

A Position Paper on the subject of

Theonomy

This paper is offered to state the position that is held by Tri-City Covenant Church concerning the Laws of God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. The position taken here is not a requirement for membership in the church, nor is it necessarily held by all members of the church.

It is the position of the Elder Board of the church as they are responsible for leadership.

“Over against the autonomous ethical philosophies of men, where good and evil are defined by sinful speculation, the Christian ethic gains its character and direction from the revealed word of God.”

Throughout the history of the Christian church, believers have asked what their attitude should be toward the commandments of God that are revealed in the Old Testament. A large variety of positions have been taken regarding God’s law – stretching all the way from saying that there have been no changes in how the law should be observed (so that, for instance, animal sacrifices would be continued) to saying that everything has been changed because of the change of dispensation (so that the Christian ethic is totally restricted to the New Testament.) Between the two extreme poles and fundamental to the position taken herein is the conviction that God’s special revelation – His written word – is necessary as the objective standard of morality for God’s people. Over against the autonomous ethical philosophies of men, where good and evil are defined by sinful speculation, the Christian ethic gains its character and direction from the revealed word of God, a revelation which harmonizes with the general revelation made of God’s standards through the created order and man’s conscience.

We take a positive attitude toward the commandments of God, even as revealed in the Old Testament. Indeed, the Bible teaches that we should presume continuity between the ethical standards of the New Testament and those of the Old, rather than abbreviating the validity of God’s law according to some preconceived and artificial limit. Because he did not come to abrogate the Old Testament, and because not one stroke of the law will become invalid until the end of the world, Jesus declared: “Therefore, whosoever breaks one of these least commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least I the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:17-19). Give this instruction, our attitude must be that all Old Testament laws are presently our obligation unless further revelation from the Lawgiver shows that some change has been made.

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 not to say that there are no changes from Old to New Testament. Indeed, there are – important ones. However, the word of God must be the standard which defines precisely what those changes are for us; we cannot take it upon ourselves to assume such changes or read them into the New Testament. God’s Word, His direction to us, must be taken as continuing in its authority until God himself reveals otherwise. This is, in a sense, the heart of “covenant theology” over against a dispensational understanding of the relation between Old and New Testaments.

To this methodological point we add the substantive conclusion that the New Testament does not teach any radical change in God’s law regarding the standards of socio-political morality. God’s law as it touches upon the duty of civil magistrates has not been altered in any systematic or fundamental way in the New Testament.

Consequently, instead of taking a basically antagonistic view of the Old Testament commandments for society and the state, and instead of taking a smorgasbord approach of picking and choosing among those laws on the basis of personal taste and convenience, we must recognize the continuing obligation of civil magistrates to obey and enforce the relevant laws of the Old Testament, including the penal sanctions specified by the just Judge of all the earth. As with the rest of God’s law, we must presume continuity of binding authority regarding the socio-political commandments revealed as standing law in the Old Testament.

Discontinuity (Change) has not been denied. What has been said above is simply that the presumption should be that an Old Testament law is binding in the New Testament. This does not in any way preclude or reject many radical differences between the Old and New Testaments. Changes do indeed come through the course of redemptive history, so that there certainly are exceptions to the general continuity that characterizes the relation between Old and New Covenants. God has the right to make alterations for the New Age. In the transition to this New Age we observe that advances are made over the Old Covenant, with some laws laid aside and some laws observed in a new fashion.

Given the progress of revelation, we must be committed to the rule that the New Testament should interpret the Old Testament for us; the attitude of Jesus and the Apostles to the Mosaic law, for instance, must be determinative of the Christian ethic. Thus a simplistic equation between Old and New Testament ethics – one that abstractly absolutizes the New Testament teaching about the continuity with the Old Testament (not recognizing qualifications revealed elsewhere) – is not advanced by the position taken here. What is maintained is that our obligation to God's Old Testament law should be interpreted and qualified by the New Testament Scripture, not by relative human opinion which can cite no Biblical warrant for departing from God's stipulations.

It should be recognized that certain aspects of the Old Covenant are not authoritative today. For instance, in addition to the standing laws by which the Jews were always to live, God gave certain localized imperatives to them – commands for specified use in one concrete situation, not principles with the continuing force of the law from generation to generation.

Likewise, there were cultural details mentioned in many of God's laws so as to illustrate the moral principle which He required (for example, the distinction between accidental manslaughter and malicious murder was illustrated in terms of a flying axehead). What is of permanent moral authority is the principle illustrated, and not the cultural detail used to illustrate it. Thus we ought not to read the case laws of the Old Testament as binding us to the literal wording utilized.

In addition to localized imperatives and cultural details of expression, we would note that certain administrative details of Old Testament society are not normative for today (for example, the type or form of government, the method of tax collecting, the location of the capitol). These aspects of Old Testament life were not prescribed by standing law, and they do not bind us today.

Other discontinuities with Old Testament life and practices would pertain to the typological foreshadows in the Old Testament – replaced according to the New Testament with the realities they typified. For instance, we have the ceremonial laws of sacrifice which served during the Old Testament as "weak and beggarly" shadows of the perfect sacrifice of Christ which was to come. We can also think here of the provisions regarding the land of Palestine. With the coming and establishment of that kingdom typified by the "promised land" and with the removal of special kingdom privileges from the Jews by Christ, the laws regulating aspects of the land of Canaan (for example, family plots, location of cities of refuge, the levirate institution) have been laid aside in the New Testament as inapplicable.

Other examples could perhaps be given, but enough has been said by now to demonstrate the point that the position taken herein is not that every last detail of Old Testament life must be reproduced today as morally obligatory but simply that our presumption must be that of continuity with the standing laws of the Old Testament (when properly, contextually interpreted).

We need to be sensitive to the fact that interpreting the Old Testament law, properly categorizing its details (for example, ceremonial, standing, cultural) and making modern day applications of the authoritative standards of the Old Testament is not an easy or simple task. It is not always readily apparent to us how to understand an Old Testament commandment or use it properly today. So the position taken here does not make everything in Christian ethics a simple matter of looking up obvious answers in a code-book. Much hard thinking – exegetical and theological homework – is entailed by a commitment to the position advocated.

It is advocated that we should presume the abiding authority of any Old Testament commandment until and unless the New Testament reveals otherwise, and this presumption holds just as much for laws pertaining to the state as for laws pertaining to the individual. As already noted, such a presumption does not deny the reality of some discontinuities with the Old Testament today; it simply insists that such changes be warranted by Biblical teaching, not by untrustworthy personal feeling or opinion.

So then, the position taken here does not pretend to be a total view of Christian ethics, touching on its many facets. We must avoid certain serious errors that can be made about God's law. Obedience to God's law is not the way a person gains justification in the eyes of God; salvation is not by meritorious works but rather by grace through faith. And while the law may be a pattern of holy living for sanctification, the law is not the dynamic power which enables obedience on the part of God's people; rather, the Holy Spirit gives us new life and strength to keep God's commands. The externalistic interpretation of God's law which characterized the Pharisees is also repudiated; the demands made by God extend to our hearts and attitudes so that true obedience must stem from a heart of faith and love. It is not found simply in outward conformity to (part of) His law.

The ethical position taken here is of a foundational character. It deals with a fundamental issue, the validity of God's law, and does not answer all questions about detailed application of God's law to our modern world. To say this, is not to endorse every abuse that has been or is being made by believers regarding the requirements set forth in the Old Testament commandments.

Furthermore, it should be observed that we do not advocate the imposition of God's law by force upon a society, as though that would be a way to "bring in the kingdom." God's kingdom advances by means of the Great Commission – evangelism, preaching, and nurture in the word of God – and in the power of God's regenerating and sanctifying Spirit. While we take a distinctive position regarding the law of God and the modern state we do not consider God's law as a method for political change.

Thus it might be well to avert misconceptions here by repudiating any thought of the church taking up the sword in society, any thought of rebellion against the powers that be, and likewise any thought of mindless submission to the status quo in one's society. Our commitment must be to the transforming power of God's word which reforms all areas of life by the truth. Ignoring the need for socio-political reform or trying to achieve it by force both contradict the church's reformational responsibilities.

By paying attention to God's law in Christian ethics we are simply being consistent with the Reformed conviction that our Christian beliefs should be guided by sola Scriptura and tota Scriptura – only by Scripture and by all of Scripture.