confirms the teaching of the Westminster Confession regarding the continual binding nature of the “general equity” of the Mosaic judicails.

Conclusion

The Biblical view of ethics set forth in this essay is that of theonomy. This view extends the doctrine of sola Scriptura into the realm of ethics. It maintains, with Paul, that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God,” and the teaching found therein thoroughly equips man “for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). In the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments we have the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).

According to the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 1, 91), “man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully enjoy Him forever,” and further, that “the duty which God requires of man” wherein man may glorify God, “is obedience to His revealed will” as found in Holy Scripture (confirm John 15:8, 10; 17:4). The Catechism (Q. 93) goes on to say that “the moral law is the declaration of the will of God to mankind, directing and binding every one to personal, perfect, and perpetual conformity and obedience therunto...in performance of all those duties of holiness and righteousness which he owes to God and man.” This applies to every man in his calling of life. Thus, it is applicable to the civil magistrate as well. If the labor of the civil ruler is a “good work” (which it is), then the 66 books of Holy Scripture (“all Scripture”) are profitable to thoroughly equip him for his calling before God.

The godly civil leader, i.e., a Christian leader, is obliged to have a “copy of this [God’s] law before him at all times, and he is to “read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes” (Deuteronomy 17:18-19). Like the Psalmist, he must say, “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day” (119:97). The Christian ruler must seek to have his mind so “transformed” by the Word of God (Romans 12:2), that he is progressively “bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). The “conclusion of the whole matter” is that the civil ruler is duty-bound to “fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

When it comes to ethics, there are only two alternatives: theonomy or autonomy. The magistrate will either honor God by obeying His Word, or like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, he will seek to “be like God,” seeking to know the difference between “good and evil” by some other way (Genesis 3:1-6), i.e., doing what is “right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). For the Christian magistrate, however, there is “no other standard” than God’s Holy Word. The Christian ruler understands, as stated by Greg Bahnsen, that “it is the epitome of foolishness to depart from the path laid out in God’s Word. It is never wise for us to disagree with or act contrary to the divine wisdom which is set forth in the Word of God, including His obligatory laws.” The Bible and the Bible alone is to be seen as “the great Law-Book of the nations.”

The Christian ruler recognizes, as taught in Psalm 2, that Christ has been exalted as King to the right hand of God the Father; He has received “the nations as [His] inheritance, and the ends of the earth as [His] possession.” These nations are to bow their knee to Christ, and they are to be instructed by His Word as their standard. If they fail to do so, they will incur His wrath and “perish in the way.” The Christian magistrate understands that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). His standard, therefore, must be Christ’s Word. What other standard could he turn to if he is to be faithful to his exalted King? There could hardly be more fitting words with which to conclude this essay than those of Greg Bahnsen:

If the critics of theonomy are unwilling to endorse the use of the Old Testament civil sanctions, they are caught on the horns of a dilemma. In rejecting God’s revealed standards for the civil punishment of criminals, the critics have either abandoned the need for justice in matters of crime and punishment, or they have fallen into the error of thinking that civil justice is completely variable (beyond the inspired and restricted flexibility in certain of the Old Testament’s penal laws). In the end, they have no other divinely authorized standard by which to guide the civil magistrates than the one proposed by theonomists. They are left promoting just one more human opinion among many. And human opinion is an inadequate basis upon which to deprive any other human being of his or her life, property or freedom. The critics of theonomy would thus, in principle (and not by intention), undermine the civil order of society and leave us with a “Beast” as our government.

Soli Deo Gloria

Footnotes


5. See W. Gary Crampton, By Scripture Alone (Unicoi, Tennessee: Trinity Foundation, 2002).


11. John Gerstner has correctly noted that there is a difference between a legal right and a moral right for persons to believe whatever religion they desire to believe. No person, church, or government has the power to make someone believe in the gospel of Christ. Such power is God's alone. Every person has the "legal" right to believe whatever they care to believe. But when a government raises the "banner of freedom of religion" to the point where it allows "all sorts of hell-deserving religions to flourish and carry millions with them to perdition," it has committed a heinous sin. See John H. Gerstner, Primitive Theology, edited by Don Kistler (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), 318.


13. In the history of the church-state relationship there have been two major errors: Papalism and Erastianism. The former teaches that the church, i.e., the Pope, is to rule both the church and the state. The latter avers that both institutions are under the headship of the civil magistrate. A proper view of Biblical ethics, as espoused by the Westminster Standards, disavows both of these errant views. The church is to wield only the sword of the Spirit in dealing with sin; whereas the civil magistrate wields the sword of iron according to Scripture in dealing with crime. This was the view taught by the Geneva Reformer John Calvin. Ronald S. Wallace, in his Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 113, wrote: "Calvin's concern in Geneva was to bring church and state closely together again in mutual independence, in such a way that the church had its spiritual independence restored to it, and civil government was allowed to retain its full power over every decision proper to its own sphere." With Calvin, there was a "distinction," and yet a "close union of church and state," which was necessary for the advancement of Biblical Christianity.


15. Bahnsen, No Other Standard, 1.


19. In verse 4 Paul uses the word dikaios twice, and in verse 6 he uses the word leitourgos. Both Greek words are properly translated "minister."


21. According to a taped lecture by Paul Schenck, this text in Deuteronomy 17 was instrumental in the establishment of the precedent that the President of the United States of America should take his oath of office with his hand on the Bible; see Paul Schenck, "Choosing a Civil Leader," National Clergy Council (Buffalo, New York, n.d.).


24. William O. Einwechter, "The Judgment is God's," Explicitly Christian Politics, 67ff. The following six points are taken from Einwechter's excellent article.

25. In his sermon on Deuteronomy 17:15, Calvin preached: "Then, whenever we choose judges, magistrates, governors and offices of justice, let us take warning by this text, to look for this mark in them, that they be men which fear God, and are at least desirous that [the Christian] religion should be maintained in his jurisdiction: For otherwise it is all one as if we would drive God from us, and seek to banish Him from among us; which is too cursed a treachery." Cited in Einwechter, "The Judgment is God's," 77.

26. Sadly, there are some Christian theologians in our day who rail against the idea that the civil magistrate is to be actively involved in the expansion of God's kingdom on earth. Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story, however, in his Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States, has shown that the Establishment clause of the First Amendment (on Freedom of Religion) was originally meant to say that the national government is not to favor one particular Christian institution over another one. The First Amendment did not intend to deny the civil government's right and duty to be involved in matters of the Christian religion and its advancement on earth. Story, with much similarity to the teaching of the Westminster Confession 23:3), went on to say: "Indeed the right of a society or government to interfere in matters of religion will hardly be contested by any persons... it is impossible for those who believe in the truth of Christianity, as a divine revelation, to doubt, that it is the especial duty of government to foster and encourage it among all the citizens and subjects." Cited in Kevin L. Clauson, "Ruler of the Nations," The Standard Bearer: A Festschrift for Greg L. Bahnsen, edited by Steven M. Schlissel (Nacogdoches, Texas: Covenant Media Press, 2002), 131n. Jonathan Edwards also taught that "magistrates" as well as "gospel ministers," are "obliged to arise and acknowledge God" in the work of promoting God's kingdom on earth (Edwards, Works I:389).

27. The Reformers, in general, believed that the law of God has a three-fold purpose: 1) The pedagogical use, wherein the law shows the righteousness of God and discloses the sinfulness of man, leading him to seek God's forgiveness; 2) The political use, where the law restrains sin in the community; and 3) The law serves as a pattern by which the believer is to live. See Calvin, Institutes II:7:6-13; see also W. Gary Crampton, What Calvin Says (Unicoi, Tennessee: Trinity Foundation, 2002), 53.

28. Bahnsen, By This Standard, 3. The hermeneutical principle spoken to here has to do with "standing law," not "positive law." Positive laws are particular directions or teachings of a "one time" nature, such as God directing Adam and Eve not to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15-17), or God's telling Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22), or God commanding Israel to destroy Jericho (Joshua 6). Dispensational theology takes the opposite stand on this hermeneutical principle; that is, if an Old Testament law is not repeated in the New Testament, then it is considered to be no longer binding; see The New Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), note on Exodus 19:5; and Charles C. Ryrie, Basic Theology (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1986), 302-305.


34. See, for example, William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey, editors, Theonomy: A Reformed Critique (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

35. Einwechter, Ethics and God's Law, 1.


38. Calvin, Institutes IV:20:1-32. Due to several statements that Calvin made in IV:20:14, some scholars have concluded that the Geneva Reformer was not an adherent to theonomy. But a close investigation of this section of the Institutes will show that what the Reformer was opposed to was not the civil magistrate's responsibility to obey the law of God as its standard, but the Anabaptist teaching that one had the right to rebel against any government which did not perfectly follow the Biblical pattern for civil law. That this is Calvin's point is clear from the
Prefatory Address to Francis I at the very beginning of the Institutes. Christianity, taught the Reformer, is not a subversive, revolutionary religion. It is not subversive or revolutionary even though the civil ruler may not be enforcing Biblical law.


42. Calvin, Commentaries, commentary on Deuteronomy 13:5-16 and Deuteronomy 22:22.

43. For more on John Calvin as a theonomist, see Gary North, Was Calvin a Theonomist? (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).


45. The Luther and Bucer quotes are cited in Martin A. Foulner, compiler and editor, Theonomy and the Westminster Confession (Edinburgh: Marpet Press, 1997), 49.


48. Foulner, Theonomy and the Westminster Confession, 8.

49. Einwechter, Ethics and God's Law, 39.

50. See Gentry, “Theonomy and Confession,” 194-195; and Foulner, Theonomy and the Westminster Confession, 8-10.


53. These quotes are from Foulner, Theonomy and the Westminster Confession, 61.

54. Bahnsen, No Other Standard, 33.

55. Bahnsen, No Other Standard, 264.

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