

## [Vision Forum](#), Patriarchy and Federal Husband: Part #1 – By: Joe Fleener<sup>1</sup>

I love being a husband and a father. It is my conviction that, next to my personal relationship with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ these are my next two highest priorities in life. In essence, God has called me to be a husband and a father over and above any other earthly relationship or responsibility.

But I have a problem. I am far from perfect in any area of my life, but it seems as though I am the farthest from perfect in these two areas – husband/father. My desire is to learn and grow in these areas so I can continually become more of the godly husband and father God has called me to be.

### **My Initial Exposure**

Well with those desires and goals in mind, you can imagine how interested I was when I came home from work one day last Spring and my wife showed me a catalog we had received in the mail from [Vision Forum](#). I had never heard of the organization before, but was instantly interested in what I saw. I found page after page of great family-friendly items – dolls and “house” type items for my daughters; swords, shields, coin collections, and teepees for my son. This was cool stuff, things that I knew they would like and consistent with the type of toys we already choose for our children.

I then found books for all ages – books for boys on outdoor type activities, detective stories and adventures; books for girls on purity, flowers, art, etc. My children are too young to read for themselves, but these are the types of things we read to them now and what I am sure they will like to read on their own when they are older.

I also found books and resources for parents, both father and mother. I saw *The Excellent Wife* (which my wife has enjoyed) and *The Exemplary Husband* (which I have also enjoyed). I noticed books by J.C. Ryle – one of my favorite authors and the namesake to my son’s middle name! In the quick glance I gave to that section I saw a lot of good books.

Well, neither time, need or resources allowed for us to order anything at the time, so I put the catalog away and figured I would dig it out again when it got closer to birthdays or Christmas or something.

### **My Second Exposure**

It was a very short time later – no more than a month or two when I heard of some churches making significant changes in their ministry structure. It didn’t seem like a big deal, they were eliminating Sunday School and moving more toward an integrated, family inclusive worship structure.

Frankly I am all for creativity in our Sunday service structure, so I really didn’t think anything of it at first. Then I heard in a conversation that some, if not much of the philosophy for these changes was coming from an organization called *Vision Forum*. Well, that sounded familiar. But I thought it was just a distributor of family-friendly toys and books, etc. I figured I better look into it a little bit more.

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## **My Initial Hesitation**

I think it is without question that the family is under attack today. I will also state I believe the father in particular and his role/function in the home is the primary target. The family is in a state of crisis and fathers are in serious trouble.

I also believe that most of our churches are not doing all they can do or should do to teach our people, particularly fathers, how to please God in their family. The needs are great, God's word is clear, but the ball is being dropped in many churches.

It is for those reasons I hesitate to critique any group or organization that is making it their mission/vision to "communicate a vision of victory to Christian families."

I certainly do not want to be seen as a man who is not seriously concerned about the condition of the family in our churches, seriously concerned about the condition of many fathers in our churches and seriously concerned about my own role and responsibility as a husband and father. I AM!

## **My Present Passion**

However, there are some things that need to be said. Stronger than my passion for my family is my passion for Christ and the truth of His Word.

I will passionately stand for and teach on the critical importance of a man's role as husband and father. I will passionately stand for and teach on the critical importance of a woman's role as wife and mother. I will passionately stand for and teach on the critical importance of a child's role of obedience and honor toward his/her parents.

But, I will not allow that passion to distort the truths of God's Word. Despite the commendable desire of *Vision Forum* to place the focus of our churches and particularly fathers back on the family, I believe they are doing so at a greater cost. The cost is the distortion of God's Word.

## **A Distorted Vision**

I am calling this a "distorted vision," because that is what I believe it is. I do not believe it is false teaching motivated by evil with the intention of hurting God's people. On the contrary, I believe it is genuinely motivated with the desire to help God's people, yet false teaching and therefore carries great potential to hurt God's people.

The fact is distorted truth is often more hurtful to the church than plain bold-faced lies.

So where is the distortion? Well before we lay out the answer to that question directly, let's lay out the structure of this series of articles.

Part #1 (this article) will serve as an introduction and will look at a key historical/theological movement which is influencing groups such as *Vision Forum*. It will also identify a couple of other "groups" who are following the same or a similar vein.

Part #2 will address how these groups have further distorted the teachings of the above historical/theological movement and applied its distorted teaching to the family.

OK, let's get on with Part #1.

## **What does *Vision Forum* Teach and Who Else is Teaching It?**

By now many of you have hopped on the Internet and followed the links that were given above or searched for *Vision Forum* and looked all over [www.visionforum.com](http://www.visionforum.com). Some who have never heard of them, may be wondering "OK, what is the issue?" Well we are getting to that.

To begin with if you really want to know what the people in the organization are teaching regarding the family and church, you will find very little at the above site. You will need to find your way to the site for [Vision Forum Ministries](#). It is on this site where they articulate their philosophy and doctrinal positions.

On this site you will find articles and discussions related to *Patriarchy, Family Integrated Church, Biblical Feminism, Hermeneutics, Creation*, etc. Some of what you will find is quite good. The desire to strengthen the home and specifically the father is very good.

In the book section on VisionForm.com you will find [Family Man, Family Leader by Philip Lancaster](#). Mr. Lancaster is the editor of [Patriarch Magazine](#).

You will also find [When you Rise Up: A Covenantal Approach to Homeschooling by Dr. R.C. Sproul Jr.](#) Dr. Sproul Jr. is, of course, the son of the director of [Ligonier Ministries](#). Back in April on his blog, Dr. Sproul Jr. revealed a bit more in regard to his view on patriarchy – [or at least the role of women](#). On the *Ligonier Ministries* site you will find as one of the books for sale Douglas Wilson's [Federal Husband](#). In addition to these, [Christian Exodus](#) shares many of the same or similar foundational theological assumptions.

Also as you read several of the articles on the [Vision Forum Ministries](#) site, especially those related to law and government you will find several contributors from [The Chalcedon Foundation](#), founded by R.J. Rushdoony.

I take the time to show all of this, because I am convinced there is no coincidence. There is something that each of these "groups" to some degree or another hold to and is, I believe, the underlying theological issue distorting their teaching.

The last person I will mention in this string of names is Dr. Greg Bahnsen. By taking the time to read the statements on [Hermeneutics](#) and [Creation](#) found on the [Vision Forum Ministries](#) site, I discovered that they were in fact drafted by Dr. Bahnsen. What does that matter?

Dr. Bahnsen was one of the modern founders, and certainly the most prolific author for a theological position known as *Theonomy*. His *Theonomy of Christian Ethics* came out in 1977 and was the subject of huge debate at the National Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in 1981 in Toronto, Canada. In 1984 Dr. Bahnsen released a second edition of his book, expanded to include responses to the critics.

At this point, I will ask that you please bear with me. It may seem like we are heading down a rabbit trail. Hang in there and in the end I hope you will see the connections. The bottom-line is this: all problems are essentially theological problems. If we can learn to think and evaluate everything we see in life and read biblically/theologically, we will be better able to choose those things that please the Lord and avoid those things that do not.

## A Brief Look at Theonomy

*Theonomy* simply means “God’s Law” or “The Law of God.” There is certainly nothing inherently wrong with the word, nor its most basic meaning. However in 1977 with the release of *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* Dr. Bahnsen built a theological worldview that he called *Theonomy* therefore giving the word a new meaning.<sup>2</sup>

For the purpose of this article a simple definition of Dr. Bahnsen’s *Theonomy* will be used. That is, “We today are ethically obligated to observe the Older Testament Law of God in everyway except those areas where the New Testament specifically frees us from that responsibility.”<sup>3</sup> At first glance, most Christians today may think they agree with that statement.

We would agree that we are still responsible to obey the Ten Commandments, etc. However, it is not that simple. There is another way to look at our obligation to the Old Testament Law. Rather than saying we are obligated to observe the Law except in those areas the New Testament specifically frees us, we could say, “We today are obligated to observe the Old Testament Law of God in everyway that is repeated or expanded upon in the New Testament.” There is a significant difference and one we will explore in a moment.

This discussion has the potential to get more complicated when we take into account that Dr. Bahnsen and most other *Theonomists* claim Covenant Theology and Calvinism as their theological heritage. Dr. Bahnsen regularly discounts the alternative suggested view I give for looking at the Law as the error of Dispensationalism and claims that a *Theonomistic* view of the Law is the historical view of the Reformers and Covenant Theologians throughout history.

I certainly do not want to turn this article into a discussion regarding Covenant Theology, Dispensationalism, Calvinism, etc. Point of fact, it is not necessary. In 1990 the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary released a book titled *Theonomy A Reformed Critique*, where they very clearly demonstrate that a *Theonomistic Worldview* is neither Covenantal nor Calvinistic.<sup>4</sup>

Ok, let’s take a closer look.

Dating at least as far back as Calvin it has been common to view the Old Testament Law in three categories: 1) Moral, 2) Civil and 3) Ceremonial. Although there is debate on whether these are the only three categories and where each section of the Law should be placed, for our discussion these categories will be sufficient.

In essence, both *Theonomists* and *non-theonomists* will agree that the ceremonial portions of the Law have been eradicated with the coming of Christ. There is no longer a need for the sacrificial system, dietary laws, Jewish festivals, etc.

We will then focus on the first two categories. First the civil law.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the basic concepts of Dr. Bahnsen’s *Theonomy* pre-date 1977 to at least 1971 and the writings of Rousas John Rushdoony. Rushdoony’s work is often referred to as *reconstructionist theology*.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of where Dr. Bahnsen would say the New Testament has specifically freed us from responsibility to the Old Testament Law would be 1) The sacrificial system – Hebrews 10, 2) the dietary laws – Acts 11.

<sup>4</sup> The sad thing is one can find several critiques of *Theonomy* and even *Vision Forum* on the Internet where the speakers/writers based their entire criticism not on the teaching of *Theonomy*, but rather Covenantalism or Calvinism as though all Covenantalists or Calvinists are actually *Theonomists*. This is embarrassing and evidence of very poor research.

It is with the civil law that the *Theonomists* find their main distinction from what has been the traditional view of the law and modern day believer's obligation to it. The *Theonomist* will hold that the civil requirements of the Old Testament Law along with its penalties for violations are still valid for today. They will stress the importance of having civil magistrates in office who will conduct themselves according to the Old Testament standards of Law and the enforcement of said penalties. These penalties will include the civil punishment by means of the death penalty for adultery, disobedient children, homosexuality, etc.

They base this claim on two main points:

1. God's covenant with Adam predated the giving of the Law to Moses, but presumed the content of that Law and is binding on all people for all time.<sup>5</sup>
2. The New Testament has not abrogated these civil laws or their associated penalties.

The problem with point 1 is rather difficult. It involves issues related to the *prelapsarian* and *postlapsarian* (pre-Fall and post-Fall) covenant with Adam, the covenants of Law and Grace, dispensations and continuity/discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. I will simply refer you to Barker & Godfrey's *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* for a complete discussion and evaluation of these issues.

Point 2 is quite interesting. If this is true, one would expect there to be some example in the New Testament where the penalties of the Old Testament civil law are carried out. However what we find is quite different. A few selected examples will be sufficient.

1. In John 8:3-11, Jesus clearly violates this principle. The Jewish leaders bring a woman who has been caught in adultery to Jesus. The legal punishment for this according to the Law is death; however Jesus challenges this legal punishment and in its place offers grace and forgiveness. Although this passage is debated the same thing can be seen in Jesus' dealing with the Samaritan woman in John 3. He did not turn her over to the authorities for the just legal punishment called for in the Law, rather offered her grace and forgiveness.
2. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, Paul instructs the Corinthian church on how to deal with unrepentant immorality in the church. The process did not include legal punishment, which under the law would have resulted in the man being put to death. Rather he prescribed church discipline.
3. In Romans 13, Paul instructs the believers to submit themselves to their governing authorities. Nero's historical record is well known. He was certainly not governing based on Old Testament Civil Law, yet Paul did not instruct the believers to rebel or strive to set up a Theocratic nation. We find the same teaching in 1 Peter 2.

Next, what about the Moral Law of the Old Testament? Aren't we still accountable to that section of the Law today?

The answer to this question is really yes and no. We are, but we are actually held to an even higher standard. The following points will serve to illustrate<sup>6</sup>:

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<sup>5</sup> This is actually a distortion of what is known as *Federal Theology*. *Federal Theology* is a protestant scholastic interpretation and application of Calvinistic teaching which began sometime around 1562. The teaching of which was later further developed and became what is known today as *Covenant Theology*. See David A. Weir *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought* Oxford: Clarendon, 1990. and Daniel J. Elazar and John Kincaid eds. *The Covenant Connection: From Federal Theology to Modern Federalism* Oxford: Lexington Books, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> For further study in this area see G. K. Beale *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts: Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994. Thomas R. Schreiner *The fulfillment of the law* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993.

1. In Matthew 5:17-48 Jesus makes several very significant statements regarding the Law. In verse 17 He clearly states He did not come to abolish the Law and in verse 18 categorically states that the Law will never pass out of existence. However, in verses 21 – 48 He uses the phrase, “You have heard...but I say unto you...” to expand the teaching of the Law. Jesus leaves no room for question. We are not accountable to the Moral Law of the Old Testament, we are held accountable to a much higher standard!
2. The topic of tithing is not mentioned in the New Testament. Some will rejoice thinking we are not obligated to give as the Old Testament believers were. However, what we find in the New Testament is an even higher standard. We are obligated to give, even out of our poverty and to give cheerfully. The grace we have received in Christ should cause us to look for opportunities to give beyond the simple 1/10. (2 Corinthians 8:2; 9:7)

To simply “settle” for the Moral Law of the Old Testament for believers today is actually to fall short of the moral and ethical standards to which God holds New Testament believers accountable.

So what does all of this *Theonomy* discussion have to do with *Vision Forum*, *Federal Husband*, etc? Well that will be the subject of the next article in this series.

At this point it is important to see that the *Theonomistic* world-view, which much of the teaching of these groups is based on, is a distortion of Biblical Theology. As Baker and Godfrey have stated:

As we see it, theonomy in various ways represents a distorted view of that tradition [Reformed/Presbyterian Theology and their Calvinistic heritage]. Particularly, we believe it overemphasize the continuities and neglects many of the discontinuities between the Old Testament and our time.<sup>7</sup>

## **Conclusion to Part #1**

It is important to note that the authors of the *Theonomistic* world-view from the ‘70’s and ‘80’s primarily applied their teaching to the role of civil government in our day. Their focus was on the reforming of society and that of government’s function within society. As a result of this attempt to apply a distortion of Covenant Theology to modern society many who taught *Theonomy* were also postmillennial in their eschatology.<sup>8</sup>

Although we will look at the specifics of the structure for the family groups like *Vision Forum* are attempting to build in the next article, it is critical to see the theological foundation on which they are building this structure. One cannot expect to find a very stable building built on such a flawed and distorted foundation.

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<sup>7</sup> William S. Barker and Robert Godfrey. *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990, 11.

<sup>8</sup> See Richard Gaffin’s essay “Theonomy and Eschatology: Reflections on Postmillennialism” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*.

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