

# Theonomy

## Can you please help me with understanding what “theonomy” is? Why have you considered this a problem?

The term **theonomy** is derived from the Greek *theos* (God) and *nomos* (law), and in its most basic or general sense means the rule of God or the rule of the law of God.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, the rule of God or the rule of the law of God, are good things. However, the term theonomy in practice can be associated with some matters, which many consider to be highly problematic. As is noted in the 2003 *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*,

“Recently, theonomy has been used to denote a political movement, sometimes called reconstructionism, that advocates a kind of theocracy in which the revealed divine law, including the laws of the Old Testament, becomes the legislated law of the nation.”<sup>2</sup>

For sure, many of us would like to see our human legal and judicial systems influenced by Biblical principles. But how far is this to be pushed? In practice, what this could mean, is that beyond the customary employment of capital punishment for murder in various societies as a Creation ordinance (cf. Genesis 9:5),<sup>3</sup> that capital punishment may also be used for a wide variety of sexually immoral crimes, originally condemned by the Mosaic Torah as worthy of capital punishment in Ancient Israel. Biblical prohibitions against idolatry, enshrined into modern law, could then be applied to prohibit non-Christians from practicing their religions. Could this, then, lead to such idolators being executed as enemies of the state?

In past history, theonomic ideas wreaked a great deal of havoc and instability, especially during the English Reformation, when the country would go back and forth between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. During the reign of a monarch who was Roman Catholic, Protestants could be executed as idolators—then only to reverse during the reign of a monarch who was Protestant, as Roman Catholics could be executed as idolators. Most recently in the United States, theonomic ideas have highly influenced many of the philosophical ideas of Christian Nationalism. What would or could a theonomic government do within a secular society, which allows for freedom of religion and conscience? Would a theonomic Christian government permit a religion such as Judaism to be legal?

But what about theonomic ideas implemented more within various religious communities? Consider how while conservative Bible Believers will not argue for the legality of murder, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, etc., there are significant questions which Biblical ethicists would have regarding post-resurrection era realities, inaugurated by the sacrifice of Yeshua the Messiah on the tree. In Colossians 2:14, the Apostle Paul wrote, “He wiped out the handwritten record of debts with

---

<sup>1</sup> Donald S. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 282.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley J. Grenz & Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 119.

<sup>3</sup> Messianic Apologetics editor J.K. McKee, at least, while recognizing capital punishment for murder as a Creation ordinance, would nevertheless prefer to see capital punishment completely abrogated, and life imprisonment instead employed for such cases.

the decrees against us, which was hostile to us. He took it away by nailing it to the cross” (TLV). Far be it from the Torah of Moses itself being nailed to the execution-stake, a widespread view seen in many Protestant theological traditions, is that the Torah’s condemnation of capital punishment was absorbed onto the Messiah. Thus, while sins in the Torah, meriting capital punishment for Ancient Israel, still surely remain sin—the Messiah’s work requires that some other, although severe, punishment should be enacted.

This is something which is detectable in the complex problem which erupted in Corinth, among the sexually immoral man. It is witnessed that rather than appeal to capital punishment of a fornicator as the answer, that the Apostle Paul prescribed ex-communication from the assembly as punishment (1 Corinthians 5:13; cf. Deuteronomy 17:7; 19:19; 22:21, 24; 24:7), as the physical consequences of sexual immorality would eventually work their way. Paul as a Torah observant Jew, hardly believed that because of the Messiah’s sacrifice and resurrection, that fornication was something permissible. But he was someone, who himself could have technically been liable for murder, because of his persecution of the early Messianic Believers, directly overseeing many deaths (cf. Acts 8:1). Paul himself would testify, “even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man. Yet I was shown mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Timothy 1:13, TLV). Paul seemingly never forgot the grave offenses he had committed, in being responsible for the murder of many Jewish Believers and wanting to destroy the assembly (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:9). Yet at the same time, he had also been shown great mercy by the Lord, in being allowed to live—precisely because the Messiah Himself took the capital penalties of the Torah onto Himself!

Those who are theonomists in their orientation, may not be fully able to recognize these sorts of post-resurrection era realities, which were indeed present and active within the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament.<sup>4</sup> Our ministry can specifically attest to having a great deal of tension with strident proponents of a One Law/One Torah theology, precisely over the issue of theonomy.<sup>5</sup> Many of them are seen to believe that Yeshua did not, actually, absorb the capital penalties of the Torah onto Himself via His sacrifice.

We doubtlessly believe in having a high view of the principles and commandments of God’s Torah. **But these same principles and commandments must also be interpreted and applied in light of the unique work and death of Yeshua the Messiah.**

---

<sup>4</sup> If necessary, consult the 2013 article “The Significance of the Messiah Event” by Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee (appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*).

<sup>5</sup> Some of this is actually discussed in the Messianic Insider episode “The Messianic Movement and the Torah Movement: Is There a Difference?” (16 February, 2023).