

THE ANNULMENT OF THE DIETARY LAWS

by Gary North

The Christian Reconstruction movement, also called the theonomist ("God's law") movement, suffers from a bad press, when it has any press at all. The evangelical community has little knowledge of the existence of theonomists, and where some information exists, it generally gets garbled as it is passed along. Not many Christians understand that it is valid to use biblical law as the basis for reconstructing the social order. At best, they prefer the use of phrases like "biblical principles." Of course, a principle, if it is perpetually valid, is a law.

Biblical law is a touchy issue. There are some Old Testament laws that have been fulfilled by Christ's work. Other Old Testament laws and practices ceased to be valid with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. An example of the latter is Paul's ritual purification of himself in order to accompany the four Jews who had taken the vow, and who were scheduled to enter the temple at Jerusalem (Acts 21:23-24, 26). The principle of interpretation promoted by the theonomist movement is this: if an Old Testament law has not been officially abandoned ~~in the New Testament~~, or if a New Testament principle has not annulled it, then it is still morally binding, and even legally binding, if it was to have been enforced by the civil government in the Old Testament Hebrew commonwealth.

One issue which has created confusion inside and outside the theonomist camp is the question of "kosher" food, meaning foods that were allowed under the Mosaic law. In the Mosaic law some animals were prohibited as food fit for consumption by Hebrews. So, for that matter, were certain kinds of "mixed clothing," i.e., linen and cotton fabric, wool and linen fabric, etc. The question is: Are these Old Testament restrictions still morally binding on Gentiles? (For that matter, were they ever designed by God to be morally binding on Gentile converts who did not intend to live in Israel, such as those in Nineveh who were converted by the preaching of Jonah?) Secondly, if these restrictions are still binding, which agency of government, civil or ecclesiastical, should enforce the prohibition?

Prior to the mid-1960's, no one in the Christian world believed that the Mosaic laws concerning food are in any way binding in New Testament times. Only in the late 1960's, as the theonomic position was being initially formulated, was the question of the dietary laws even raised, and even then, only in taped lectures. The theonomist who promoted the re-establishment of these laws had not previously paid any attention to them in his own household. In the late 1960's, he offered various reasons as to why these laws are still binding, the most common being the question of health. The New Testament exegetical case against the continuation of the dietary laws, most notably Paul's discussion of meats offered to idols in I Corinthians 8, was never discussed; indeed, I Corinthians 8 has yet to be discussed by proponents of Christian "kosher" laws, which testifies eloquently to the exegetical weakness of the position. (The Orthodox Jew relies on the Talmud's more detailed set of food restrictions than the laws found in the Old Testament, so "kosher" for him means something different.) Despite this lack of a biblical case for the dietary laws, the rhetoric favoring these laws has grown more and more shrill. Few people within the theonomist camp hold to the view, and only one of the published leaders does, yet it has become a topic which continues to generate an unfortunate controversy.

Disagreement from the Beginning

From the beginning, the theonomist camp as a whole did not take seriously the idea that the New Testament does not openly and specifically abandon the Hebrew dietary laws. The argument favoring Christian "kosher" foods met with immediate opposition. I wrote a paper in 1970 which was photocopied and distributed "within the camp." Since so few theonomists ever

accepted the "kosher" arguments, this paper was not widely discussed at the time. But newcomers who have come into the movement by way of the proponent's ministry have never been told by him that his position is held by "a minority of one" within the leadership. This is why I am reprinting the original essay here.

As time has gone by, the rhetoric of this lone defender of "kosher" food for Christians has escalated. What was a kind of afterthought in his initial audiotapes of 1968 has become central to his faith. In a book published in 1982, he writes that "Although *all* violations of God's law pollute the land, certain offenses are singled out as especially polluting. For these offenses, men make themselves *abominable* to the Lord and provoke the earth itself in a violent way. First among these offenses are *dietary* violations, the eating of unclean beasts (Lev. 20:22-26)." **First** among these offenses? This boggles the orthodox Christian mind, though not the Orthodox Hebrew mind. It is not animals that are abominable in New Testament times; rather, it is the argument favoring the continuing requirement of the dietary laws. It reintroduces the dead hand of ceremonial-national Judaism into the church of Jesus Christ. It places the Gentiles under laws that they were never under, ~~even in Old Testament times (Deut. 14:21: "the alien"). It is the~~ essence of the rival faith which Paul warned against in Galatians. Thus, it threatens to bring into needless contempt the whole theonomist movement. While I believe that this 1982 essay was actually written almost a decade earlier but left unpublished, there is no doubt that it represents a significant theological deviation from historic Christianity. Such a deviation was not made public in 1974.

The Cleansing of the Land

Since Christ's death and resurrection, the whole earth has been permanently cleansed of the death-curse it labored under as a result of Adam's fall. That release was established **definitively** at Calvary, and is being **progressively** revealed over time. The whole creation looks forward to the **final** release at the end of time (Rom. 8:19-23). This is one aspect of the release granted to the Church and to mankind in general by Christ.

In Old Testament Israel, for instance, the land was polluted — religiously polluted — by any unsolved murder. The elders of the city in which the murder occurred had to slay a heifer in order to remove the pollution from the land (Deut. 21:1-9). Calvary annulled this law, the death of Christ covered the pollution and permanently cleansed the land. There is no ritual cleansing required by the civil magistrates in order to free the land of pollution. Similarly, it is erroneous to speak of the eating of formerly prohibited foods — shrimp, crab meat, catfish, etc. — as somehow ritually polluting the land, or as a provocation to the earth. Such language is, quite frankly, the language of the Pharisees, a denial of the New Covenant's release. It is the perspective of the Talmud, not the New Testament. It would re-establish the bondage from which Christ has delivered us. James Jordan comments:

Thus, when Isaiah informed the Hebrews that the lion would be become tame and the snake safe to play with (Is. 11:6-9; 65:25), he was not simply talking about the conversion of the nations, nor necessarily about a change in the habits of animals during the millennium (though both of these are probably in view). Rather, it is the whole sphere of death and curse which is to a large degree lifted, so that detestible animals and people are no longer detestible, and so that admirable but unclean animals and people are no longer unclean. . . .

The establishment of the New Covenant with its final sacraments obviated all the Old Covenant quasi-sacraments. Thus, Jesus declared all food clean for eating purposes (Mark 7:19). Similarly, the New Covenant, with its greater dynamic after the coming of the

Holy Spirit, entails the conversion, not only the abhorrence of the nations. Thus, the vision given to Peter (Acts 10, 11) made clear that the animal kingdom was now clean, and so special emotional abhorrence was not to be cultivated any longer. Such cultivation would make evangelism difficult, and in an age of evangelism, the nations should be loved as the Father loves His enemies (Matt. 5:44-45), not abhorred as abominable. . . . What remains? Nothing. No animals today are unclean, and none are abhorrent. We are free to eat any animals without violating any psychological or sacramental principles. ("The Dietary Laws of Scripture: Their Meaning for Today," pp. 32, 33.)

Certain people who have been influenced by an increasingly shrill defense of the "kosher laws" have been misled into believing that these arguments are widely held by other theonomists. These newcomers are usually shocked to learn that virtually all the leaders and writers of the theonomist movement regard these arguments as erroneous at best and heretical at worst. Not only this, newcomers are also amazed to find that from the beginning, the theonomists who co-founded the movement have been divided on this question. They have been led to believe that adherence to "kosher laws" are of the essence of the theonomic position. On the contrary, **such practices are a ritualistic denial of the theonomic position.**

It is time to bring the dispute into the open, so that those inside the Christian Reconstruction movement can lay down this needless burden once and for all, and those outside can stop attributing a preposterous position to the bulk of those who call themselves theonomists. The defense of Christian "kosher laws" is a theologically deviant position of one man and a handful of his as yet unpublished followers. The name of the proponent is unimportant; the issue is theology. We must defend biblical truth; we need not bring up personalities.

The essay reprinted below was written in 1970. Only one or two minor points have been removed from the original. Only a word or two has been added, except section headings, which are for the readers' convenience. Mine is not a comprehensive analysis. The far more detailed and insightful studies by James Jordan, to be published in 1985 under the title, *Food and Faith*, bury forever all attempts to justify a New Testament continuation of the Hebrew dietary laws. (Audiotapes of his series on food in the Bible may be ordered from Geneva Ministries, 708 Hamvasy, Tyler, Texas; 75701; \$20 for five tapes.)

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HEBREW DIETARY LAWS AND THE NEW COVENANT

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by Gary North

The mainstream of orthodox Protestant thought since the 16th century has overwhelmingly rejected the Hebrew dietary laws as being in any way binding on the people of the New Covenant. The issue has therefore never been a particularly important point of contention within Anglican, Presbyterian, or Congregational-Puritan circles. Some Protestant groups have held to the validity of the Hebrew prohibitions, but these have generally been the heretical sects: Anabaptists during the 16th century, the radical sects of the Puritan Revolution, 1640-60, and some Seventh Day Adventists and Anglo-Israelites of modern times. [The late] Professor Ernst Ekman, Chairman of the History Department at the University of California, Riverside, and an expert in the Reformation period, has stated that those groups which proclaimed the continued validity of the dietary prohibitions were "decidedly on the left wing" of Protes-

tantism. As Prof. E. S. Gaustad has put it, only half in jest, anyone in the Puritan era in the American colonies would probably have been asked to join Roger Williams' colony of Rhode Island the day following any such announcement of a re-establishment of the dietary prohibitions.

Calvin's Viewpoint: Christian Freedom

The basic passages relating to the question of the eating of unclean or profane meats are Acts 10:7-16, Romans 14:14-23, and I Corinthians 8:1-13. Calvin, commenting on Acts 10:16, presents us with this challenge: "We must always find out what the Lord has to say, so that we may decide from that what is lawful for us, and what we are free to do. . . ." His exegesis of Acts 10 is representative of the whole Protestant attitude towards unclean meats. The discussion always centers around the division placed by God between the Hebrew nation and the Gentiles, a division symbolized and enforced by the establishment of the dietary laws. In the New Covenant, Christ "hath broken down the middle wall of partition" between Gentiles and Jews (Eph. 2:14), and therefore the symbolic and operational barriers are equally defunct. I know of no orthodox commentator in Protestantism, from the 16th through the 19th centuries, who views Acts 10 in any way other than this. Calvin writes:

Therefore I think that it is shown to Peter, in a general way, that the distinction, which God had formerly imposed, is now removed. But, just as He had made a division between the animals, so, having chosen one people for Himself, He used to regard all the nations as unclean and common. The distinction between the animals having now been removed, He teaches, as a consequence, that men are no longer divided as they used to be, and that a Jew is no different from a Greek. From this, Peter is warned not to shrink, afterwards, from the Gentiles as unclean (*Commentary on Acts: 10:12* [Eerdmans, 1965], p. 293).

Before, Calvin explains, Christ had ordered his disciples not to preach to the Gentiles, and he quotes Matt. 15:26, in which Christ forbade them to "take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Only if they accepted circumcision would the convert be accepted. Now, however, a new order is given to Peter. The Gentiles are to receive the message.

Therefore, in order that he may be sure of his call, God shows him openly, as if in a picture, that the legal distinction of clean and unclean is abolished. From that he may deduce that the wall which previously stood in the middle between Jews and Gentiles is now destroyed (Eph. 2:14). (*Ibid.*, p. 294.)

Calvin is adamant on this point. His language reflects the extent of his overwhelming hostility to any other reading of this passage. He especially rejects the transfer of the now-defunct Hebrew restrictions to the prohibition of meat on Friday, an obvious implication of the Roman Catholic position. No doubt his opposition to Rome colored his language:

As far as food is concerned, after the abrogation of the Law, God pronounces all to be pure and clean. If, on the other hand, a mortal man rises up who establishes a new distinction, forbidding people certain things, he is sacrilegious in audaciously seizing, and arrogating to himself, the right and authority of God. Such were the ancient heretics, Montanus, Priscillian, the Donatists, the Tatians and all the Encratites. Later on the Pope introduced a law concerning food, in order to bundle all those impious sects together (*Ibid.*, 296).

Alexander on Acts 10

J. A. Alexander, son of the founder of Princeton Seminary, was, along with Charles Hodge, perhaps the leading exegetical scholar in 19th-century American Presbyterianism. His *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Zondervan, [1875] 1956) is a masterpiece of careful scholarship, grounded both in Greek grammar and covenant theology. After a painstaking, line by line exegesis of Acts 10, Alexander summarizes the meaning of vs. 15, where God commands Peter not to call common what He has cleansed (following vs. 14: "And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill and eat"):

Instead of recognizing his pretensions to the praise of ceremonial perfection, the person, whose authority he had just acknowledged by addressing him as Lord, denies the truth and value of the distinction altogether. It is not a mere precaution against error in the application of the ceremonial principle, but an abrogation of the principle itself. Peter is not simply put upon his guard against the error of regarding as unclean, according to the Jewish standard, what was really, according to that standard, clean. He is warned against the far worse error of continuing to recognize that standard as itself obligatory, after it had ceased to be so. Hitherto there has been a distinction between clean and unclean, both in meats and persons. Henceforth there could be none; for what had been unclean for ages by divine authority was now pronounced clean by the same; and what had thus been constituted clean could not be rendered common by the exercise of any human power or authority (p. 396).

Cultural-National Separation

The problem is in deciding whether this command to Peter is comparable to that given to Hosea, to marry a prostitute—a temporary command to single man, and not a general requirement for all. What we have in the prohibition against the eating of meats is a case-law application of a more general law, namely, the prohibition of intercourse, both spiritual and physical, between God's national kingdom people and all those of other kingdoms. It is a case-law application similar to the prohibition against muzzling an ox which treads the corn, a rule given to demonstrate that a laborer is worthy of his hire (1 Tim. 5:18). With the abolition of the general principle comes the abrogation of its case-law application: clean and unclean are no longer terms applicable to national groups or to certain kinds of meat or fish. God demonstrated by means of case law, i.e., the newly granted right to eat all meats, that the former cultural and national distinction between Israel and the Gentile nations is no longer in effect. The Hebrew commonwealth is officially defunct theologically in God's plan for the "last times." Thus, Peter's case is not comparable to the case of Hosea, except in this sense: the prostitute, regarded as a foreigner or stranger in Israel, was not to be married, and a religious or externally immoral foreigner is still forbidden. Clean and unclean are terms reserved for spiritual kingdoms, not political ones; therefore, we still may not marry prostitutes, who are strangers to the kingdom of God. But the division based on foods was purely national; with the abolition of the national kingdom, God showed Peter, comes a new permissiveness with regard to meats. The implications of this change in covenantal administration is brought home to Peter in an intensely personal way: he is commanded to eat the crawling things so foreign to his traditions.

Paul carries this principle to the Gentiles. "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean" (Rom. 14:14). This, as Paul makes clear in Romans 1, does not apply to every act that man is capable of,

but only to those things culturally indifferent to the Scriptures, and the example he provides of just such an indifferent act is the eating of what the Hebrews would have regarded as unclean meat—meat offered to idols. Paul distinguishes between the weaker Christian who has not yet seen the implications of Christian freedom under the new covenantal administration and the stronger Christian who has grasped the extent of the change. Meats offered to idols are perfectly edible to the fully mature Christian, so long as it does not cause a weaker brother to stumble in his faith. This is the message of Rom. 14:14ff. and 1 Cor. 8:1-13. Robert Haldane, the 19th-century Calvinist commentator, says only the obvious: "Every kind of meat is here declared to be pure" (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Banner of Truth, (1963)], p. 606: vs. 20). Haldane's comments on Romans 14:17 are to the point, and representative of virtually all Protestant commentators:

For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink.—This imports that the service which belongs to the kingdom of God, and which He requires from all His subjects, does not consist in abstaining from, or in using, any kind of meats. The typical dispensation of the Old Testament enjoined a distinction of meats. Men are particularly prone to cling to externals in religious worship. It is, then, of great importance to attend to this decision of the Holy Ghost by the Apostle Paul. The distinction of meats has nothing to do with the service of God under the New Testament (p. 604).

The "Weaker Brother"

Charles Hodge, the great 19th-century expositor, predictably concerns his exegesis with the issue Paul was raising, namely, the plight of the weaker brother. The general principle, in the absence of any harm for the weaker brother's faith, Hodge states quite accurately: "There is no sin in detaining from certain meats, and therefore, if the good of others require[s] this abstinence, we are bound to exercise it" (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans, (1886) 1964], p. 424). The focus of such abstention from eating "unclean" meats is on the heart of the weaker brother, and not the freedom granted to the strong, theologically mature Christian. The weaker man, because he does not yet grasp the freedom of the new covenant with respect to the culturally indifferent practice of eating all meats, fears that in eating meat offered to idols he would offend God. The stronger man, for the sake of his brother's immaturity, voluntarily abstains. Paul's entire exegesis, it should be pointed out, rests on a very clear statement of which position represents that of the immature Christian. The hypersensitive conscience with respect to meat eating belongs to the immature, weaker, less theologically astute member of the Church. If this is not Paul's position, then it becomes impossible to make sense out of Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8.

It cannot easily be argued that Paul was dealing only with meats offered to idols, but not with the meats prohibited by the Old Testament. First, Paul was concerned with a general category, religiously unclean meats, i.e., meats polluted with idol worship. Second, one of the most popular of Greek sacrifices was the pig. By allowing the Christian to purchase and eat meats once offered to idols, Paul legitimized the eating of pork. He made no distinction between, say, beef offered to idols (which we can eat) and pork offered to idols (which is prohibited). He referred to a general category, meats offered to idols. To read more into this passage is to go beyond Paul's clear language, and especially dangerous practice, given Peter's experience in Acts 10. Calvin's comment should stand as our guide:

He leaves their freedom intact, but he puts a restriction on it, in so far as its use must not upset those who are weak. And he is quite explicit about his wish that consideration should be given to the weak, i.e. those who are not yet very well grounded in godliness. Since they are usually looked down upon by everybody, the Lord wishes, indeed commands, us to be concerned about them. At the same time he hints that tough giants, who want to play the tyrant, and put our freedom under their control, can be safely ignored; because one need not be afraid of offending people who are not led into sin by weakness, but who, at the same time, are eagerly on the look-out for something to find fault with (*The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* [1960], p. 178: 8:9).

Calvin, with his eye always to the Catholic Church of his day, was unwilling to allow any compromise with Paul's explicit language. The prohibition on meat eating can be made on one ground, and on one ground alone: to eat would jeopardize the faith of the weaker brother.

If a law is valid in principle, it must be enforced in its particulars. This is basic to any concept of law. Conversely, if it is not to be enforced in its particulars, it has no validity in principle. We see a confusion of this principle of law in most of the writings of today's Christian antinomians. "The law against debt of any kind is a nice general principle (Rom. 13:8), but in some way this general principle is never to be enforced in terms of the explicit limitations placed on debt by the Bible." Such an outlook means simply that principles of law are not to be enforced in practice. It is the denial of law.

Dietary Restrictions and Circumcision

Paul and Peter, in dealing with the weaker Hebrew brethren, respected their inability to discern that the general distinction between Jew and Gentile had a case-law application: the freedom to eat any kind of food. Paul did not tolerate anyone who raised the issue of circumcision to a place where it infringed on the doctrine of salvation by grace. He did not tolerate Peter's mistake in separating himself from the Gentile brethren for the sake of his *fear* of the other Jews (Gal. 2:11, 12). No, only out of his respect for cultural distinctions that were in no way Scriptural, but which, had they not been observed, his ministry would have been threatened, did Paul conform himself to them (I Cor. 9:18-23). "And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law (I Cor. 9:20). That is why he consented to purify himself with the four men who were to shave their heads because of their vow (Acts 21:24, 26). That is why he consented to send word to the Gentiles that they keep from things offered to idols (Acts 21:25)—not because they were in principle to keep from such things, but because of their weaker Hebrew brethren in the

faith who were upset by his teachings with respect to Christian freedom.

The eating of the previously prohibited meats is comparable to the practice of circumcising infants. "For in Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (Gal. 6:15). Circumcision, unless made a basic principle of salvation, is neither here nor there. If some medical reason can be shown that circumcision, given the cleanliness practices of a particular culture, might lower certain kinds of disease, then it cannot hurt to circumcise. Similarly, if in some nation the handling of pork is so lax that danger of disease is rather high, Christians would be wise to abstain from pork. But in no way can the prohibition be linked to a single verse in the Bible; in no way can it be made into anything more than expediency. Only if one is dealing with weaker Christians—new converts from orthodox Judaism or new converts from a culture that prohibits the eating of certain meats—can the prohibition be linked to a scriptural passage. With regard to the culturally indifferent practices of the *New Testament*, especially those formerly instituted by God only to keep a sense of cultural isolation present in the minds of His people before he revealed the great mystery—that Gentiles were to have *full and immediate acceptance* by their profession of faith (Rom. 16:25, 26; Eph. 3:3ff.)—but now abrogated, Paul's standard is ours: "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any." (I Cor. 6:12) The words of Christ should be sufficient to counter any argument that Christians are in some way bound to honor the Old Testament's dietary provisions:

Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man (Matt. 15:11).

Conclusion

Because our witness with regard to what is still in effect of Old Testament laws will be scrutinized carefully by both believers and unbelievers, it is mandatory that we do not make that witness appear exegetically unscriptural. Contemporary antinomians will point to any continuation of an abrogated Old Testament provision, using that as an example of the invalid nature of our whole approach to biblical law. We will be called heretical on this one point, and that will help to discredit our overall view of law. Therefore, it is mandatory that we clarify our position with respect to the abrogated (culturally or ceremonially fulfilled) portions of Old Testament law, officially denying our acceptance of any view of the Old Testament's dietary laws as binding, except in so far as our witness might be weakened when dealing with the immature, hyperfastidious new convert whose cultural background sets forth restrictions on the eating of certain foods (e.g., Muslim, Hindu, Orthodox Jew, etc.).