

THEONOMY

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The word Theonomy is a compound word made up of the two Greek words *Theos* (“God”) and *Nomos* (“law”). It literally means “God’s Law.” The term is used in theological circles today to refer to the teaching that says we ought to attempt to legislate all of the Mosaic Law into the governmental laws of our land. This normally does not include the ceremonial laws, but does include all of the civil laws that were given to Israel.

Much of modern Theonomic thought seems to have come about as a reaction to certain trends within American Evangelicalism such as the neglect of the Old Testament regarding ethics and a lack of involvement in social issues. Some of the most outspoken Theonomists have been Rousas J Rushdoony (The Chalcedon Foundation), Gary North (Institute for Christian Economics) and Greg Bahnsen (Southern California Centre for Christian Studies).

To be fair, Calvin taught that each of the “case laws” of the Mosaic Law taught some abiding principle which could have an appropriate application under the New Covenant. But the Theonomic view of the Old Testament Laws is much more forceful than this.

The commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” means also “Thou shalt have no other powers before me,” independent of me or having priority over me. The commandment can also read, “Thou shalt have no other law before me.” (R.J. Rushdoony, The Institutes of Biblical Law, Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1973, p. 61). Statements like this could be construed to mean that Christians ought not to obey the laws of the nations in which they live.

When Paul quoted Old Testament laws and applied them to situations within the church, he often did so by appealing to the principle behind the law rather than appealing to the law as a legal enforcement. An example of this is seen in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 where Paul deals with the situation of a man who is sleeping with his father’s wife. In such an instance, Leviticus 20:11 mandated that they should both be put to death. This punishment is not enforced by Paul. Instead he calls for the offenders to be put out of the church. This punishment is at the same time more severe than in the Old Testament (*handed over to Satan*) and yet it is also more gracious than that which is found in the Old Testament as it makes way for future restoration (*in order that his spirit may be saved*). It may therefore be concluded that the proper application of the Old Testament principle is New Testament Excommunication.

The following chart may help to portray the differences in thought regarding the proper

use and understanding of the Law.

Dispensationalism	Covenant Theology	Theonomy
The Mosaic Law has no bearing upon the world today.	The Principles of the Mosaic Law have application to the church.	The Law of Moses is to be applied to nations today as the means in which they are to govern.
Stresses the “literal interpretation” of the Bible.	Accepts both literal as well as figurative (spiritual) interpretations of Biblical principles.	Stresses the literal application of the Mosaic Law to modern governments.
Premillennial in eschatology.	Usually Amillennial, but sometimes Historical Premillennial	Postmillennial in eschatology.
The Old Testament animal sacrifices shall be restored in the future millennium as a memorial only.	The Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ, never to return, though the principles behind the Law continue.	The Old Testament Laws are to be applied to governments today and forever.

It is interesting to note that there are several areas in which Theonomy is more closely aligned to Dispensationalism than with Covenant Theology.

The larger problem with most Theonomists seems to be not so much their beliefs but rather the attitude in which they have historically attempted to propagate those beliefs. They have regularly been divisive in their polemics.

If you are a pastor, and you don't think your congregation wants to hear this kind of message, think about forming a new congregation. It won't be difficult. Just start preaching like a prophet of God, and the losers will leave, or toss you out. Your income as a pastor is going to wipe you out anyway; better seek alternative income now, while you have the opportunity. If you are a layman, and your pastor refuses to preach like a prophet, find a new church, or do what you can to get a new pastor. Being surrounded by Christian lemmings (grasshoppers, in Aesop's fable) when the crisis hits will be unpleasant. You will need friends who are better prepared than lemmings in that dark day. (Gary North, Backward Christian Soldiers? An Action Manual For Christian Reconstruction; Tyler, Texas; Institute for Christian Economics, 1984, p. 14).

The militancy with which the Theonomist holds to his position is reflected in the following statement of Rushdoony.

All who are content with a humanistic law system and do not strive to replace it with Biblical law are guilty of idolatry. They have forsaken the covenant of their God, and they are asking us to serve other gods. They are thus idolaters, and are, in our generation, when our world is idolatrous and our states also, to be objects of missionary activity. They must be called out of their idolatry into the service of the living God. (R. J. Rushdoony, Law and Society: Volume II of the Institutes of Biblical Law; Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1982, pp. 468).

That is quite different from the attitude of Paul toward the human legal systems of his day when he told his readers in Rome: *Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.* (Romans 13:1-2).

In 1 Timothy 1:8 Paul says that *the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully*. The Theonomist takes this verse as giving free reign to his view of establishing the Law as that which ought to be imposed upon nations and governments today. In doing so, they *have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions* (1 Timothy 1:6-7). The point is clear. Just because one wishes to be a teacher of the Law is no guarantee that such assertions are in keeping with healthy teaching.

Jesus is the best argument against Theonomy. He did not do anything or say anything to change the political leaders of the world of His day. He was in the presence of Pilate, the governor and representative of Caesar, and did not say a single thing to him about this law or that practice. He testified to Who He was! He came to seek and save the lost, not transform governments.