

SHOULD WE UPHOLD UNCHANGING MORAL ABSOLUTES?

Greg L. Bahnsen*

Expressing philosophical hesitation about a "divine command theory of ethics," Douglas E. Chismar and David A. Rausch in a recent issue of *JETS* have raised a challenge to the idea of an enduring written code of unchanging moral absolutes.¹ Since the occasion of their critique was my lecture, "The Immutability of God's Commands,"² delivered to the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society at Toronto in 1981, I am glad to offer a brief reply here.³

Cultural relativism and situationist ethics are popular twentieth-century expressions of an underlying philosophical position (ethical nominalism or existentialism) that maintains that only particulars, only individual circumstances, count in a moral judgment.⁴ The morally relevant factors in any situation are too numerous for any two situations to be ethically identical, for any prescription to apply across the board. In short, there are no general classes of moral situations—no simple types or categories of cases—for which pre-established and universal dictates can determine a course of action. Every situation is unique. Thus Joseph Fletcher argues that every case must be handled on its own. No guidance in law-form can be given in advance, even when we are thinking in the vaguest way of love.⁵

Theonomic ethics, like every truly evangelical approach to morality, takes a decided stand against this kind of philosophical perspective. There are objective, nonarbitrary and universal principles of morality that apply in advance

*Greg Bahnsen is dean of Newport Graduate School in California.

¹D. E. Chismar and D. A. Rausch, "Concerning Theonomy: An Essay of Concern," *JETS* 27 (1984) 315-323 (hereafter Chismar).

²The tape is available from Covenant Tape Ministry, 4155 San Marcos Lane, Reno, NV 89502.

³One of two previous published efforts by these authors (*Christian Century*, August 3, 1983; *Moody Monthly*, April 1985) was so inflammatory as to call for retraction (*Christian Century*, November 9, 1983). Here we focus only on the issues involved.

⁴For instance J. Fletcher says, "Situation ethics, at the level of human value judgments, is likewise nominalistic. . . . Christian situation ethics asserts firmly and definitely: value, worth, ethical quality, goodness or badness, right or wrong—these things are only predicates, they are not properties. . . . There are no universals of any kind. . . . Extrinsicism fights back at the unlovingness of law-bound conscience. . . . [Value] is only a function of human decisions. Here is the normative relativism we espouse. It waves good-bye to legalism and dogmatism" (*Situation Ethics: The New Morality* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966] 57-58, 60, 64, 67).

⁵"Only one 'general' proposition is prescribed, namely, the commandment to love God through the neighbor. . . . And this commandment is, be it noted, a normative ideal; it is *not* an operational directive. . . . For the situationist there are no rules—none at all" (*ibid.*, p. 55).

to general types (or classes) of situations.⁶ My lecture indicated that these principles are found in God's character.⁷ As such they are not dependent upon human decision but are objective. Since they characterize the very nature of God—not simply his volition or random choice—they are not arbitrary. Since God made all things, controls all history, and knows every detail of every situation in the world, he is not prevented from making advance judgments about the same kinds of moral circumstances. Finally, since God himself is ever the same (immutable in character), the moral principles expressive of his nature are universal in validity, applying to all men in all places at all times.⁸ (A hasty criticism might be that such a view implies that we should now be obeying every command recorded in Scripture, but Chismar recognizes that theonomic ethics has an objective Biblical reason for not concluding that—viz., some commands were initially limited in scope when revealed [e.g., the order for Samuel to anoint David] and others were supervened by God himself as to their manner of fulfillment of them [e.g., atoning sacrifice].)

What, then, does Chismar find objectionable about this divine-command-theory's rebuttal to moral relativism? His claim is that the "concept of immutability" employed in such reasoning is "vacuous," not solving "the hermeneutical problems of application raised by situational relativists" (p. 316). But Chismar demonstrates nothing of the sort. In fact, the answers to his questions and challenges are already found in the tape of my lecture itself—as well as in my published discussions of the thesis that God's law is our standard for Christian living. We can thus be brief.

Part of Chismar's difficulty is that he does not clearly conceptualize the difference between situationist and absolutist ethical systems. This is evident when he characterizes situationism (p. 316) as advocating such things as "In any situation characterized by morally revelant properties C, do action w"—precisely the kind of prescriptive universal (a directive given in advance for a general type of circumstance) that Fletcher repudiates, as we saw above. The significance of Chismar's confusion becomes immediately obvious when, due to it, he proceeds to portray absolutism in oversimplified terms, screening out any

⁶G. L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (2d ed.; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984 [1977]) xvi–xvii; see more recently my book *By This Standard* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985) 346.

⁷Cf. J. I. Packer: "God's call to be holy, as he is holy, is a general summons to live by his revealed precepts and prohibitions, as embodying the loves and hates which make up his character and which his ways with us will always express" ("Conscience, Choice, and Character," in *Law, Morality and the Bible* [ed. B. Kaye and G. Wenham; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978] 182); W. C. Kaiser, Jr.: "The standard of moral measurement in deciding what was right or wrong, good or evil, was fixed in the unwavering and impeccably holy character of Yahweh, Israel's God" (*Toward an Old Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978] 114).

⁸Chismar thinks it is "an interesting turn" to argue from the premise that God's commandments reflect his unchanging character to the conclusion that the demands made in these commandments are themselves unchanging (p. 316). But what is "interesting" about this piece of "theonomic" reasoning? The predicate logic is obvious, and the inference itself is not peculiar to theonomic evangelicals (see n. 7 above). It is just as strange when Chismar suggests that a significant "third and final step" is taken by the theonomist when "immutable commandments" from God are "construed as forever binding." That is simply what the terms mean.

reference to applicable situation in its statement of commands.⁹ Evangelical philosophers who are ethical absolutists are more logically sophisticated than Chismar's straw man, though. They already realize that the universal, unchanging law "Thou shalt not commit adultery" is not "universal" in the sense of being applicable to each and every moral situation in life (e.g., the temptation to embezzle office funds). There is nothing in the defining premises of ethical absolutism that rules out inclusion of reference to specific kinds of situations in the expression of moral precepts.¹⁰

Chismar's charge, however, is that when an absolutist formulates a moral command in such a way as to include reference to applicable situations it may be immutable, "but this is a vacuous immutability because the command may make no difference for most situations in life" (p. 317). Such a remark does not show us Chismar at his philosophical best. In logic, "vacuous" sentences are those that are true only because their terms lack denotation or (in hypotheticals) their antecedents are false.¹¹ Neither the immutable commands of the absolutist nor the claim that such commands are immutable is vacuous in this way. Furthermore the immutability being claimed for them is not somehow trivial (a less technical sense of "vacuous"). A precept "For all times anyone who is a P in situation C ought to Z" is quite important when P is "married person," C is "where tempted to go to bed with someone not his/her spouse" and Z is "not commit adultery." And even though the precept has a circumscribed or limited range of applicable situations, it is the furthest thing from trivial to maintain that this precept is "immutable"—e.g., was morally binding in 1580, 1880 and 1980 alike. Chismar's concern about just how often an "immutable" command might apply to concrete situations in life has nothing to do with the genuine or bogus import of the command's "immutability."

Chismar gets himself tangled up over this, for one reason, because on the bottom of p. 317 he illegitimately switches terms on himself. He has been considering a command that is described as binding "for all times . . . in situation C." When he wants to dismiss the immutability of such a command as vacuous, however, he without explanation or justification re-describes that command as binding "for all times . . . at time t." The latter claim really is trivial,¹²

⁹Chismar's rendition is "For all times, every person S who is a P should do x" (p. 317).

¹⁰Chismar's misconception of the essential difference between situationism and absolutism is evident again later (p. 318) when he makes the misguided assertion that if "applicability conditions" are built into a command "one ends up sacrificing the absoluteness of the command, leaving one with [a] kind of situational ethic." That reflects an artificial notion of what makes a command "absolute," a notion not countenanced in contemporary moral philosophy. For instance, in my lecture I cite M. Singer (*Generalization in Ethics*, 1961) who describes the generalization principle in these words: "What is right (or wrong) for one person must be right (or wrong) for any similar person in similar circumstances." The same incorporation of reference to circumstances is evident from other philosophers cited in my lecture: R. M. Hare, Don Locke, H. L. A. Hart, Joel Feinberg.

¹¹E.g. "All winged-horses are white"; "If horses fly, then plums outweigh pumpkins."

¹²E.g. "For all times a husband should not commit adultery on Tuesday, August 6, 1985." The end of the sentence would make the beginning of it pointless.

but it is not at all pertinent since absolutists do not formulate commands like that in the first place.

Laying aside all of the preceding confusions in Chismar's discussion, it turns out that when we come to the heart of his critique of the theonomic endorsement of the immutability of God's commandments Chismar's fundamental problem is that he has misconstrued theonomic ethics. This is obvious when he gets around to proposing a way someone could "keep absolutism and strong immutability" both—namely, by inserting in those immutable commands applicability conditions that are defined "in general terms" (p. 317). In this way, he says, the commands would not be "restricted to overly narrow applications." But the problem with this for Chismar is that this is precisely what the theonomic approach itself maintains, and yet he claims to be criticizing theonomic ethics.

Chismar considers the "case laws" (e.g., Exodus 21–22) of the OT to pose tremendous difficulty for upholding the immutability of God's commands—such as theonomists do, being critical of attempts to reduce the scope of our moral obligation to "merely some broad and general moral principles" contained within the Bible at certain places (e.g., "love your neighbor," the Ten Commandments in isolation). Unlike special imperatives revealed by God to individuals in the Bible (e.g., for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac), which were never intended for application by everybody,¹³ the case laws were standing (or policy) laws applicable over time to many people. And these laws were expressed in terms of very specific, cultural details (e.g., goring ox, flying axhead, rooftop railing).

What Chismar wonders is how theonomists can maintain the immutability not only of the summary laws (e.g., love commands, the Decalogue) but also of these very specific case laws "despite apparent radical changes in application" (p. 319). After all not many of us are in the precise, specific situation literally described by Scripture in terms of axheads, rooftops and oxen. Does the theonomist have to resort to trivial immutability for these laws, lose the abiding relevance of these laws, and tragically fall into the weak position of situational relativism? Chismar begins to suggest (without any substantiating evidence) that this is what theonomic ethics actually does, but then he saves the day, saying "a useful hint can be gleaned from Bahnsen's book, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*." From this "hint" Chismar goes on to develop a way "to make good sense out of Bahnsen's call for the 'abiding validity of the Law in exhaustive detail'" (p. 320). That is, Chismar finds in Bahnsen's expressed position the very answer needed for Chismar's challenge to Bahnsen's position. He even quotes me in the process of laying out this answer.

According to Chismar, epistemically the case laws "provide paradigm instantiations of the principles or summary laws. Only the principles, however, are morally binding for all times. . . . Thus we are not bound to put fences around our roofs today, but we may be bound to put them around our swimming pools" (p. 320). I said the same thing with the same illustration in the lecture

¹³That such imperatives have a "vacuous immutability" in Chismar's nontechnical sense (p. 319) is insignificant just because God intended these imperatives to have their extremely limited applicability.

that Chismar is supposedly criticizing. One will find the same observation made by me with the same illustration in *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*.¹⁴ Chismar has simply joined hands with the position against which he intended to write.

The only way Chismar hides this fact from himself is by saying that the case laws are “not morally binding today, except in the vacuous sense. However, they are epistemically binding for all times in the important way of helping us to generate new laws from the general principles (summary laws) found in the OT” (p. 320). This kind of epistemic/moral distinction is misleading and hollow. Is the story of the Good Samaritan “morally binding” upon us, or merely “epistemically binding” because by means of it (as an illustration) we learn the principle by which we should behave? If God expects us to obey that principle, what sense does it make to deny that the story expressing it is “morally binding”? Chismar has confused himself and his readers by speaking in this way. There is nothing trivial (“vacuous”) about holding that the story of the Good Samaritan, just like the OT case law, teaches us God’s moral requirements, which are immutable—forever binding—in all the cases to which the underlying principles apply.¹⁵

Do the underlying principles illustrated by the case laws of the OT explicate, qualify, and show us how to obey the more general commands of Scripture? In his article Chismar admits that they do.¹⁶ Theonomic ethics says likewise. We are morally forbidden to engage in willful negligence that can harm other people, even when our situation is not the case of a “flying axhead” literally mentioned in the case law. Chismar’s way of stating this is: “It is the principles, not the case laws” that retain moral authority today. Theonomic ethics states it this way: “It is the underlying principles illustrated by the case laws, not their cultural expression” that retain moral authority today. There is only the thinnest appearance of contradiction between these two ways of stating the point. In short, Chismar has concealed from himself his agreement with theonomic ethics by falling into a mere verbal dispute.

Chismar makes one final thrust at the theonomic position on pages 320–321, claiming that it tries to rescue the immutability of the individual case laws by maintaining that we are “still under the OT theocratic system.” To avoid another misleading verbal dispute, Chismar might consult chap. 20 in *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* so as to distinguish clearly the differing senses for the word “theocracy.” If the word is used for those cultic, geopolitical and administrative aspects that were unique to OT Israel,¹⁷ then theonomic ethics

¹⁴1st ed., pp. 313–314, 540–541.

¹⁵Surely we must grant that the ancient Hebrews knew that a law illustrated in terms of a flying axhead also applied to the situation of a flying sickle blade (etc.). Christ’s hearers were not so dull as to think that the story of the Good Samaritan strictly applied only to the Jericho road, muggers, and pouring oil on wounds.

¹⁶They do not reduce simply to the more general commands (e.g. “Love your neighbor”) but play a definitional role, illustrating the application of those commands and thus helping generate new laws from the summary principles—as Chismar himself says (pp. 319–320).

¹⁷All of such characteristics that are mentioned by Chismar on p. 321 call for particular attention and study, to be sure, looking to see how Scripture would have us understand and respond to them today. But I cannot do that in detail here, just as Chismar could not in his own article. Much of what he mentions, though, has been given initial treatment in my other publications already.

certainly does not maintain that we are under such a "theocracy" today. But, then, neither does theonomic ethics hold that such a "theocracy" is any kind of revealed prerequisite for the moral validity of the Mosaic laws. Scripture indicates the very opposite: that even the nontheocratic nations around Israel were held accountable by God to the same moral obligations as those revealed through Moses (e.g. Deut. 4:5–8; Lev 18:24–30; cf. Pss 2:10–12; 119:46; Sodom; Nineveh), these ordinances of the law being known by natural revelation and written on all men's hearts (Rom 1:20–21, 32; 2:11–15).¹⁸

Chismar correctly notes that there are "massive cultural/technological/geographical differences" between the society of OT Israel and our own—differences that make the translation of OT demands into contemporary applications a difficult and challenging task (pp. 320–321). Indeed, although the difficulty has sometimes been exaggerated, Chismar is right that there will even be some difficulty "in determining which principle is being instantiated" by specific case laws (p. 320 n.). But what Chismar has pointed out is not a unique hermeneutical problem for theonomic ethics. Such remarks apply to every effort to bring the ancient literature of the Bible (whether from the Mosaic, prophetic, or even NT periods) to bear upon our very different, modern age. Relativists insist that it is impossible. Evangelicals have always argued that, although we must do our tough homework—and learn from our mistakes—God himself is the One who requires that his inspired Word be applied in this way ("every scripture" of it, 2 Tim 3:16–17) and who promises to bless the effort with the illumination and strengthening of his Holy Spirit. The alternative of abandoning God's ancient, written revelation of his will in favor of modern wisdom may have greater simplicity, but it is treason against the King of heaven and earth. If God chose to reveal his will once for all in writing, that writing will in the nature of the case be in a language and communicated in terms of a culture that are both different from the many other languages and cultures to which this revelation must be applied. God chose to speak (in Hebrew) about rooftop railings, expecting us in the twentieth century to learn thereby what to say (in English) about swimming-pool fences (and many other applications). Let us not allow the difficulty of the task to make us hesitant to give it our best, sanctified efforts.

At the end of the article Rausch adds to what Chismar has said certain critical remarks about two particular attempts to see how God's commands should apply to society, neither one of which have I published or endorsed.¹⁹ For this reason, and because mistaken applications of a principle do not logically imply that the principle itself is mistaken, there is no need for me to reply further. I will conclude by saying, however, that it is unreasonable for a sick person to abandon himself to poison simply because doctors have sometimes

¹⁸This is one of the major points for discussion throughout *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* and *By This Standard* (see n. 6 above).

¹⁹In fact, advocating theonomic ethics I have publicly criticized some of the very ideas that Rausch now holds against theonomic ethics.

misapplied good medicine. I prefer imperfect efforts in society to use God's righteous commandments to the destructive (and in principle uncorrectable) use of fallen man's unrighteous ones. The consequences of the latter are available for all to see today.²⁰

²⁰Even as extreme an example as the witch trials at Salem (where, once, twenty people died) would not be worthy to be compared to the one and a half million babies slaughtered by western humanism every year or the sixty million (plus) killed by eastern communism in this century. All sense of proportion is lost by selecting a divine-command theory of social ethics for expenditure of *ad hominem* criticism.