

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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## A COVENANTAL VIEW OF BIBLICAL LAW

### Transcendence

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).

### Hierarchy

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons . . . It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. (Hebrews 12:3-11).

### Ethics

Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. . . (Hebrews 12:12-17).

### Oath

For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to them. . . But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:18-24).

### Succession

See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven." And this expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:25-29).

For over a decade, the issue of Old Testament law has steadily crept to the foreground. Detractors on all sides have attempted to suppress this movement. They have failed. The question has been, "How much Old Testament law pulls over into the New Testament?" The theonomic and Christian Reconstructionist camp has by and large answered, "Only the Old Testament law that is **not explicitly abrogated** in the New Testament is required of the Christian." The dispensational camp to the contrary has reasoned, "Only the Old Testament law explicitly **re-stated** should be kept."

Reformed churches have been somewhat caught in the middle. Emerging out of the Protestant Reformation traditions, they have always at least required their members to keep the "moral law," the Ten Commandments. And since all of the original leaders of the Reconstructionist movement have reformed backgrounds, Presbyterian or Episcopalian, the issue has created tension among the ranks.

Theonomy has been charged with a "defective view of the New Covenant" because of its position on the continuation of Hebrew civil law into the New Testament. Why this "perception," even if the allegation is not true? Theonomists believe in a "whole Bible approach" to Christianity. When Paul said, "All Scripture is . . . profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (II Tim. 3:16), he was primarily referring to the **Old Testament**. **Whatever hermeneutic a person comes up with should therefore include the Old Testament: beyond principalizing, beyond typologizing, beyond psychologizing. All of the Old Testament has ethical ramifications for the New Covenant believer.** To this hermeneutical concern, theonomists have spoken; they have been well-spoken and even **out-spoken**.

Beyond the out-spokenness, however, there has been much antagonism to theonomy. Why? Quite frankly, much of the horrendous reaction has been due to the "spirit" of

the age in which we live, **antinomianism**. For decades, theologians within **evangelicalism** have been infatuated with holiness-hating theologies: revivalism with its "easy **beliefism**" and "carnal Christian" doctrine, Dispensationalism with its "New Testamentalism" and "parenthesis" view of history that leads to **social irrelevance**, and Neo-orthodoxy with its hatred for culture. Take a look at those who most vehemently oppose theonomy, and one of these antinomian theologies usually appears. The problem is not so much that theonomists don't believe in a New Covenant, but that they believe in the **whole Bible, and a this-world-morality**. That's why they don't call their magazines "Eternity" or "The Beulah Land Report."

But some of the uneasiness about theonomy is not totally unfounded. There are many serious and faithful Christians who correctly allege that the "theonomic hermeneutic" – that the "jots and tittles" of the Old Testament cannot change "until heaven and earth pass away" (Matt. 5:17-18) – is too rigid to allow for New Covenant changes. I would go so far as to say that the standard theonomic hermeneutic up to this point "restricts" the New Testament emphasis on **the intensification of Biblical law** in the New Covenant age. For example, the laws regarding divorce are **stricter in the New Covenant, as I have attempted to develop** in my book on divorce and remarriage.<sup>1</sup>

This **covenantal view** of Biblical law says that certain elements of Old Testament law have to change before the law can be applied to the Gentiles, changes leading to a greater application of the Old Testament. To understand this position, we should examine the central passage to the theonomic position, as well as the Scripture cited at the beginning of this newsletter. I propose **a covenantal view of Biblical law, coming as a friend to the covenant law of Scripture, and not as an antagonist. I will draw many of the same conclusions about the application of Old Testament law to the New Covenant Age as the previous position on theonomy, but I will do so with a slightly different and I hope better approach to Matthew 5:17-19.**

### Matthew 5:17-19

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. . . ." (Matthew 5:17-19). The standard Rushdoony/Bahnsen approach to this passage has been to understand the Greek word for "fulfill" (**pleroo**) to mean **static maintenance**. **Jesus did not come to abolish**, nor to do away with Old Testament law, so they have concluded that He came to **maintain it, or re-establish it**. The present theonomic position has concluded such because of the reference to the "jots and tittles" of the law not being able to change until the "heaven and earth pass away" (Matthew 5:18), meaning absolutely no changes in Biblical law until the passing of the physical universe.

**To be completely consistent with the theonomic interpretation of Matthew 5:17-18, therefore, all of the law should still be observed.** For example, Rushdoony and the Armenian tradition agree: Dietary laws should still be kept; sacrifices should continue to be offered on the steps of the Church as a "memorial"; circumcision is **mandatory**.<sup>2</sup>

The major problem with the Rushdoony/Bahnsen view is that it does not do justice to the Greek word translated "to fulfill." The Greek normally means, "To bring to fullest

expression." Jesus could have used another word that would have very easily conveyed the idea of **re-established** or static maintenance (**bebaio, histemi**). But He didn't. He selected a word implying **progression, the implication of which in my opinion would be intensification of Biblical law**. **Jesus brings into full force what had never been able to be applied before, as well as in greater force than ever before.** One commentator says,

Therefore we give **pleroo** ("fulfill") exactly the same meaning as in the formula quotations, which in the prologue (Matt. 1-2) have already laid great stress on the prophetic nature of the OT and the way it points to Jesus. In no way does this "abolish" the OT as canon, any more than the obsolescence of the Levitical sacrificial system abolishes tabernacle ritual as canon. Instead, the OT's real and abiding authority must be understood through the person and teaching of him to whom it points and who so rightly fulfills it. This may work out in any particular case to have the same practical effect as "intensifying" [Bold face mine] the law or "annulling" some element [e.g. sacrificing animals].<sup>3</sup>

The other problem with the Rushdoony/Bahnsen interpretation concerns the inability to deal with legitimate New Covenant changes. In fact, the force of arguing that the "jots and tittles" are binding until the end of the physical world **simply cannot allow for any change. I know many theonomists try to distance themselves from Rushdoony on these points. Bahnsen, who builds on Rushdoony, tries to make a distinction between "restorative and retributive" law. But the qualifications effectively fail to soften the original premise. As James Jordan has said on a number of occasions, Bahnsen's position on Matthew 5, "Dies the death of a thousand qualifiers!"**

### Redemption and History

In my opinion, here is the theonomist's dilemma, at least as the position has been presented by the Rushdoony/Bahnsen camp. To be precise, it cannot allow for the changes brought about by the **application of redemption in history**.

**The relationship between history and redemption separates Christianity** from every other religion. The Fall of man brought the judgment of God to history. For the Fall to be reversed or overcome, redemption in history had to occur; moreover, the redemption of history had to take place. So that we not misunderstand, the Bible **progressively** unfolds the glorious record of how the world could not be changed until the coming of Christ. It does not have to give every detail of history because history itself does not have the power to redeem. Rather, the Bible concentrates on the application of redemption through God's appointed priesthood to the world, Adam and Israel in the Old Covenant and Jesus and the Church (New Israel) in the New Covenant. Throughout the Old Testament, God raises up one "new" Adam after another, giving more and more revelation. Each one, however, ends up like the first Adam, and points to the need for a **true second Adam, Jesus Christ**.

**Finally, when Christ comes in history, there is an historic shift from wrath to grace.** In the words of the Apostle Paul, "The old things passed away; Behold, new things have come" (II Cor. 5:17). It is simple: If this transformation of history has not occurred, then redemption has not been **applied to the world. It is this historic change** that the standard theonomic hermeneutic cannot legitimately account for, nor any other view for that matter that is not

1. Ray R. Sutton, *Second Chance: Biblical Principles of Divorce and Remarriage* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1988).

2. Rousas John Rushdoony, *Law and Society: Volume II of the Institutes of Biblical Law* (Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1982).

3. Donald A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:143-144.

truly **covenantal**. The following is a **covenantal** view of Biblical law.

## Hebrews 12

I believe the "shaking of the heaven and earth" in Hebrews 12 says the physical world was transformed at the Cross. This has significant bearing on Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. He said Old Testament law could not change until "heaven and earth pass away." If this passing away is the same as the "shaking" in Hebrews, then we can see how the law would in some sense change after the Cross, while at the same time intensify in application.

The context of Hebrews 12 is the key to this interpretation. I have cited the entire chapter at the beginning of this newsletter so that the reader may see this context, specifically where the verses of Hebrews fall in the **covenantal** scheme of things. A quick overview of the chapter is in order.

First, the chapter begins on a **transcendent note (Hebrews 12:1-2)**, referring to **"so great a cloud of witnesses": the witnesses in heaven**. It stresses that **what will be said is based on what goes on around the throne of God**, a transcendent theme also found in the first segment of the Deuteronomic covenant; **Moses speaks what comes from God who dwells in Heaven**. Specifically, however, **Hebrews 12 develops the theme of witnesses from the previous chapter, witnesses who carry out the sanctions attached to the oath of the covenant**. So the chapter opens by emphasizing the need to live according to our covenant oath because the "heavenly witnesses," the ones who can prosecute against us, surround our activities, particularly on the Lord's Day when the church "draws near" to the heavenly throne in some special sense (Hebrews 10:23-25).

Second, Hebrews 12:3-11 speaks of the need for the fathers of the covenant to carry out the process of discipline. This parallels the **discipline of the fathers theme in the second part of the Deuteronomic covenant (Deuteronomy 1:9ff.)**.

Third, Hebrews 12:12-24 switches to specific exhortations and commands. It continues the Deuteronomic structure by calling for certain righteous actions to be performed, **as well as** speak of unrighteous behavior to be avoided. Just as the third part of Deuteronomy, outlines the expectations of the covenant, the third section of Hebrews 12 calls for stipulations. The list of commands generally follows the last five commandments of the Decalogue, ending on an imperative to avoid coveting (Hebrews 12:16-17).

Fourth, Hebrews 12 then turns to a discussion of two mountains: Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion. This emphasis is consistent with the fourth part of the Deuteronomic covenant (Deuteronomy 27-30) where the covenant was renewed on two mountains: Gerizim and Ebal (Deuteronomy 27). In this case, Paul, the author of Hebrews calls attention to the fact that the New Covenant oath is made on a superior mountain, implying stricter recriminations should the oath be violated.

Fifth, Hebrews 12:25-29 concludes on the theme of succession. It points back to the power of the Old Covenant mountain to tremble and exclude violators of the covenant, removing them from succession or inheritance. It then compares the shaking of the old covenant mountain to the shaking of "heaven and earth" by the new covenant mountain (Hebrews 12:26). The "shaking" is obviously the means of establishing true covenantal succession, always the theme of the final segment of the Deuteronomic covenant structure (Deuteronomy 31-34).

Paul's meaning of the "shaking of heaven and earth" is important to our understanding of Jesus' words in the

Sermon on the Mount, where He said, "Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the law" (Matthew 5:18). The Apostle Paul speaks of a succession, transition or transformation that comes at the "shaking of heaven and earth", specifically the Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ. He describes a judgment of cosmic proportion. At this judgment of heaven and earth, one covenanted group of people was disinherited, apostate Israel, and the Church became the new heir. In so doing, Paul warns his readers of the God of "consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29) with the power to judge **them**, should they ignore their solemn oath taken in the presence of the heavenly witnesses. The "shaking of the heaven and earth," a transformation of the **cosmic order**, means the one limitation for the law of God being changed has been removed.

## John Owen's Interpretation

John Owen, the 17th Century Puritan, develops this superior and more **covenantal** rationale for understanding how the law could not change and yet change in the New Covenant. He resolves the tension of modern theonomic hermeneutics in his exposition of a passage in Hebrews 12:26-29 called, "The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth" Vol. 8, pp. 247-279 ).4

And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven." And this expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude.

Owen notes that (1) the Greek for "removal" means **transformation**, pointing out that none of its other uses even hint at the idea of "removal" (Heb. 7:12; 11:5; Jude 4). Thus, the "shaken" physical is not "done away with", but **ethically and governmentally changed**.

(2) The transformation places the government of the physical order under the **kingdom of God**, a "new" ethical regime. Clearly, verse 27 says something that "cannot be changed" changes that which "can be changed." The "that which can be changed" is the physical world called "heaven and earth." Verse 28 tells us that "that which cannot be changed" is the "kingdom of God." So his interpretation tells us how the physical world is "removed."

Moreover, Owen argues that the phrase "heaven and earth" is shorthand for the physical world under the government of the Old Covenant. He supports his interpretation by reference to the use of cosmic language in Scripture to describe making and breaking **covenants**. Creation-language portrays the formation of a **covenant** with Israel (Isa. 51:15-16), and conversely, cosmic de-creation-language delineates breaking a **covenant** with the "old" people of God (Jer. 4:23-25). For Owen, the "passing of heaven and earth" was its transformation from a world ruled by the Old Covenant with its capital in Jerusalem, to a "New Heaven and Earth" under the New Covenant with its center in Christ and the Church (Heb. 12:18-24).

Applied to Jesus' statements that not "one jot or tittle" of the Law and the Prophets is changed until "heaven and earth pass away," we can properly see our Lord's intent. "Heaven and earth" **covenantally** passed away at the death and resurrection of Christ, meaning the physical world came under a "New Covenant." A "New heavens and earth" definitively began, whereby the physical world was placed in submission to the Covenant of Christ.

4. Others have followed this "redemptive historical approach", such as John Brown and many of the Dutch theologians of the last 150 years.

Where does this leave the concept of theonomy? We are left with a **more covenantal view**. When Christ died, the Old Covenant died with Him (Col. 2:14). Some would say this does away with the emphasis of Christian Reconstructionism. Is this true? No. The Old Covenant is resurrected in Christ, making it a New **Covenant**. **So, the writer to the Hebrews assumes the argument that the New Covenant intensifies the application of the Law, because he says that "Torah" is etched more deeply on the "hearts" of the New Covenant people (Hebrews 8:10).** As the law of God was re-published in the resurrected Christ, so it is incarnated in the Church by the Spirit of God.

A **covenantal** view of theonomy therefore accounts for the dramatic changes of the New Covenant, expressed in the strong Pauline language, "old things have passed away, behold new things have come" (11 Cor. 5:17). But it also indicates that God's law is intensified through the glorification of Christ.

### Intensification of Law

The total transformation of the Old Covenant law means that only the **jots and tittles** of the Old Covenant change. **Not everything**. Some change is not complete change. At the very most, Jesus argues for very small alteration in content. So, a covenantal view of Old Testament law allows for a more rigorous application in the New Covenant, specifically in the area of **sanctions**. Not only do **Jesus' comments not remove the law; they allow for its intensification**. Let us begin with two simple observations about Old Covenant sanctions.

#### Old Covenant Sanctions

First, Old Covenant sanctions were **restrained in their judgment effect**. After Adam and Eve sinned, God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever' . . . . So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3:22-24). Why did God prevent the first couple from eating the fruit? To have eaten it would have kept them in perpetual judgment. The text says they would have lived forever had they eaten the fruit, but they would have lived forever in their **fallen state**. God restrained them. The awful judgment of the tree of life was reserved for Christ. Until His death, however, judgment on the world was held back.

Second, not only were the sanctions restrained, they were not as **potent**. For example, **unlawfully** eating the food sacrament of Passover did not have the power to kill. In the New Testament, however, unfaithful eating of the Eucharist sickens and kills (1 Cor. 11:30). Why the change? Remember, until Christ received the full weight of all the

Old Covenant judgment, sanction wrath was not fully released. After the shift from wrath to grace, the floodgates of judgment were turned loose. Thus, the Crucifixion and Resurrection ushered in the release of **judgment and blessing**. The full force of judgment came to the earth definitively, progressively, and culminatively: without delays, postponements, and certainly never "random intrusions." The marvel of the Gospel became the offer of "escape" from the wrath of God. Rejection meant greater judgment: hence, the New Covenant sanctions have greater consequences if violated.

#### New Covenant Sanctions

Due to the fact that judgment is unleashed in the New Covenant, the sanctions seem to be more rigorous. Consider the death penalty attached to unlawful participation in the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:30). Consider Paul's expanded list of penal sanctions (Rom. 1:28-32).<sup>5</sup> Consider Hebrews 2:2-3: "For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a **just reward**, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was **confirmed to us** by those who heard Him." Thus, Paul sums up the entire rationale for more extensive and intensive New Covenant sanctions. God always gets His **restitution**. The Old Covenant man didn't escape, neither does the New Covenant man. The latter even faces greater condemnation because he lives A.D. and not B.C.

All of these considerations indicate greater judgment in the age of the New Covenant. If Jesus really did come in history, then judgment came because only through judgment can salvation be given to man. **Grace** came through the wrath of God. So with the intensification of judgment came its counterpart: blessing. As history moves forward, more and more judgment will be poured out to the end that more and more blessing will result; the world is saved, a time when the world will therefore be covered with salvation (Heb. 8:11).

#### Conclusion

In this newsletter I have tried to demonstrate a superior hermeneutic for those who love God's law: one more able to deal with all the Biblical factors. History is not static or level. Christ's coming brings dramatic change in history. As a matter of fact, the hermeneutic I have proposed lays the ground work for understanding why God's sanctions intensify through history. Christ brings a "greater than redemption," but He also eschews a **greater than judgment**. With this view, one does not have to apologize for what God has done, is doing, and will do in **history**.

5. Although Paul qualifies that those who "practice such things" – meaning the "motivations" have to flesh out into practice – Paul seems to be more rigorous in that which is "worthy of death."