

## BOOK REVIEWS

Bahnsen, Greg L. *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. Nutley, N.J.: The Craig Press, 1977. xvii + 619 pp. \$12.50.

This lengthy effort to show the perpetual validity of the OT laws for contemporary secular society is of special interest in the setting of the present political objectives and activities of conservative evangelicals. Bahnsen is a graduate from Westminster Theological Seminary and has taught at Reformed Seminary in Jacksonville, Miss. His main thesis is clearly stated in the preface: "The Christian is obligated to keep the whole law of God as a pattern of sanctification, and in the realm of human society the civil magistrate is responsible to enforce God's law against public crime" (p. xii).

The first part of the book consists of a thorough discussion of the eternal value of the law, including a useful survey of different theological approaches to this problem and a very thorough exegesis of Matt 5:17, which is the key text upon which Bahnsen builds his thesis. (This material will, in my opinion, be of special interest to many readers of *AUSS*.) While the author vigorously asserts the eternal authority of the precepts taught by Moses, he carefully reminds the reader that the purpose of the law never was to provide justification or sanctification. Recognition of the law's proper limitations (as Bahnsen says, "its inabilities") in no way annuls the objects for which it was given, "its abilities." Since the ceremonial aspects of the OT laws have their permanent validity in Christ and his saving work, Bahnsen is especially concerned with the ethical and political principles of the OT, not only "a few general and vague moral principles," but "the specific and extensive commands since God cares for every specific of our lives" (p. xv).

In the second part of the book Bahnsen attempts to show how those biblical norms should be applied in present society. For Bahnsen, the present secular statesman lives in the same relation to God as does the OT ruler, and he is equally bound morally to rule according to the principles of God's law. Bahnsen does not advocate a return to a theocratic regime, but rather to a *theonomy*, a legal system based upon the divine command. Thus Bahnsen rejects with equal vehemence both the thought of a legislation derived from rational ideals and the idea of the church's entering the political arena or resorting to violence to achieve the goal he proposes. He is a staunch defender of the separation of church and state, for which he gives an elaborate theological justification.

While most of Bahnsen's ideas quite closely reflect the Calvinistic perspective, he separates himself from the Genevan stream by his insistence

on the separation of church and state and by his radical rejection of any cultural conditioning in OT patterns. This latter point gets a special and disquieting significance in the last part of the book, where he deals with the death penalty, which he, as could be expected, strongly endorses. He draws a list of all capital offenses found in OT legislation, such as idolatry, witchcraft, and sabbathbreaking; and he implies that the death penalty for all these should be reenacted today.

There are several highly questionable aspects to Bahnsen's thesis. For one thing, his eschatological perspective is not very clear. He has a two-kingdom approach of his own, in which he separates God's spiritual realm from the political realm, but nonetheless wants the secular realm to be ruled by divine ideals. However, both the OT and NT distinguish between the ruler whom God uses (whether, e.g., the king of Assyria, or Pilate, etc.) and the ruler who loves and serves the Lord (e.g., Josiah). The former carries out God's will against his own will, so to speak, while the latter's supreme goal is to find God's will and follow it. In the Gospels, by distinguishing between God's rule and Caesar's rule over God's people, Jesus recognizes the validity of a secular ruler's authority, although such a ruler may neither know nor wish to keep God's law. Thus Bahnsen's demand that the ruler be a God-fearing person does not have a solid NT basis.

In the second place, the NT does not place ideal value on all the precepts of Moses. Moses' legislation on divorce, e.g., is considered as coming far short of God's purposes, brought about only by the wickedness of the human heart. On several occasions the NT refers to the times of ignorance of the past, when God accepted moral behavior that was not fully pleasing to him. Jesus did not feel obligated to keep the Mosaic code legalistically. Instead of insisting upon surrendering the adulteress to the fate prescribed by Moses, he merely commanded her to go and stop sinning.

Finally, nowhere in the Bible do we find opposition to the laws of the Gentiles as such. The Christian is commanded to obedience without any other reservation than his duty to God. The Christian must be "light" and "salt," Jesus says; and the illustrations he uses show the duty of God's children to influence an environment that is totally alien to them.