

Responses to Questions and Objections Regarding Biblical Civil Government

The following series of answers have been derived from a document originally designed to be used in the context of a class on ethics as a response to student papers arguing in favor of modern western notions of religious freedom. The class had been presented with a quotation from Deuteronomy 17:2-7, in which God commanded the Israelites to put to death those who publicly worship false gods. The students were asked to argue either for or against the modern western concept of religious freedom in light of this text, and these answers were delivered as responses from a person holding a biblical perspective on this topic to the arguments made by the students. We decided that as the document deals with a wide variety of questions and objections that are frequently raised against biblical civil government, particularly relating to the duty of the civil magistrate to enforce both tables of God's law, it would be useful to provide it here for our readers. The numbering starts with #3 as the first two points were not relevant to our use of the document here.

Note that the Reformation Party, as a body, does not necessarily endorse every view taken in this document; but we endorse the overall position expressed regarding the role of the civil magistrate in religious matters.

We also highly recommend a book written by John Brown of Haddington, a Scottish Presbyterian (Seceder) minister who lived in the eighteenth century, titled The Absurdity and Perfidy of All Authoritative Toleration of Gross Heresy, Blasphemy, Idolatry, Popery, in Britain. The book provides an excellent positive case for the biblical position regarding the duty of the civil magistrate to enforce both the first and the second tables of God's law, as well as a very useful set of answers to frequently raised objections to this position. The book also deals with the nature and abiding status of the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant. The book can be purchased (very cheaply) here:

http://www.puritandownloads.com/swrb/products/The-Absurdity-and-Perfidy-of-All-Authoritative-Toleration-of-Gross-Heresy_-Blasphemy_-Idolatry_-Popery_-in-Britain-by-John-Brown-of-Haddington.html

Information about a recently-released version of this book (edited by Rev. Greg Price and under the title of A Refutation of Religious Pluralism), as well as a series of MP3s of Rev. Price reading the book, can be found here:

http://www.puritandownloads.com/swrb/pages/-A-Refutation-of-Religious-Pluralism-by-John-Brown-of-Haddington-and-Greg-Price-%28Free-MP3-Audio-Book_-Free-Online-Text_-Kindle_-PDF-Books_-etc.%29.html?utm_source=God%27s+Hatred+For+Pluralism%2C+Free+MP3s+%26+More&utm_campaign=SWRB-EMAIL-Refute-Pluralism2-Aug15-12&utm_medium=email

3. Many of you asserted that religious freedom is a right. Most of you simply asserted this without any evidence or arguments to back it up. Many of you also said things like, "I think that people should have religious freedom, so far as their religious practices do not interfere with the rights

of others.” But you provided no arguments about how you know what rights human beings have. How do you know what rights human beings have? Where are you getting that information? Obviously, in light of the entire point of this paper, we have different views on what rights we think human beings have. I don’t think there is such a thing as a right to religious freedom. So if you do, you must show me why you are right about that, not simply assert that you are right. I need to see arguments supporting your concept of what rights exist. I believe that rights come from God, and God has revealed these rights in general revelation but especially in the Bible. In the Bible, God has not granted the right of religious freedom. In fact, he has forbidden it. Therefore, I do not believe this is among the rights that humans possess. I am aware of no good argument for the right to religious freedom. (Of course, I do believe in *some* degree of religious freedom, but my view of religious freedom is significantly different in some ways from what many people in modern western culture mean when they talk about “religious freedom.”)

Similarly, many of you made claims about what is good and bad, right and wrong, harmful and harmless, etc. You cannot simply assert that various things are good, right, or harmless; you must show it, particularly when your assertions disagree with my beliefs. For example, if you want to say that the practice of idolatry is actually a good thing, you will have to show me why my belief that it is bad is wrong. My belief comes from God’s command not to practice idolatry in the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:40-6, for example), and the repeated statements all over the Bible that idolatry is wrong. (For more examples of the biblical teaching regarding idolatry or the worship of false gods, see <http://wbsa.logos.com/Home> and look up the word “idol.” See the list on the left of various aspects of “idol” or “idolatry.”) The Bible describes idolatry as wrong because it is ultimately directing worship to a created object rather than to the uncreated God (see Romans 1:18-25). It therefore shows contempt for God. So, in short, to simply assert that various things are “rights” or “good” or “harmless” without evidence is to beg the question against my position. (See #10 below for a related point that continues this point.)

4. Many of you mentioned “agency” as an argument against my position. You said things like, “We shouldn’t have laws restricting religious liberty, because this violates people’s agency—their right to choose their own way of life, etc.” But this is a vague and question-begging argument. If “agency” (which most of you didn’t explicitly define) means a right to live however one wants, then *all* civil laws violate agency. Murderers use their agency to murder, and yet you no doubt think that the government should prohibit them from doing it and provide consequences (such as jail) when they do so. You believe that the government should use coercion to stop child molesters from using their agency. You want the government to thwart the agency of thieves. So your argument here is self-refuting. Why should the government use coercion to stop and punish murderers, but not those who engage in the public practice of a false religion? This is the real question, and simply asserting that people have “agency” that shouldn’t be violated doesn’t even begin to answer it. Sometimes you provided what struck me as rather bizarre versions of this argument. For example, some of you suggested that since God has given us the ability to do things, therefore it would be inappropriate for the government to stop us from doing them.

Since we can worship false gods, God must have given us this ability, and so the government should let us do it and not hinder us. But God has clearly given humans the ability to murder, molest children, commit genocide, and steal as well, and yet I'll bet you would not say that therefore the government should not hinder people from doing these things or provide consequences when they do them. So you don't believe your own argument.

It seems to me that many of you confuse "rights" with "abilities." You seem to think that God granting an ability to do something implies a right to do that thing. I see no reason for such an obviously absurd assumption. To have an ability to do something simply means that one can in fact do it. To have a *right* to do something means that doing that thing is not wrong and ought not to be followed up with negative consequences. If I say to my child, "You have a right, or you are allowed, to go to the movies tonight with your friends," my child will think it rather hard of me if I punish him when he arrives home from doing that. On the other hand, the fact that my child perhaps has the *ability* to go to the movie theater (he is capable of getting himself there) does not at all imply that he has a *right* or *permission* to go there. These are completely different things. Some of you have said to me, "We have a right to violate God's law, but there will be consequences for doing so." I cannot figure out what on earth this could possibly mean. If God is going to punish me for doing something, surely that implies that he has *not* granted me the right to do that thing—unless God is far more inconsistent than most parents I know! "Sure you can do it, I give you the right to do it, but I will punish you if you do." What?!

Also, if you are going to make an argument about agency, you ought to tell me explicitly what it is and show why you think it is real.

5. Many of you suggested that a person ought to be allowed to follow his conscience wherever it might lead. This is the modern idea of freedom of conscience. This is similar to the previous argument, in that I'm pretty sure none of you (or at least hardly any of you) believe it yourself. You do not believe a person ought to be allowed to follow his conscience wherever it leads. If you believed that, you would allow murderers and thieves to go free and unhindered provided they were acting according to their consciences. If a murderer were arrested, and protested, "You can't arrest me! My conscience says it's fine to murder innocent people!" you would have to let him go, if you would be consistent with your argument here. I see no reason whatsoever why people ought to be allowed to follow their consciences wherever they lead. To say this is to put conscience in the role of God, the ultimate Law-Maker. But in reality, conscience is subject to the Law of God and must submit to it. Conscience is not a law or a law-maker, but a judge. If a judge attempts to throw out the law and to make a new law, he should be deposed. If you are concerned that it would be unfair to subject unbelievers to biblical law because they can't be expected to know that it is correct, see #23 below.
6. Some of you suggested that I should be in favor of freedom of religion because it is a safer way to go for me than advocating a state based on religious law. Well, perhaps in some cases it might be, in a limited sense. But it is ultimately unsafe to go against the will of God, as should be obvious. Following God's law is always the safest way to go. And besides, there are

considerations more important than safety, such as doing what is right—and what is right is defined by God’s will. Also, I do not believe that a government based on Agnosticism is ultimately going to be safe. Agnostic Naturalism, I believe, has a rather flimsy basis for moral values (of any sort)—human desires. A society whose foundational moral question is nothing more than “What do I want and how can I get it?” hardly sounds like a society prone to stability and righteousness. Such a society, I believe, will tend to lead to tyranny (indeed, it *is* tyranny) and the persecution of the righteous. A society based on biblical law, on the other hand, will of course never persecute biblical Christians so long as it is acting consistently with its own foundation—so this would be by far the safest society for biblical Christians to live in.

7. Some of you pointed out that the government cannot regulate thought. It is impossible for the civil government to control what people are thinking. I agree. I have never advocated having civil law attempt to coerce thought. Notice that in order to be convicted as a public idolater according to Deuteronomy 17:2-7, one must be successfully accused by two or three witnesses. Biblical civil law deals with outward acts, not with inward thoughts. I do not advocate trying to regulate people’s thoughts with civil power. If a person is an idolater, or covetous, or a murderer, in his heart, the civil power cannot touch him (although God will judge his heart). But if he acts in ways that violate outward civil law—such as by committing murder, theft, or publicly worshiping idols—he can be punished by civil power. This is all that I, following biblical law, am advocating. It is not the role of the civil government to try to get people to believe things or not believe things, or to force people to join churches. The role of the civil magistrate is simply to keep the public sphere clear of evil and safe for those who do good (as much as reasonably possible) by enforcing biblical civil laws. See Romans 13:1-7.

Related to this, some of you argue that people should be free to think for themselves. The government should never stop someone from investigating the evidence and coming to his own conclusion about what is true. I couldn’t agree more, and nothing I have said (or the Bible has said) is against this. I do not say that investigating false religions should be punished by civil law. I say the (public) *practice* of false religions should be punished by civil law. These are two very different ideas. It is quite true that people need to be able to follow the evidence where it leads, and for that they must have access to all the relevant information on all sides of every question. I do not advocate forbidding this access; on the contrary, I think it a fundamental value to protect such access. I am only against the public *advocacy* or *practice* of fundamentally false religious beliefs. This is not so different from modern American practice. In this country, it is legal to investigate the teachings of Al Qaeda all you want; but it is illegal to advocate or to practice beliefs that are deemed contrary to fundamental American values—for example, we value human life, and therefore we forbid the Al Qaeda religious practice of blowing up random Americans. If someone were to investigate Al Qaeda’s teachings and become convinced that they are true, they would not be able to publicly practice their new religion in this country. Similarly, in a biblical society, anyone can investigate any idea he pleases; he is simply forbidden from advocating or practicing beliefs that biblical law deems evil and dangerous. A biblical society, like modern America, values human life, and therefore will forbid religious practices

involving murder. Unlike modern America, a biblical society will also value God above all else, and therefore will not tolerate religious practices that are blasphemous towards God—such as those practiced by false religions that deny his fundamental nature as defined in the Bible. In both cases, we find that people are allowed to practice their religion freely only to the extent that the fundamental values of the society are not violated. This is uncontroversial. The *real* question is, *Which* values ought the society to value and to what degree? The answer to that depends on which worldview is true. If Christianity is true, then God is infinitely valuable, more so than human life, and the state ought to recognize that and act accordingly. If Agnosticism is true, then God is a fairy-tale along the lines of Santa Claus, and the state ought to recognize this and act accordingly.

8. Some of you suggested that laws ought to be neutral between different worldviews. This is impossible, as different worldviews disagree on what laws we should have. Some people think Agnosticism is somehow neutral; but this only expresses a rather astonishing naiveté. Of course Agnosticism is not neutral, for it disagrees with other people's beliefs (like mine). The fact is that everyone wants law and public policy to reflect his own values and beliefs, for the not-so-astonishing reason that he believes his own values and beliefs to be correct and true. So it is impossible that this country, or any country, should not have an established religion/worldview. The only question is, Which one? I would suggest that we pick the true one, as, probably, would you. But which one is true? Ah, that is the key question, isn't it?
9. Some of you suggested that people should be allowed to practice their false religions because it is beneficial to them and to all of us. False religion makes its practitioners happy; it allows them to express themselves and their unique personalities; it suits their unique ways of thinking, etc. For the rest of us, allowing diversity in religious matters (false and true mixed together without hindrance) enriches our lives, increases our experience of the variety of human ways of flourishing, etc. Well, I disagree. And you will have to prove that you are right about these things, not just assert that you are. People may want to practice false religion and feel happy when they do so, but ultimately they will end up in hell for it—a distinctly unhappy place. Likewise, some people get a thrill out of murdering people, or treating people badly in other ways. Should we therefore let them do it? No, of course not. "It makes me happy" is not a sufficient argument for someone to be allowed to do something. Imagine a child molester saying, "I should be allowed to molest children. It enriches my experience with life. I feel cramped and boxed-in when I am not allowed to do it. It fulfills deep crannies of my unique personality," etc. Are you going to let such a person go ahead and molest children? I doubt it, because you see the practice of child molestation (as do I) to be wrong. Diversity can be a good thing, but not always. Diversity of personality, of race, of aspects of culture, can be good. But what about murderers and thieves? Don't we want more murderers and thieves and terrorists in the world to increase our diversity? Of course not. Or perhaps we would like more racial bigotry, to balance out those who hold to racial equality, to provide more diversity. I doubt it. Why? Because we see these things as wrong and bad. Well, I see false religion as wrong and bad. It is an insult to the true God, and against his will. This argument against me is really just

another question-begging argument. It only makes sense if we assume that false religion is a good thing. But I reject that assumption. The contrary assumption (that false religion is wrong and bad) is part of the fundamental basis of *my* position. You cannot simply assume without argument that you are right and I am wrong on this crucial point of difference between us.

10. This is related to #3 and others above. Many of you argued that “we should have religious liberty, so long as the religious practices don’t harm anyone,” thereby implying that the public practice of false religion doesn’t harm anyone. But it does harm people. For one thing, it violates the right of God to rule over his creation. Of course, God cannot be effectively hurt by his creation, but his rights can be violated by us, and whenever we refuse to obey him we are violating his rights over us as our Creator. Since God is infinitely valuable, this is an infinite crime, an infinite harm. God's honor is infinitely more important than human safety, and so preserving that public honor, according to God's commands to do so in the Bible, should be a top priority for all human societies. Also, I (and all of us) have the right to live in a godly society that does not tolerate public false religion. My right is violated when we have freedom of religion. I am forced to live in a society that constantly violates the values I hold to be true (and have good reason to hold to be true), and this harms me and my family. Also, false religion does indeed harm people. It sends them to hell. (See #11 below.) The public promotion of false religion encourages other people to go to hell as well, which is surely harmful to them, if anything is! If we have laws prohibiting smoking indoors because of the dangers of second-hand smoke, shouldn’t we have laws prohibiting the public spread of soul-destroying false beliefs and practices? And finally, God has promised judgment on nations that rebel against him. (See <http://wbsa.logos.com/Home> and look up “Sin, National, Punishment of.” See the words on the left that lead you to different aspects of this, particular instances, particular nations, etc.) So if this nation tolerates public false religion, it is courting the judgment of God on the entire society, which will bring harm to all of us who are living in it. So does false religion harm people? Yes, if biblical Christianity is true. Perhaps not, if Agnosticism is true. And I assert that biblical Christianity is true.
11. Some of you asserted that false religions are good, and people who practice false religions can be good people—and therefore should be allowed to go unmolested by the law. I grant that false religions can teach good and true things. This is not surprising, for even false religions have to live in reality and cannot escape it entirely, and the practitioners of false religions are human and cannot fully escape their humanity. However, although false religions contain some truth, they mix it with fundamental error. If I put poison in your corn flakes, you will not continue to eat them anyway and declare them acceptable because the corn flakes are still nutritious. They may be, in themselves, but mixed with the poison they are not healthy but deadly. False religions are partly right, but fundamentally wrong. They distort core aspects of the nature of God, and thereby divert their practitioners away from the true God. This is deadly. The Bible does not present false religions as good, wholesome alternatives, but as deadly apostasy from God. See, for example, Exodus 20:1-7, 1 Corinthians 10:14-21, Jeremiah 2:4-13, etc. The Bible represents those who reject the true God not as fundamentally good people, but as wicked

rebels deserving of God's punishment. See, for example, 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Romans 1:18-32, Revelation 21:6-8, etc. Do not misunderstand me here. I am not saying that non-Christians are evil in the sense of being cardboard cartoon villains. They can be very moral in a civil sense, sometimes more so than Christians. But ultimately, they are refusing to acknowledge the true God and are setting up their own desires and imaginations as God instead, which is to cast infinite contempt upon God and is horribly wicked. Even the good things they do, they do not do for God, which is a horrible slight. They are rebels and enemies of God, who is the true definer and foundation of good. Their character must be seen, therefore, as fundamentally evil. (Remember, however, that this is what we are all like by nature. If any of us are different, and have been brought to love God, it is only because of God's grace and not because we are natively better. We should therefore sympathize with our lost brothers and sisters in Adam and have no basis to feel superior to or better than them.) But what about those who do not know the truth? How can they be blamed for rejecting it, or for casting contempt on God whom they do not know? See #23 below.

12. The case for my position is found, to a great extent, in the Law of Moses. Some of you have argued that the ethics of Jesus contrast with those of the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses was mean, barbaric, unforgiving, vengeful, cruel, etc., while Jesus advocated, love, forgiveness, meekness, gentleness, niceness, giving people hugs :), etc. The mean old Law of Moses advocated stoning adulterers and idolaters, while Jesus advocated treating them kindly and lovingly. Therefore you advocate the ethics of Jesus over the ethics of the Law of Moses. But this argument is based simply on a lack of understanding of either Jesus or the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses is certainly tough on crime. It holds to a standard of firm justice—"an eye for an eye." But this is in connection to civil government and civil penalties, not interpersonal relations. With regard to interpersonal relations, the Law of Moses says things like don't hate people, love your neighbor as yourself, and avoid taking vengeance (Leviticus 19:17-18). It says that you should love and help even your enemy and those who hate you (Exodus 23:4-5). The ethics of Jesus actually flow right out of the Law of Moses, which is not surprising given Jesus's own ringing endorsement of that Law as a rule of ethical living (see Matthew 5:17-20, discussed further below). To contrast Jesus's ethical teachings with Mosaic civil law is to compare apples to oranges. Jesus does not speak much on civil or political ethics. His purpose in coming into the world was not to provide a compendium for political ethics, but to bring salvation. He had no need to provide a manual for political ethics, for such a manual had already been provided in the Law of Moses, which Jesus explicitly and enthusiastically endorsed.

Some of your confusion on this point seems to also arise from not being careful to distinguish between your own definitions of certain terms and concepts and the Bible's understanding of these terms and concepts. For example, many of you have said things like this: "We can't stone public idolaters to death, because the Bible says to love our neighbors and not judge them, and stoning people is not loving and is judgmental." It is true that the Bible says sometimes not to judge people. In Matthew 7:1-5, for example, Jesus says, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be

measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank *is* in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." However, in other places, Jesus tells us to judge. For example, in Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus says, "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that '*by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.*' And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector." In John 7:24, Jesus says, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." So are we to judge or not? Both. There are senses in which we are not to judge, and senses in which we are. Language has flexibility, and it is therefore necessary to look at context in order to determine how a term or concept is used. Those of you who say that punishing idolaters is "judging" them as Jesus said not to are reading your own personal definition of "judging" into the text, instead of letting the Bible define its own terms and concepts. This is simply sloppy reading and interpretation, whether it is done with the Bible or any other document. Is it unloving to stone idolaters? You might think so, given your ideas of what "loving" means, but the Bible doesn't agree, for the same law that says to stone idolaters also says to "love your neighbor as yourself." So if you want to know what biblical "love" or "judging" looks like, you need to look to the Bible's context rather than simply smuggle in your own definitions while ignoring that context. That will help clear up a lot of confusion in biblical interpretation (and, indeed, the interpretation of anything)! Here is a great article on the biblical view of "judging": http://www.christianciv.com/Judge_Others.htm.

Related to this, some of you noted that Jesus did not execute people for public idolatry, and you concluded from that that civil magistrates are no longer to execute people for public idolatry. Well, Jesus did not arrest anyone for theft or murder either, so I guess we aren't to do so anymore as well? The problem with this argument is that there is no reason to expect that Jesus would take it upon himself in his earthly ministry to carry out personally the infliction of civil law. That would have been to take up the role of a civil magistrate, but Jesus did not wish to take up that role during his earthly ministry (see, for example, John 6:15, 18:36, and Luke 12:13-14). However, he is the King of kings, and he has authority over all civil magistrates, and he commands them to carry out the enforcement of civil law (see Matthew 28:18-20 and Romans 13:1-7).

A related objection arises from passages like 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. In this passage, the Apostle Paul writes to deal with a case of sexual immorality in the Corinthian Church. Read the passage (it is too long to quote here). Some have argued that the fact that Paul does not advise execution here, but merely excommunication from the church for this sexually immoral person, suggests that excommunication has replaced execution in the New Testament, and therefore the Old Testament death penalties no longer should be carried out. Those who argue this position

point out that Paul uses the language often associated with execution in the Law of Moses: “Put away the evil from among you.”

Once again, if the objector’s position and interpretation is valid, it would mean the end of all civil government. For the objection is arguing that the punishments of the civil government in the Law of Moses should now be replaced by church punishments. There is no reason why the same would not apply to murder as it is applied to idolatry or blasphemy. So, according to this reasoning, in the Old Testament murder was punished by death, but today it should be punished only by excommunication. We shouldn’t even put people in prison or fine them for murder, because the church has no authority to exact civil penalties. Again, this interpretation of Paul’s words here are in conflict with his affirmations of the continuing authority of the civil magistrate in Romans 13:1-7, Acts 25:10-11, etc.

Paul is not writing a theoretical treatise on all that is deserved on account of various sins; he is writing a practical letter advising a church to take action against an immoral person. Writing about the role of the civil magistrate in such cases would have been beside the point. Christians did not have civil authority to implement biblical law in New Testament times, just as we do not have the authority to do so in modern America (see #16 below). When a Reformed church in modern America discusses what to do with an unrepentant, sexually immoral person (who has committed incest, like the man in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13), they talk about excommunication, but they do not talk about execution--not necessarily because they do not believe that such a person ought to be executed, but because they have no authority to do so, so the issue is moot. They do, however, have the authority to excommunicate without execution. And that is what they would do. If a modern American Reformed church finds itself having to deal with an unrepentant murderer among its church members, it would likewise, insofar as it was discussing its own actions, talk of excommunication, but not execution, for the same reason--not because the elders of the church do not believe that murderers should be executed, but because the church, as opposed to the civil magistrate, has no authority to execute people. The same would apply in ancient Corinth. Early Christian churches would no more execute murderers than they would idolaters or incestuous persons, not because murder ought not to be punished with death, but because it is not the role of the church to carry out such a penalty. Church leaders, as such, have ecclesiastical authority, not civil authority; just as civil leaders, as such, have civil authority, not ecclesiastical authority. But the existence of one kind of authority is no argument against the existence of the other. It is only church authority, not civil authority, that is in view in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. When Paul does talk about civil authority, he does indeed attribute to it the power of the “sword” and discuss the death penalty for things “deserving of death” (Romans 13:1-7; Acts 25:10-11). So this argument is simply an argument from silence that ignores other parts of Scripture.

13. Related to #12, some of you made the argument that the Law of Moses has been abolished by Jesus and the New Testament, and so we are no longer to follow it. You drew the conclusion from that that we should no longer punish public manifestations of false religion, etc. Jesus actually explicitly addressed the question of the continuing validity of the Law of Moses in

Matthew 5:17-20, and how his coming affected that validity. Listen to what he said: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all has come to pass. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus explicitly warns against thinking that his coming has abolished the Law of Moses. He tells us to make sure we keep following it, even down to the minutest part (every jot and tittle). This argument is a good example of people’s tendency to read into the Bible what they like rather than what is there, even if it is the direct opposite of what is there (this is one reason why there are so many interpretations of biblical passages around—it is not necessarily that the Bible is unclear; it is that people don’t want to submit to what it says and try to impose their own desires onto it).

Now, it is true that Jesus’s coming and the New Testament have brought changes to our relationship with the Law of Moses. This is the kernel of truth in your argument. There are aspects of the Law of Moses that were intended to be permanent, to permanently apply to the ongoing practice of the people of God. (Historically, Christians have typically called these aspects of the Law of Moses the “moral law.”) But other aspects were always intended by God to apply only temporarily or to particular circumstances. For example, much of the Law of Moses is taken up with instructions regarding the building and maintenance of the Tabernacle. However, while David was king of Israel, God gave him plans for the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, and Solomon his son built that Temple. From the time of Solomon on, the Tabernacle was obsolete, and those parts of the Law that dealt with things unique to the Tabernacle were no longer applicable in their literal sense to the ongoing life of the people of God. They were always intended to be temporary. Of course, their underlying substantial meanings, the principles displayed in them (such as the need to have an atonement for sin, the need to worship God with reverence, etc.), are permanent and continued to apply to the people of God after the Temple was built, but the literal instructions were not. Other aspects of the Law of Moses were temporary as well. There are parts of the Law of Moses that only applied in their literal form to the people of God before the coming of Christ. They looked forward to the coming of Christ, and therefore their form changed when Christ came. For example, the Law of Moses prescribes a whole system of animal sacrifices. These sacrifices were foreshadowings pointing forward to the coming of Christ, the true sacrifice for sins. Once Christ came, there was an alteration of the application of this part of the Law of Moses. Now, instead of performing animal sacrifices looking forward to the coming of Christ, we look back to the sacrifice of Christ and celebrate it and commune with it through the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper (Communion). You can see this outlined, for example, in Hebrews 5-10 and in Matthew 26:17-29. There were other aspects of the Law of Moses that were changed as well with the coming of Christ, such as the change of the priesthood (also discussed extensively in Hebrews), the inclusion of the Gentiles, etc. Other aspects of the Law of Moses, however, did not change in

form. For example, the Ten Commandments are still to be followed mostly without any real change in form (see, for example, Romans 13:8-14 and Ephesians 6:1-4). For another example, the laws against sexual immorality remain unchanged in form (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 5:1-13). The entire Law of Moses remains in force in substance, as Jesus said, but there is a change in the form and the application of some of the commandments. The key question is this: How are we to know what parts of the Law of Moses have changed in form or application and which have not? Well, only God is authorized to change the application of his law. "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" (Deuteronomy 12:32). Unless God has indicated in his Word that some portion of the Law is temporary, we have no right to stop following it. If the Bible gives us clear evidence of a change of application, we should observe that change. Where the Bible does not give us clear evidence of change, we should continue to observe the law in its original form.

I see no evidence that God has commanded any changes in the observation of the judicial (including the civil) laws of Moses (besides those judicial laws that were linked to otherwise-known temporary components of the law, such as laws pertaining to separating Jews from Gentiles). Specifically, I see no evidence in the Bible of God changing the applications of any of the civil laws pertaining to the punishment of false religion. God's view of false religion remains the same in the New Testament as it was in the Old Testament (see, again, Romans 1 for a clear indication of this, among many other passages). In Romans 13:1-7, Paul reaffirms that the civil magistrate has been given the sword by God for the protection and promotion of the good, and for the punishment of evildoers. Paul calls the civil magistrate a "minister of God." The magistrate must therefore look to God's law to determine how he should carry out his God-appointed functions. Jesus, as we have seen, reaffirmed the entire Law of Moses, and never suggested any changes in the judicial laws. In fact, in Mark 7:1-13 (and specifically verse 10), Jesus chides the Pharisees for neglecting the Law of Moses, and specifically mentions one of the civil penalties in that Law as an example of that which they should not have neglected.

The main argument you have provided in your papers to suggest that Jesus did away with the judicial laws is the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11. Some of you suggested that Jesus does away with civil laws against adultery in this passage. However, the passage says no such thing. Let's take a closer look at it. First of all, it is found in John 8:2-11. Read this passage (I am not going to quote it all here for reason of length). For context, also read Deuteronomy 22:22-24, which discusses the civil penalty for adultery in the Law of Moses. Now let's talk about what's going on here. Did Jesus repudiate the law of Moses regarding adultery in John 8:1-11? Well, he certainly didn't prosecute the woman for adultery. Nor did anyone else, by the end of the passage. We have the motive of the men who brought the woman to Jesus. It was not out of a concern for justice, but to try to get Jesus into trouble. They wanted to put Jesus into a tight spot, where he would be forced either to repudiate the Mosaic law or to enforce it and thus risk the wrath of the Roman governors (who required permission to be sought before executions could be performed). Do you notice anything interesting about how these men carry out their case, in comparison with the law in Deuteronomy 22:22-24? First of

all, the law says to bring the woman *and the man* to be punished, but they have brought only the woman. Very suspicious! Also, why are they bringing her to Jesus? He has made no claims to be exercising civil authority in Israel at this time, nor would they have recognized such claims if he had made them. They should have brought her to the proper authorities. Also, we should ask, was it even legal for the Jewish authorities to be carrying out executions against the command of Rome? God had always told his people to submit to the governing authorities when they were in captivity, not to subvert them and attempt to set up their own alternate government (see #16 below). So it would probably not have been lawful *by Old Testament biblical standards* to try to carry out that penalty at that time, even if they had followed the law properly and brought both the man and the woman and had gone to the proper authorities. So their entire case is highly suspicious and unlawful, according to God's own Old Testament standards. In fact, it seems to be precisely this point that Jesus plays on in his response to them. He says, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." If Jesus meant by this that only completely perfect people can carry out the exaction of legal penalties, this comment would imply the abolition not just of the death penalty for adultery, but of all civil government. It would be an endorsement of total civil anarchy. This is something those who use this passage to oppose Mosaic judicial law always seem to overlook. But, in fact, Jesus's words mean no such thing. Jesus knows that the men are not honest and righteous in the case they are bringing to him, and he calls their bluff. In biblical law, as we have seen, the witnesses are to be the first to throw the stones at the one they have testified against. This would have the tendency to put a strong burden on the witnesses to avoid false witness, since they would be clearly and directly guilty of murder if their witness was not honest. Jesus thus challenges the witnesses to go ahead and start throwing stones. This is very likely not what they expected, and their consciences, knowing that their case is not legal or just, will not allow them to continue; so they give up their case. Since there is no valid case that has been made, Jesus doesn't prosecute either (not that he could, not being a witness). Instead, he lets her go, warning her to sin no more (perhaps implying that she may indeed have been guilty of adultery, despite the illegality of the case made against her). In any of this, did Jesus actually repudiate the judicial law against adultery? No, he didn't. If he had wanted to do so, it would have been very easy. Instead, he actually affirms the judicial law, calling the bluff of those who were suggesting that it be carried out. There are a lot of interesting things in this passage about the Law of Moses and how it should be applied, about forgiveness, about hypocrisy, and other things; but what is not here is a repudiation of the judicial law against adultery.

Therefore, there is no merit to your argument that the Law of Moses, and specifically the judicial part of it, has been done away with by Jesus and the New Testament. However, I will say that this is a better argument than most of the preceding arguments I have hitherto dealt with in this reply. The reason is that this argument, unlike most of the others thus far, does not beg the question. It does not simply assume an Agnostic viewpoint or some other viewpoint without argument. It is a deal-with-the-issue sort of argument, because instead of just assuming a view alternate to mine, it directly attacks a foundational point/assumption of my position. My position assumes that the biblical civil laws against false religion still apply today, and this

argument attacks this assumption directly and tries to show that it is unbiblical. That is a very useful approach. If you wish to continue to use this argument, you will need to do better at it next time, taking into account my response, but bravo for heading down a useful track! Just remember, though, that if you are arguing for religious freedom based on biblical teaching, you are implying that you want civil law to be based on biblical teaching and therefore to acknowledge the Bible as the Word of God just as much as I do. We both agree that the Bible should be a foundation for civil law--the law should not be neutral, but rather Christian; we simply disagree about what the Bible tells civil magistrates to do. Make sure you make this implication of your argument explicit.

I need to deal with another related objection before we move on to the next point. Some of you suggested that biblical civil law, even in the Old Testament, was never meant to apply to non-Israelites. It only applied to those who had voluntarily accepted a covenant relationship with God. Therefore, today, even if the Law of Moses was still in force, we should never punish practitioners of false religions unless they first voluntarily embraced Christianity. But this argument is in error. In fact, non-Israelites who lived within the territory of Israel were indeed subject to biblical civil law. Non-Israelites living in Israel were called "strangers" and "aliens" in biblical law, and the law commanded that they be subject to the same laws as the Israelites. See, for example, Leviticus 24:10-23 and 20:2-3. Anyone living in a biblical society would be subject to these laws. Also, the law of God was always meant to apply to all people. In the Old Testament, only the Jews were actual followers of God's law. But the Gentiles and the Gentile nations were still bound ethically by that law (see, for example, Romans 3:9, 19). The Old Testament prophesied that when the Messiah would come, all the nations would be brought into subjection to God's law (see Isaiah 2:2-3), and this was fulfilled when Christ gave his great commission to go out and make disciples of all the nations (see Matthew 28:18-20). So in both the Old and the New Testament, but even more emphasized in the New, all people and peoples are subject to the law of God.

Let me say a little more here to strengthen my case regarding the universal applicability of the Law of God. Of course, in Old Testament times, only a minority of the world's population had access to the written biblical law. However, it was always designed to be a model for all nations. All nations that were interested in righteousness should have looked to that law to guide them on laws and policy insofar as they knew about it. In Deuteronomy 4:5-8, God makes this point, speaking to Israel: "Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to *them* in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe *them*; for this *is* your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation *is* a wise and understanding people. For what great nation *is there* that has God *so* near to it, as the LORD our God *is* to us, for whatever *reason* we may call upon Him? And what great nation *is there* that has *such* statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?'" Biblical law is a model to all nations of a righteous law. Therefore, any nation that sought

justice in OT times should have modeled their laws off of the standard of the Law of Moses so far as they knew about it.

The prophets repeatedly call all the nations, not just Israel, to righteousness and justice. See, for example, the Book of Amos, among many other examples. The nations were subject to God's standard of righteousness, and would be judged if they violated it. This included standards of justice related to idolatry and blasphemy. In the Book of Daniel, for example, in Daniel 5, we read of a Babylonian king, Belshazzar, being threatened with judgment for his and his people's idolatry. Daniel says to him, in verse 23, "And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who *holds* your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified." All nations and rulers are subject to the law of God.

Gentile kings in the OT are often commended for making laws that reflect devotion to the true God, and even which mandate worship of the true God. Jonah, for example, was sent to the Assyrian kingdom, to the capital city of Nineveh, to call the people to repentance or face judgment. He delivered his message, and here is what happened (Jonah 3:5-10): "5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. 6 Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered *himself* with sackcloth and sat in ashes. 7 And he caused *it* to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, 'Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who can tell *if* God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?' 10 Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it." God clearly approved of the Ninevite king decreeing a public fast crying out to the true God for repentance. (What would have happened if the Ninevites United for Separation of Church and State had come in and convinced the king not to do this because it was a violation of religious freedom?) In Daniel 3:29, after acknowledging the Israelite God to be the true God, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, issued this decree: "Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation, or language which speaks anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made an ash heap; because there is no other God who can deliver like this." In Daniel 6:25-26, after the affair with the lion's den, Darius, king of the Medes and Persians, made this decree: "To all peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you. I make a decree that in every dominion of my kingdom *men must* tremble and fear before the God of Daniel. For He *is* the living God, and steadfast forever; His kingdom *is the one* which shall not be destroyed, and His dominion *shall endure* to the end. He delivers and rescues, and He works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, who has

delivered Daniel from the power of the lions.” In Ezra 7:25-26, King Artaxerxes of Persia commanded that the law of God be enforced in the entire area near Judah within his kingdom. And I could give more examples.

The proper understanding of the place of the Law of Moses as a rule of life today is a complicated one, and so, in case you might want to study this issue further, you may go to <https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B0VLND0Xob7qZTEtTTixQjNDSDQ> to find two sermons in which a more complete case is made regarding the proper understanding of the place of the Law of Moses in the modern world.

14. Many of you who argued that the Law of Moses has been abolished by the coming of Christ made the assumption that this would imply that now we should have freedom of religion protected by civil law. But I don't see why this necessarily follows. In other words, I am saying that if you could prove that the judicial laws of Moses no longer apply to modern civil magistrates, you would not necessarily have proven that we ought to have freedom of religion. Perhaps we are no longer bound by the judicial laws, and yet *still* the civil magistrate is to punish manifestations of false religion. After all, Paul in Romans 13:1-7 says, in the New Testament, that civil magistrates are “ministers of God” sent to reward the good and punish evildoers. False religion is just as evil and dangerous now as ever. So why shouldn't the civil magistrate punish false religion now just as much as before? You think that the civil magistrate still has authority to punish murder, theft, child molestation, etc., so why not public idolatry, blasphemy, etc.? You cannot simply assume that just because the judicial laws of Moses are no longer in effect, therefore whatever modern American culture thinks the civil magistrate should do is right. You need to add more to your case here.
15. Many of you argued that having biblical law as the basis of civil law, and therefore punishing things like false religion, would be a violation of the principle of the equality of all human beings. It would be to discriminate against those who don't practice the biblical religion. It would be unfair to them. Well, the very concept of law involves discrimination and treating people unequally; so the only way to avoid discrimination would be to abolish all law. I'll bet you don't really want everyone to be treated equally. You like discrimination. For example, you don't want murderers to be treated the same as non-murderers, do you? You want them to be discriminated against--that is, treated less favorably than non-murderers. You probably want thieves and rapists to be treated unequally and discriminated against as well. Why? Because you believe murder, theft and rape are bad activities which violate the values you think the state ought to protect--such as life, property, and freedom from being sexually coerced. I agree with you. But I also think that false religion and blasphemy are bad activities that violate the values we all ought to hold and that the state ought to protect--such as the supreme honor of God and obedience to his will. Therefore, whatever answer you would give to defend yourself against the charge of unfairness and discrimination when it comes to the treatment of murderers, I would give a similar answer with regard to the punishing of false religionists and blasphemers. Again, this is a question-begging argument. It only makes sense if one already assumes that murder and theft are bad but false religion and blasphemy aren't that bad (or that God has

commanded the state not to punish them). But you can't just assume that, because the question of what is good and bad and what the state ought to punish are precisely the points at issue in our controversy. You can't *assume* these things; you have to *prove* them. Why do you think idolatry and blasphemy aren't bad enough to be prohibited and punished by law? I think they are, for reasons I have given (both here and in class).

Related to this, some of you have made an argument like this: "Jesus said to do unto others what you would have them do unto you. You wouldn't want someone to punish you for your religious practices, would you? Well then, you shouldn't punish people for their religious practices." But this is fallacious reasoning, for it rests on the false assumption that all religious practices are equally true and/or good. If they aren't equally true and/or good (as I have shown in #11 above), the argument doesn't hold. Here is a similar argument: "Jesus said to do unto others as what you would have them do unto you. You wouldn't want to be put in jail for your lifestyle practices (say, hiking and kayaking), would you? Well then, you shouldn't put thieves and murderers in jail either." What is wrong with this argument? It makes the assumption that theft and murder are in the same category as hiking and kayaking. But they aren't. The latter are harmless, innocent activities, while the former are evil and harmful activities. It is the business of law to discriminate between good activities and bad ones, and to punish the latter but not the former. You want thieves and murderers, but not hikers and kayakers (so long as they are not also thieves or murderers, etc.) to go to jail. Likewise, I am advocating that those who practice public false religion should be punished, but not those who practice public true religion. Since false religion is bad and harmful while true religion is good and beneficial, I am not at all violating the golden rule by advocating my position on this subject.

16. A number of you made the argument that we shouldn't get rid of freedom of religion and have biblical law because people would be very upset by this and would revolt, causing war, bloodshed, chaos, and other bad things. In other words, my view would lead to chaos and destruction. Some of the problem here comes from assuming that I am suggesting we force biblical law on a society by means of a violent revolution. I am suggesting no such thing. No authority has been given by God in the Bible for us to overthrow governments or to use violence to get biblical law accepted by any society. Nor can we take the law into our own hands—vigilantism--and punish people for crimes ourselves without a proper legal trial and the consent of the proper legal authorities. In the Old Testament, the Israelites, while in exile under foreign, pagan governments, were required to observe the laws of the society (except insofar as those laws commanded sin) and to be at peace with it, being good citizens. See the Book of Daniel for an Old Testament example of this. It is no different in the New Testament. Christians are to obey the laws of the society they are in, and they are not to use violence to promote the spread of Christianity. Rather, they are to spread Christianity by means of persuasion. See Matthew 28:18-20 and 2 Corinthians 10:3-5. Of course all people are commanded by God to accept his revelation, and they have an ethical obligation to do so, whether they agree or not. God will punish all individuals and nations that reject his will. But we are not given authority to enforce acceptance of God's law on any society. However, once a society voluntarily embraces biblical

Christianity, the civil government of that society, when it realizes what God desires and commands of it, will willingly embrace biblical law and enforce it within its rightful territory. This will involve punishing public proponents of false religion, etc. So we are to work peacefully for the Christianization of the entire culture and all aspects of it--personal, social, political, etc. Therefore, I do not think that my views will lead to mass chaos and bloodshed, although they will lead sometimes to the occasional punishing of a proponent of false religion in an already-established biblical society.

But let's say that obeying God's command in this area would lead to chaos and bloodshed. Would that be a good argument for why we shouldn't do it? No, we should obey God no matter what the cost. When Abraham was ordered by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, he didn't say, "No, I can't do that; the cost is too high." When the Israelites were commanded to wipe out the Canaanites for their sin, it was their duty to do so. So if God gave us a plan that leads to chaos and bloodshed, so be it. That doesn't let us off the hook obeying God. But, in fact, I don't think the biblical view promotes chaos and bloodshed.

If biblical law did promote chaos and bloodshed, whose fault would the bloodshed and chaos be? God is the ultimate moral authority of the universe. All people are morally obligated to follow his commands. The only reason why God's laws could possibly bring chaos and bloodshed, or even any negative consequences at all, would be if people rebel against them. If there is an established biblical society and some people in it rise up in violence against it, or if a non-biblical society were to wage war in order to change a biblical society, these things would cause bloodshed. But the fault would not be with biblical law, but with those who refuse to submit to it. When the police attempt to apprehend a bank robber, sometimes this leads to bloodshed, because the robber starts fighting back with violence. Whose fault is the bloodshed? The robber's. Sometimes in a just war, people get killed. Whose fault is it? It is the fault of the wicked people who made the war necessary. So in this case, if biblical law leads to any bloodshed or chaos, the blame is on those who refuse to submit to their moral obligations and instead choose to fight against God. So your concern about bloodshed is selective. You don't mind it when you think it is for a good cause. Your argument therefore begs the question, because it is based on the assumption that biblical law is not a good cause. To put it briefly another way, what if we Reformed Christians decided that we didn't want to live in an Agnostic society anymore, and so we rose up in violent rebellion against the US government? (We won't do that, for reasons I have already mentioned.) This would probably lead to some bloodshed and chaos. Whose fault would it be? The fault of the US government for imposing an Agnostic order on people, or our fault for rising in rebellion against it? Your answer will depend, to some degree, on whether you think the imposition of an Agnostic order is good and just. My answer to the chaos and bloodshed issue likewise partly depends on my view that the imposition of biblical law is good and just.

Some of you tell me that it is not practical to try to promote biblical law in modern countries like the USA. It is not likely it will be accepted. Well, humanly speaking that is certainly true, although God can change people's hearts and cause it to happen even if it is humanly

immensely improbable. However, what I am suggesting is an ideal, just as Prof. Rawls is suggesting an ideal. Prof. Rawls is well aware that there are some countries that are highly unlikely at the present time to embrace his political liberalism or the UN's view of human rights. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't work towards that goal, if that is what is right. I would say the same about biblical law.

By the way, before we leave this topic, I might point out that while my view does not recommend coercive measures to produce a biblical society, Prof. Rawls's view does. If you recall, he says that liberal societies might wage war against countries that don't honor his view of human rights in order to make them do so. So if a biblical society like Puritan New England existed today, the Rawlsian Agnostics might wage war against it to force it to accept their Agnostic-based viewpoint, while the biblical society would never wage war against the Agnostic society to force biblical law. I like to call this point of view "Rawls's Agnostic jihad." So who's promoting more potential chaos and bloodshed?

Also, I should add that I think that an Agnostic society will in general be more prone to chaos and bloodshed and violence than a biblical society. In an Agnostic society, at least one like the modern USA that wants to be pluralistic—that is, it wants to have citizens who hold to a variety of worldviews and can publicly promote them—there is a strong tendency towards violence and chaos due to the fact that the country will be full of people who fundamentally disagree about what values and goals the society ought to pursue, what methods it ought to use to pursue them, what rights people should or should not be granted, what is harmful and therefore should be illegal and what is not harmful and should be legal, what the proper role of the government is, etc. Imagine trying to form a club made up of members who fundamentally disagree about what the club is for, what its rules should be, what its values and goals should be, etc. It is a recipe for chaos, is it not? Now blow that up to an entire nation full of millions of people with diverse worldviews, and you get . . . peace and order? I don't think so. A pluralistic country is one with unsolvable underlying tensions that must again and again break out into fights, even violent fights. Think about abortion in this country. Some people think that abortion is a woman's right; others think that abortion is the violation of the right to life of the unborn child. No matter what the law does here, whether it allows abortion or not, it must violate fundamental rights in someone's view. This difference in view over abortion is owing to a great degree to the different worldviews in our pluralistic society. For people on all sides, there is a lot at stake in the abortion controversy, and neither side is going to tolerate defeat (nor should they, from their own moral point of view). This kind of unsolvable tension is the stuff of civil war, and that is the path I believe this country is heading down unless it resolves these tensions, which it can't do if it wishes to remain pluralistic. In a biblical society, on the other hand, there is a single worldview clearly adopted by the government which everyone is explicitly aware of and which provides a unified standard of right and wrong. The vast majority of citizens share that worldview, and those who don't are not allowed to oppose it and are subject to strict penalties for advocating publicly an alternate worldview. This sort of society will be naturally far more prone to peace and order, as it will have a fundamental unity of values, goals, and

standards running through it. How ironic, then, that the pluralistic Agnostics should accuse a biblical society of being prone to chaos and disorder!

Let me add one other qualification here to make sure my position is clearly understood. I have said that the civil magistrate has a moral duty to punish the public practice of false religion. We must note that he has other duties as well, such as the protection of the lives of his citizens. One can imagine situations where the two values might come into conflict, in which case difficult decisions would have to be made. This can happen in many kinds of cases. For example, we would probably agree that it is the role of the civil magistrate to arrest those who trespass into a house not their own and refuse to leave even when the owner wishes them to do so. But think of a situation where a trespasser takes hostages while he is in the house and threatens to kill them if he is forcibly removed. In this case, while the police have a prima facie duty to arrest trespassers, yet they also have a prima facie duty to protect the lives of innocent citizens, and these two values are in conflict in this situation. The police will likely choose to forgo an immediate arrest of the trespasser in this case in order to try to preserve the lives of the hostages. They will not give up on this goal entirely, however. They will make plans to try to accomplish the safety of the hostages as well as the apprehension of the trespasser, and yet this plan will be more complicated than the normal process of arresting trespassers and will likely require a time of forbearance in which the trespasser is not immediately arrested. Similarly, one can conceive of circumstances in which the civil authorities might forgo punish someone for public idolatry for a time. For example, if an atheist organization were to make a credible threat to bomb an entire city if the guilty idolater is arrested, this would surely give a pause to the immediate plan of arrest. I don't know what the exact proper response would be, as this would depend on many detailed factors, but certainly great creativity would be required in order to preserve all of the values and achieve all of the goals of the society in such cases. But none of this, of course, should be used as an excuse to ignore than general principle that public idolaters should be civilly punished.

17. A few of you suggested that the Law of Moses, with its lack of religious freedom, reflects a dark, barbaric time in human history, and that now we have evolved beyond such barbarism. Well, I hope you can see by now that this is yet another question-begging argument. By what standard are you declaring the Law of Moses "barbaric" and your own view "evolved" or "advanced"? By the standard of your own feelings? Well, my feelings are different, because they are informed not by my imagination and fantasies but by the objective Word of God. If you want to say that the Law of Moses is "primitive" or "barbaric," you will have to define these terms more clearly and show specifically how this is an objection against biblical law. For example, perhaps "barbaric" simply means "cruel." Well, then you will have to show how you define cruelty and explain specifically why you think biblical law is too cruel. Some people seem to hold to some idea that ideas must evolve, and so any view that was held in the past must be worse than a view held today. But while technology tends to advance, there is no reason to think that morality does. Perhaps we do learn how to do things in a smarter way sometimes, but you cannot simply assert that a belief is "older" and therefore, on that basis alone, declare it false.

Perhaps biblical law is right and we are wrong. Perhaps we have taken a wrong turn, and need to retrace our steps back to where we went astray. It happens!

18. A number of you have tried to make my view look bad by using vague generalizations and comparisons to other bad things. For example, some of you say things like this: “We don’t want to take away religious freedom. When people didn’t have religious freedom in the past, it led to wars and chaos. Look at the communist countries! Haven’t they been bad? They denied/deny religious freedom. Therefore denying religious freedom is bad.” The problem with this form of argumentation is that it is too vague, and it uses unjustified stereotypes. If you want to show that biblical law will lead to this or that result, you cannot simply make grand assertions without clear, specific evidence. You must show specifically and with evidence that some particularly spelled-out aspect of biblical law must lead, or must tend to lead, to some specific result. When slavery was abolished, people were against it because they said “it will crash the entire economy!” When women were given the vote, people said it was the demise of civilization. When interracial marriage was made legal, people said it would destroy American society. Etc., etc. People today say that if same-sex marriage is granted, it will destroy the entire fabric of western culture. We must do more than simply throw out fearful, dire assertions. We must give specific proof of the alleged bad tendencies of some specific idea. It is also unfair to compare my view with communism, or neo-Nazis, or Iran, or any other group, without dealing with specifics. A biblical society would be very different from Iran, from neo-Nazism, etc. You cannot just say, “This bad society bans religious freedom, so you’ll be just like them if you do it.” That is simply sloppy stereotyping instead of careful analysis. It is propaganda, not argumentation or evidence. It paints a picture rooted in emotion rather than reason, in fear rather than objective evaluation. It tries to slam a hated view by associating it with other hated things without being careful of the differences.
19. A number of you said that we should have religious freedom “insofar as the religious practice is not in violation of the laws of the land.” But this begs the real question, What should the laws of the land be? *That* is what we are talking about. Unless you are suggesting that the actual laws of any given society are the highest source of morality, so that it is logically impossible for any country to ever have any bad laws, or that the highest standard of morality is whatever the majority in any country happen to want at any particular time (and if one of these is your position, you must prove it), you yourself must ask the question of whether the laws of the land in any given case are actually right. And that is what we are asking.
20. This is the flip-side of #18 above. Many of you said that the reason this country (the USA) is a great country is because we have religious freedom, thereby implying that not having it would be a bad thing. Just as with #18, this argument is too vague and un-specific. How do you know that America’s success is owing to religious freedom? Can you really prove that? Are you sure it isn’t owing more primarily to other factors? And what do you mean by this nation being a “great” nation, a “blessed” nation, a “successful” and “prosperous” nation, etc.? Successful how? Prosperous in what way? Economically? Socially? I would argue that the USA may be prosperous economically (at least compared to some other nations), but morally it is becoming

more and more bankrupt because of the abandonment of biblical law and biblical teachings in general. We are becoming morally more and more corrupt. We celebrate sexual immorality. We legalize euthanasia (a nice name for self-murder), abortion (the killing of thousands of innocent human beings on a regular basis), and same-sex marriage. Our families are falling apart through lack of biblical guidance. We are a culture obsessed with entertainment, with no sense of the purpose or meaning of our existence. We live for entertainment. There were times in the Old Testament when the rich were prospering, but living in immorality. The Old Testament prophets repeatedly called Israel to repentance, and warned them not to trust in riches or to judge their well-being by outward things while they were forsaking the law of God. Rebellion against God brings judgment, but sometimes that judgment, through the mercy and plan of God, takes a while to fully manifest itself. I would argue that our culture is morally falling apart, and we will continue to see more of the effects of this as other aspects of our society decay. Israel thought itself secure, sometimes for hundreds of years, but eventually destruction came. We are a young nation, and yet we pride ourselves on our success. There have been many nations that have lasted far longer than we have thus far, and have fallen to the judgment of God. Sometimes the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. But the Bible repeatedly warns us not to be fooled. God's judgment will right all wrongs in the end. See, for example, Psalm 73.

So there are two things I would need to see here to make this argument good. You need to show (with specific evidence) that the prosperity of this country is owing to its repudiation of biblical law and granting religious freedom. And if you can show that, you need to show why we should take the prosperity of a wicked nation (which, by the way, may be righteous in other areas) as an indication that we should abandon God's law. If the Baal-worshippers of the Old Testament had been able to make a case that Israel was prospering when Baal-worship was rampant, would that have proved that Israel ought to tolerate Baal-worship and refuse to enforce the Law of Moses? (See Jeremiah 44.) The Church of Scotland, a Reformed church, back in the 1600's when toleration of false religion was becoming popular, said this against it: "Such a cursed toleration as this will not only make every thing in religion appear to be uncertain, rend the churches and disturb the state, and trample all ordinances, order and government under foot, and bring forth many blasphemies and abominations, but is like to banish religion and righteousness quite out of the land, and at last make a hell upon earth" (from <http://www.covenanter.org/JHowie/faithfulwitnessbearing/testimonyagainsttoleration.html>). Are their words coming true in this culture right before our very eyes?

It can be quite difficult to determine the real reasons for success or failure on a national scale, as the factors involved are often quite complex. Personally, I consider it likely that one of the main reasons for the relative economic prosperity of the US today is that God is blessing us in response to our godly national ancestors. God often providentially blesses children and descendents for the good actions of the parents. Our godly Puritan national ancestors were a very holy people in many ways (by God's grace), and they prayed for their descendents and for

the future of their nations. I think that much of American success is God's response to their prayers. Another reason I would assign to explain the US's relative economic prosperity is the work ethic handed down by our Puritan forefathers who encouraged industry and diligence in fulfilling one's calling. This has led to a distaste for laziness that has often animated many Americans and has, I think, influenced our prosperity. Neither of these reasons involves religious freedom. I do not say that I can prove that these are causes of our economic blessings (although it might be easier to prove the second than the first), but they are surely plausible candidates (assuming a Reformed Christian worldview). I mention these plausible explanations in order to illustrate how difficult it can be to assign reasons for success and failure on a national (or even a personal) level. If you wish to make an argument on this point, you must avoid being overly simplistic and deal with the complexity of this issue adequately.

21. Some of you asked me a question like this: "How can we turn our back on freedom of religion, when so many people have suffered and died for it (in combat, etc.)?" Well, a lot of people suffered and died in service to Adolf Hitler as well, and to communism, and to Islamic fundamentalism, and to Reformed Christianity for that matter (see, for example, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Covenanter>). Just because people are willing to suffer for something does not make it true or right.
22. A number of you suggested that it would be inappropriate for a nation to enforce biblical law and punish false religion, because judgment belongs to God and we should not judge. We should leave the judgment to God. Well, that is exactly what I am doing. I leave the judgment to God. And God has said things like this in his Word: "If there is found among you, within any of your gates which the LORD your God gives you, a man or a woman who has been wicked in the sight of the LORD your God, in transgressing His covenant, who has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, either the sun or moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded, and it is told you, and you hear *of it*, then you shall inquire diligently. And if *it is* indeed true *and* certain that such an abomination has been committed in Israel, then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has committed that wicked thing, and shall stone to death that man or woman with stones. Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness. The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall put away the evil from among you" (Deuteronomy 17:2-7). So if we leave the judgment to God, we will do as God says, which includes being involved in judging ourselves in some way. Those who are refusing to obey God's will in this area, it is they who are refusing to leave the judgment to God. If a child professes respect for a parent's authority, and the parent then tells the child to do something, and the child does not do it, the professed respect is really no respect at all. If we are so concerned about leaving God's prerogatives to God, why not listen to what he says?
23. Some of you suggested that it would be unfair for God to punish people who practice false religion, because they don't know any better. But that is false. The Bible says that the evidence for God is so clear that anyone who denies God is without excuse. And since God is a being of

infinite objective value, to cast contempt on him by rejecting, opposing, or ignoring him is an infinite crime deserving of an infinite punishment. That is why sin is so terrible and deserves so great a punishment. Read Romans 1:18-3:20 to see all of this spelled out. Also, salvation comes through accepting the gospel (see, for example, Romans 10:12-21), so those who reject the gospel are in a state of condemnation under God's curse. There is no excuse for rejecting the gospel, for whenever it is preached, there is enough evidence to know that it is true. (See, for example, Luke 10:1-16, Acts 13:42-51, and 1 John 2:22.) Ignorance is not a valid excuse for the infinite crime of rebellion against God.

Also, recall that in this conversation we are talking about a civil government in a biblical society punishing someone who publicly practices and advocates false religion. No one will be punished except for breaking the civil law of the nation in which he lives. In this country, ignorance is not considered an adequate excuse for committing a crime. If you steal a tube of toothpaste from Walmart, you will not escape prosecution by claiming that simply were not aware that stealing toothpaste was a crime. You are expected to know this, for the civil laws are sufficiently published. Likewise, in a biblical society the laws forbidding public idolatry will be sufficiently published so that ignorance will not be taken to be an adequate ground for an excuse.

24. Some of you have used the GIPD [Good and Intelligent People Disagree] argument, usually without apparently noticing. The GIPD argument says that the fact of widespread disagreement about religious matters in the world must mean that the evidence is unclear and so it is impossible to know whether or not God exists, whether or not Christianity is true, etc. But this is a bad argument. I've discussed this in class as well. GIPD is self-refuting, since one of the things there is widespread disagreement about is GIPD itself. Also, GIPD is used to promote Agnosticism, but it is anti-Agnostic just as much as it is anti-theist or anti-Christian or anti-atheist, for Agnosticism is also among those things that there is widespread disagreement about. Also, GIPD makes too many unproven assumptions. It assumes that the reason for disagreement must be lack of available, clear evidence. But it ignores other reasons for disagreement or confusion, such as apathy, bias, pride, fear of consequences, enmity to the truth, etc. I think the reason there is widespread disagreement on religious matters is not because the evidence is unclear, but because people don't value truth. They don't pursue it, and they often run away from it. That is human nature, as you saw from Romans 1-3. So GIPD is gipped, in my opinion.

Many of you specifically used GIPD when discussing the interpretation of the Bible. You said something like this: "How can we adopt just one interpretation of the Bible as the foundation for law? There are lots of different interpretations. People disagree about which is the right one." The implication is that the existence of disagreement is evidence that it is impossible to tell whose interpretation is correct. But, again, this assumes too much. Perhaps there are many other reasons for disagreement. Many of you have provided examples of other reasons. For example, some of you quoted the Bible to support your position, but your quotations betrayed lack of familiarity with the Bible, so that your quotes were out of context and were therefore a bad interpretation. One of you quoted 1 Kings 18:20-40. This is the story of Elijah defeating the

prophets of Baal. Elijah puts the true religion and Baal's religion to the test, to encourage the people to decide to follow the true God. At one point, Elijah says this: "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." You quoted this as proof of religious freedom, against my position. "See," you said, "Elijah gave them a choice! He respected their agency. That shows that the Bible is in favor of religious freedom." Well, let's read a little further and quote verse 40. After the test (in which the true God was successful), it says this: "And Elijah said to them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal! Do not let one of them escape!' So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Brook Kishon and executed them there." Context, context. Some of you did the same thing with Joshua 24:14-15 (compare with Joshua 23:6-8). The problem with our disagreement over biblical interpretation here is not that the Bible is unclear, but that I have paid attention to the context and done my homework and you have not, and consequently your arguments are sloppy while mine are backed up by the objective evidence. I think this sort of thing happens all the time—I've seen it happen over and over again—so I am just not all that impressed when there is disagreement. Some disagreement is more substantial than this, to be sure—but ultimately, I think it makes more sense to evaluate truth claims by looking at the evidence rather than by taking polls.

So if there is no reason to think that people will not continue to disagree even if sufficient evidence is available to find out what is objectively true, why is there consensus on so many "mundane" matters, such as the existence of Idaho, the boiling point of water, the content of gases in the atmosphere, etc., but not on religious and philosophical matters? I think there are a few reasons. For one thing, religious and philosophical matters are often very abstract and difficult to think about. There has to be more care to avoid confusion, and people who are apathetic aren't usually very careful. Also, it is easier to ignore truth in religious and philosophical matters. If you get the existence of God wrong, you don't have as much immediate consequence as if you think your bedroom door is in the opposite wall. I often run across people who will seriously dispute with me about whether $2+2=4$. One of the most intelligent students I have ever had in any of my classes was among that group. He was trying to prove to me that all knowledge is impossible (not noticing that that claim is self-contradictory). His argument about why we don't even know that $2+2=4$ went like this: "It may seem that $2+2$ must always equal 4, but what if you add two raindrops to two more raindrops? Then you get one raindrop!" The raindrops will fuse together. The problem with this is that it doesn't show that $2+2=4$ in its common mathematical meaning isn't universally true; it just redefines the meaning of $2+2=4$ to reach a different conclusion. It is true that raindrops will fuse together if you put them together, but this has nothing to do with the mathematical concept of $2+2=4$, which is simply trying to express the fact that if you take two independent objects and then put with them two more independent objects, and you don't merge them, split them, blow them up, or whatever, you will have four independent objects; and that is universally true. We know that. It is true by logic, by definition. Why did my student think otherwise? Simple semantic confusion. Do I therefore say, "Well, an intelligent person thinks that $2+2$ isn't always 4! I guess I'll have to abandon my belief that it is!" That's what the GIPD argument would tell me to do, but instead I just realize that people can get confused and move on with my life with my belief

intact. If my student was doing math, he would know that $2+2=4$, but in the context of our abstract philosophical conversation, he allowed himself to get confused by semantics. Another reason why I think there is less agreement over religious matters than over mundane matters is because religious matters are more important to people. People don't mind having their views subjected to scrutiny and corrected when the subject is something they don't care about much. But subject people's fundamental, foundational views to criticism and you will often bring out all their bias, prejudice, and motivation to prove themselves right in order to maintain their opinions at all cost. As I mentioned earlier, the Bible teaches that all men are sinners. They hate God and his ultimate truth by nature, and they are devoted to finding ways to remake reality in their own image. Therefore, according to Christianity, there is an insurmountable bias built into fallen human nature against thinking rightly and consistently in ultimate religious matters. This manifests itself in all of the different religions in the world. Why are there so many different religions in the world? Because human beings in different circumstances, cultures, and backgrounds find different ways to reinvent reality in order to justify rebellion against the true God. John Calvin called the human heart an "idol-factory." Christianity thus explains the diversity of views on religious matters better than the Agnostic point of view. If the Agnostic view was true and GIPD was a good argument, we should see a vast historical consensus of the people of the world around Agnosticism. But we don't. (Even if we did, this wouldn't in itself prove that Agnosticism is true, for there can be as many non-rational reasons for agreement as there can be for disagreement, and these must be considered.)

These sorts of observations, I think, can quite adequately explain the lack of consensus in religious matters without having to assume that there is not enough evidence to objectively decide the issues.

25. This relates back to #12-14. I must wonder whether those of you who profess that the Law of Moses is the Word of God and yet object to it today really even approve of it in the past. You say, "Those laws were fine then, but now we need different laws." But I'll bet many of you would think those laws immoral even back then, and the reason you haven't realized that is simply because you haven't thought about it very much or very deeply. One of you said to me something like this: "What if you were eating dinner with your family, and you prayed to God, and then someone came and arrested you? Would you like that? Well then, you shouldn't advocate doing that to others." If that is a good argument, wouldn't that apply 2500 years ago as well as now? Why would punishing people for false religion be OK 2500 years ago, but not now? Why is it now cruel, and barbaric, and unfair, and mean, etc., but 2500 years ago, it was just right? The fact is that modern American political values are out of accord with biblical values, and this is an issue not just for people like me who think the Law of Moses still applies today, but for anyone who thinks it is from God and ever applied. I don't think you've thought about that sufficiently. Atheists like Sam Harris, I think, are more consistent—they affirm religious freedom, recognize that the Bible doesn't (whether or not the Law of Moses still applies), and therefore hate and reject the Bible.

26. Some of you asked how it would be practical to have biblical law today. After all, biblical law doesn't say anything about traffic lights, insurance companies, etc. In other words, it is out of date. This raises an important issue. It does not beg the question, but raises a valid concern that needs to be responded to. The answer is that while it is true that biblical law was written directly to a society that was very different from ours in some ways, yet the principles in biblical law can indeed be applied today. Let me give you a couple of examples. In Exodus 21:28-31, we read this: "If an ox gores a man or a woman to death, then the ox shall surely be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox *shall be* acquitted. But if the ox tended to thrust with its horn in times past, and it has been made known to his owner, and he has not kept it confined, so that it has killed a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death. If there is imposed on him a sum of money, then he shall pay to redeem his life, whatever is imposed on him. Whether it has gored a son or gored a daughter, according to this judgment it shall be done to him." This law is about negligence. We don't have a lot of oxen in modern American cities, so the direct application does not apply to most of us. However, the principle is clear and certainly does apply. For example, if someone has a pit bull, you can see how this law could apply. Or if a person runs a piece of machinery and does not adequately guard it for the protection of others. This law provides a way to deal with these kinds of situations. This could also include the need to regulate traffic in an appropriate manner, etc. Here is another example. In Leviticus 19:35-36, it says this: "You shall do no injustice in judgment, in measurement of length, weight, or volume. You shall have honest scales, honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin: I *am* the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." This law commands people to be honest in business. To be dishonest in business is a form of theft. Here is a law on theft from Exodus 22:1-4: "If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep. . . . He should make full restitution; if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. If the theft is certainly found alive in his hand, whether it is an ox or donkey or sheep, he shall restore double." These laws provide principles on which laws regulating businesses, including insurance companies, as well as private individuals, can be built. Of course, biblical law doesn't provide easy and automatic answers to every possible question that might arise in any society; but what does? What it does provide are principles that can guide the direction of laws that can be made to be adapted to various situations. That is no doubt how these laws functioned in ancient Israel, and it is how these laws would function today. We should not think of these laws as a ready-made code to be put directly into practice without thought. They were never that, even in ancient Israel. They are foundational laws that we can apply using knowledge and wisdom, creativity, and imagination, to the various situations that might arise.

27. Some of you said to me something like this: "You are an imperfect person, Rev. Willson; so how can you know if you are interpreting God's laws right? Why should we trust you to get them right and apply them correctly?" I admit I am imperfect. What do I then do? Do I give up making judgments about anything and just curl up and die? Or do I go forward and do the best that I can? Yes, I am imperfect; but I can still look at the evidence and see what is true and right. I can pay attention to the world around me and try to draw the right conclusions. I can read the

Bible carefully and honestly and find out what it has to say. To say that my views should not be listened to or followed because I am imperfect is absurd. It is an argument born of bias and unquestioned assumptions, not careful and objective thought. For I could say precisely the same thing to you. You are imperfect as well, I presume you will admit. Well then, why should I listen to anything you say? Whenever you talk, should I just wave my hand dismissively and say, "Oh, be quiet, you imperfect, fallible human! Since you are imperfect, there is no point listening to anything you have to say. It is all worthless. Be gone!" And we must all say that to ourselves as well. This is obviously one of those vague and self-refuting arguments I discussed earlier. It would never be used if it were not for a lack of assumption-questioning going on.

28. Following up with #27, let me advise you to watch out for arguments that are self-refuting like the above argument and like GIPD. These arguments show a lack of awareness and critical thinking. You cannot have thought with great depth about something if you use arguments that are obviously self-refuting. You cannot have conscientiously applied your reasoning to your own arguments, for then you would quickly discover your error. If being imperfect disqualifies a person from having a valid case, then clearly it disqualifies you as well, unless you will claim a unique perfection among the mass of imperfect humans. If it is impossible to tell who is right when people disagree, then it is impossible to tell if *you* are right as well. And so on.

To provide another example of self-refuting argument, one of you said this to me: "One thing that may appear perfectly evident and clear to one individual never is that way to everybody else. I remember learning about the stages of cognitive development in a psychology class not too long ago. An important outcome of one of these stages is the ability to understand that not everybody is going to have the same thoughts and opinions about things. For example, a child who has not yet learned this may find it absurd that his best friend's favorite color is green while he thinks that orange is obviously the best color of them all. As adults, I am assuming that we both understand that favorite colors, among other things, are merely opinions. There is no way to prove that one color is better than the other, yet some kids still may try to. Hopefully this stage is overcome during childhood, and is continually applied as adults. Clearly adults often still have the same problem as they converse with their peers. They, too, are often unable to understand that another person may not have the exact same thoughts and opinions as them."

It is quite true that people have different perceptions and tastes, and that an important part of maturity is learning to recognize that and to learn to discern the difference between different factual beliefs that are worth arguing about and mere differences in taste which are not factual contradictions. But you don't want to take this too far, or it becomes self-refuting. If you use these observations to argue that there is no objective way to tell who is right or wrong in any dispute, you will have to conclude that it is impossible to know any truth at all, and you will also have to conclude that you can't even know if any of your own beliefs are true, including your belief that there is no way to tell who is right and wrong in any dispute and that therefore you can't know if your own beliefs are true! It is self-evident that it is possible to know truth, and all people affirm this, including you. It is possible to tell, sometimes, who is right and who is wrong in a dispute. If you didn't believe that, you wouldn't be able to hold any beliefs at all. So this

cannot be used an argument against my position. I claim to have good reason to conclude that I am right about religious freedom and you are wrong, and you claim the same thing in reverse. The only way to tell which one of us is right is to look at the specific evidence.

29. Some of you asserted confidently, as if it were an obvious, indisputable principle, that it would be unfair of God to give laws to those who do not believe in him. I cannot make heads or tails of this objection. Why, if God is the Creator of the entire universe, including all unbelievers, would it be unfair or somehow too far a reach for God to give laws that bind unbelievers? God is the ultimate moral authority of the universe. He does not need to wait for our consent in order to give us commands. To say that he does is to place ourselves as the ultimate moral authority of the universe, so that God must do what we want him to, and if he wants us to do anything, he must ask our permission first. I cannot think that anyone who could suggest such a thing as this could have any clear awareness of what it means to be *God*.

James Renwick Willson addressed a similar objection:

“The obligations of the written law of God upon nations, is suspended not on the consent of the nation. A writer, who once contended for better doctrine, teaches in a late pamphlet, that the law of God contained in the Scriptures, is not binding upon any nation, until the nation engages to take it for its rule. This proposition is really so monstrous, that it may well be wondered how any one professing to be a Christian, and minister of Christ, could have the effrontery to give it utterance. ‘Be wise, now therefore, O ye kings—kiss the Son.’ Ps. 2:10,12. Were any one in expounding this command of God the Father to the civil rulers of the world, to affirm, that no king is bound to kiss the Son, until he engages by covenant to do so, who would, who could believe him? As if God had said ‘kiss the Son’—however you will commit no sin, it will be no neglect of duty that you do not obey the Son, that you render him no honour, until you consent to receive this my commandment, and promise obedience. Will it be a good plea, at the judgment seat of Christ that they had never agreed to obey him? If the apology will avail for a nation, it will also for individual persons. But we know that it will not excuse them. ‘But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither and slay them before me.’ Luke 19:27. The sin for which the enemies are slain, is that they would not assent that Christ should reign over them.

“The objection to which we are here replying, is based on the infidel principle, that the will of the people is the supreme law; that what they enact binds all, and that nothing is obligatory on a nation, until it is enacted by them. The command of God most solemnly enacted, and most clearly revealed, the objector does not consider binding on the creature, until he consents to take it for his rule of action. Perhaps no sentiment ever did greater dishonor to the Law-giver, than this unholy doctrine. To such extremes are they driven, who become the apologists of unholy governments, and who seek to please men rather than God. But such apologies will not avail the wicked in the day of wrath. ‘For the nation and kingdom that will not serve thee shall perish; yea, those nations shall be utterly wasted.’ Isa. 60:12. Their sins, for which they perish, and are utterly wasted, is their refusal to engage themselves to his service. It is not those

nations only that have entered into covenant to serve him, and have violated their engagement, but it is the nation that *will not* serve him; and there is no exception. If they even forget to acknowledge God, destruction awaits them. 'The wicked shall be turned into hell, *and* the nations that *forget* God.' Ps. 9:17" (from <http://www.covenanter.org/JRWillson/writtenlaw.htm>).

30. Another good, valid concern that at least one of you raised was a concern over the biblical principle that a person can be convicted of the death penalty by two or three witnesses. You said that this would not adequately protect justice, because witnesses can lie, etc. That is true. Witnesses can lie. The Bible is not, of course, ignorant of that fact. The entire point of having a plurality of witnesses is to avoid false witness. Notice that the law takes a somewhat open approach to application: "two *or* three" witnesses. How would you know when to accept two witnesses and when to demand three? This would have to be judged on a case by case basis. I think the principle here is deliberately open-ended to allow for careful application to different circumstances. If a case arose in which even the testimony of three witnesses was doubtful, for example if those three witnesses were three brothers or friends who might reasonably be suspected of collusion, then the principle would require more proof in that case. In short, I don't think this law is mean to be a straightjacket, but a typical application of a general principle that needs to be carefully applied to different cases. The overall point is that the judges must make a reasonable attempt to guard against false witness. That this is the case can be seen from Deuteronomy 19:15-21 as well: "15 "One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established. 16 If a false witness rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing, 17 then both men in the controversy shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who serve in those days. 18 And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, *if* the witness *is* a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, 19 then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil from among you. 20 And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you. 21 Your eye shall not pity: life *shall be* for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."

One of you said this: "It is established science that eyewitness testimony is unreliable. Different people often see the same situation in different ways. There have been several studies conducted on eyewitness testimony where a large auditorium full of people, over a hundred in each case, has been lead to believe they were witnessing a crime. Afterward those people were interviewed and asked to provide details of the perpetrators appearance. The results were all over the board, and differed in such major details such as the race of the perpetrator, the weapon used, and even who the victim was." But again, if you look at biblical law regarding witnesses (see, for example, Deuteronomy 19:15-21, which I just quoted), you will see that witnesses aren't to be just automatically assumed to be right. "Careful inquiry" has to be made to be sure a

witness is reliable. If you have three witnesses and they disagree substantially, or their testimony does not clearly establish a particular individual, their testimony is insufficient to prove guilt. The biblical system requires conclusive proof, not circumstantial evidence. The eyewitness testimony would have to be such that it is quite clear that it the only reasonable reading of it is that it points to a certain person being guilty of a certain crime. Our modern system is quite defective here. The problem is not with eyewitness testimony per se, but with how we go about using it, such as using line-ups (which obviously would tend to bias people and create false connections), etc. In the biblical system, it seems it would be quite difficult to convict someone of a crime, and there would, I think, be a very, very low chance for error. Also, as I mentioned above, this is a case law. If evidence is available that is better than what witnesses can establish, biblical law would certainly allow for that as well. The overall principle of the "two or three witnesses" requirement is that there must be clear and sufficient proof of guilt before someone can be declared guilty.

31. Many of you have relied on emotional or emotion-based labels to attack my position. You've used emotion-based and emotion-laden terms to describe my views, which tend to bias the reader emotionally against my position. For example, you have called my view "barbaric," or "primitive," or "fearful," or "cruel," or "unloving," or "intolerant," or suggested that those in a biblical society would "cower in fear" of the law, etc. Name-calling is not the same as providing evidence. You must not attempt to prove that a view is false by ushering emotional labels meant to discredit it by getting people's feelings to go against it. This is propaganda, not rational argument. Just because something is distasteful to you, or you can make it seem distasteful to others, does not mean that it is not true. Feelings are not evidence. "This is yucky," etc., is not a rational argument against a position. You must provide evidence, rational argumentation, to support your viewpoint and your evaluation of my viewpoint. As I said earlier, if you think that my view is "barbaric," you need to define clearly and explicitly what barbaric means, and you need to show that it has a bearing on the *truth* of my view. This is true in all things. Some people, for example, argue against atheism by saying that if God did not exist, "everything would be purposeless and meaningless, and it would be a dismal and sad universe." Well, how do you know this *isn't* a purposeless and meaningless, dismal and sad universe? Just because you don't like something, it doesn't make it false. I do not care whether you *like* my point of view (well, I do care, but it is not important for the purposes of this immediate conversation); I want to know if you have any actual reason to think it is wrong. And remember also that the standard for evaluating what is good and bad, cruel or nice, etc., is relative to particular worldviews. What might be barbaric from one point of view might not be barbaric from another. Beware of assuming the truth of your own worldview as the basis for your evaluation of my position. For example, the doctrine of hell would be barbaric if God were not infinitely valuable. But since he is, it is not. Infinite punishment is not at all too cruel as a punishment for an infinite crime. It is entirely and perfectly appropriate. If God did not exist, however, or if he was not infinitely valuable, infinite punishment for rebelling against him would

be absurd. It all depends on what is actually true; and that must be decided on the basis of the evidence, not one's feelings or desires.

Related to this, watch out for oversimplifications of your opponent's position. Many of you were not careful in trying to understand my position before attacking it. You caricatured it in ways that distorted it, making a "straw man" that is easier to knock down. This is not a fair and accurate way of arguing. My favorite example thus far is when one of you asked me, "Do we really just want to go around stoning everybody?" Uh, no, we don't. And I never said any such thing. That kind of caricature is totally unhelpful for careful and accurate dialogue and debate.

32. Some of you suggested that perhaps I am "intolerant" (an emotional, prejudicing label?—see #31 above) because I simply don't know enough about other religions. Perhaps I am parochial and ignorant. Well, I don't think I am. Have you ever considered that perhaps it is *you* who might be parochial and ignorant? Perhaps you don't mind false religions all that much because you don't really know what they are. You just assume, perhaps, an Agnostic view of them without question because that is the default worldview of modern American culture, and you have just absorbed it without critical scrutiny. But let's abandon unprovable ad hominem accusations and focus instead on dealing with the arguments.
33. Another good, non-question-begging objection that you have brought against me is that the Bible contradicts itself. If this is true, then that will jeopardize its status as the infallible Word of God, which is essential to my position on our topic. This is therefore a very worthwhile line of investigation. But I do not think the Bible contradicts itself. One of the only examples given in the papers is the assertion that "Thou shalt not kill" in the Ten Commandments contradicts God's command to engage in capital punishment against murderers, idolaters, etc. But this is based purely in a lack of understanding of the law. The same God who said "Thou shalt not kill" also approved of capital punishment, in the very same law. The command against killing is not intended to rule out all killing, but only killing that is not authorized by God. Killing is only allowed by biblical law in cases of just war, capital punishment, and self-defense. To say that a command against murder is inconsistent with capital punishment or war is as silly as to say that a law against kidnapping is inconsistent with having jails, and it is silly for the same reason.

This is related to what I said in #12 above. If you want to prove a contradiction in the Bible, or in anything, you have to be careful not to slip into your understanding of biblical terms and concepts your own definitions instead of looking at the biblical context itself to gain your definitions. I just mentioned the example of "Thou shalt not kill." You may think this means that all killing whatsoever is forbidden, and thus interpret laws allowing capital punishment as a contradiction, but this is not what the Bible itself means by "Thou shalt not kill," which you would learn if you paid attention to its context in the rest of the law. In order to prove a contradiction, you have to show that two statements are contradictory *given the Bible's own understanding of what it is saying*. To show that one might possibly understand two statements in a contradictory way is not to show that they *must* be understood in a contradictory way or that they are contradictory *given the Bible's use of them*. Sometimes there can be apparent

contradictions simply because language is flexible, and you have to allow for that. Sometimes apparent contradictions are made deliberately in order to make a deeper point, such as when Jesus says, "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it." If you do not understand various common forms of literary conventions, Jesus's words will sound strange to you. But if you understand basic conventions commonly used in literature, his meaning is not that difficult to figure out. One of my favorite examples of this kind of apparent contradiction is in Proverbs 26:4-5: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes." So, which is it? Are we to answer a fool according to his folly or not? Is this a contradiction? If it is, the author of Proverbs must be a serious idiot not to notice. But of course this is not a contradiction, but a deliberate apparent contradiction meant to get at a deeper point. There is a sense in which we should answer a fool according to his folly, and a sense in which we should not. Cultivating good reading skills and a charitable attitude towards the text would resolve a whole host of so-called biblical contradictions. So if you wish to continue to press this line of objection, by all means do so, but please do it in a more careful and thoughtful manner next time.

34. Many of you made comments about how difficult the Bible is to understand. When I quote a biblical verse, you say that it is just my interpretation, and there are many other interpretations, and the Bible is just so difficult to understand that really we should just give up and not base law on biblical teaching. Of course, a lot of this is based on GIPD reasoning (see #24). You assume that when there are different interpretations, they must all be equally valid and therefore no one can say which is objectively right (except for yours, that is :)). But one ironic thing I kept noticing is how many of you, after pontificating on the utter hopelessness of biblical interpretation, would then go on to quote Bible verses against me. "You've quoted verses, Willson, but who's to say your interpretation is correct? There are lots of different interpretations. The Bible can't be used to make law because there are so many different ideas of what it means. Anyway, Jesus said 'Do not judge,' and so we shouldn't judge." Wait a minute! If no one can figure out what the Bible is saying, how can you figure out what Jesus is saying when he says "Do not judge"? For many of you, your difficulty in understanding what the Bible is saying is suspiciously selective. When a verse is quoted that you don't like, you find it oh so difficult to understand. But when you like a verse, suddenly the Bible is as clear as day! One of my favorites was someone telling me that we can't understand the Bible, and to back it up, he quoted Isaiah 55:8-9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." Well, there seems to be no trouble understanding this verse! How can one use the Bible to show that one cannot understand the Bible?! So why is it that people often think the Bible is so unclear? Why are there so many interpretations? I think that if we understand fallen human nature, the answer is not far at hand. Imagine a group of rebels who receive a message from the rightful king telling them to repent and return to loyalty, but somehow, they have trouble figuring out exactly what it means. Or, if you have seen Star Trek: The Motion Picture, I am reminded of the phrase, "V'Ger did not receive the final

sequence.” The problem is often not that the Bible isn't clear enough; it is that it is far too clear for our taste, and so we feel compelled to fog it up a bit to bring it closer to our comfort level.

35. One of you pointed out that there are occasions in the Bible when God makes exceptions to some of his rules. For example, while adultery and murder normally bring about the death penalty, God remitted this punishment for David after he committed these crimes. This is quite true. However, then you argued that because God can make occasional exceptions to his rules, therefore we don't have to follow his rules. This strikes me as absurd. What would you think of a person who, observing that a king occasionally makes exceptions to his rules, concluded that none of the king's rules applied to him? It is the Law-Makers' prerogative to make occasional exceptions, but this does not grant a universal license for disobedience.
36. Some of you have brought up the problem of evil. The problem of evil is an objection to the existence of God. It is a very important objection and well worth bringing up. This is definitely a deal-with-the-issue kind of argument rather than a begging-the-question type of argument. The argument argues that if God is all-powerful and all-good, there should be no evil (defined as sin and suffering) in the world, because God would be able to prevent it, being all-powerful, and he would want to prevent it, being all-good. Therefore, the existence of evil in the world shows that God does not exist. Well, I deny that we have any reason to think that a good or even an omnibenevolent being would not want there to be evil in the world. Of course, a good being would not delight in evil for its own sake, but there is no reason to think he wouldn't want it to exist for the sake of improving things overall. Let me state to you a few of my assumptions/arguments which might help us here: 1. God exists, and it is part of the nature of God that he is the Supreme Being and is also supremely valuable. If God is the fullness and source of all reality, then everything we are is derived from him, and we are nothing in comparison to him. That is, we don't weigh at all on the scale of being in comparison to him. Therefore, God's ultimate satisfaction is going to come from his enjoyment of himself, and he is going to think of himself as infinitely more important than us creatures. 2. If God is supreme and thus supremely valuable, he is going to see rebellion against himself as a supreme evil. That is, if God loves himself fully, he is going to hate hatred to himself fully. We can get a sense of this by coming to understand how the value of various objects is proportional to the badness of attacking or opposing or showing contempt for various objects. If I go outside and break a rock on the sidewalk, no one cares. This is not a bad act, because no one cares about rocks. If I take your cell phone and smash *it* on the sidewalk, that is a bad action, because now I have destroyed something of value. If I were to go to New York City and spit on a monument dedicated to the victims of 9/11, that would be far worse, because the monument (which represents human beings who died) has great value. If I were to kill a human being, that would be even worse, because I've actually attacked a real human being, who we think to have great value. If I kill sixteen human beings, that is even worse, because there is more value in many people than in one person, all other things being equal. If God exists, he is going to be infinitely more valuable than all created things put together, and so showing contempt for him or opposing him ought to be considered infinitely or supremely bad. 3. The creation exists as a theater to display the

perfections of God. That is, the narrative of history in this created universe serves as a means by which God enjoys his own perfections. Again, I think this follows from the existence of God. If God is supremely valuable, and if he is the fullness and source of all being, his ultimate purpose or delight in anything will be the enjoyment of his own perfections. This will therefore be creation's ultimate purpose as well.

Now, let's apply these assumptions to the problem of evil. The purpose of the creation is to display God's glorious perfections. Let's say that a part of the best way of doing that involves allowing evil to exist in the creation, in order to use it as a backdrop to show up God's perfections. God's view of his own perfections involves his awareness of their conceptual opposites (although, of course, he would experience all of this as a dimensionless whole, while we must talk about it using pluralistic language). For example, God is aware that he is the fullness of reality, and he is therefore also aware that the opposite of himself would be nothing. He is aware that he has all power, and therefore he is aware that the opposite of himself is all-weakness. Etc. So it makes sense to think that the display of God's perfections in the creation and in history would involve a display of those perfections with the backdrop of their conceptual opposites. If this is the case, we would expect the world to contain weakness, including moral wickedness (which is the backdrop for moral perfection) and pain and suffering (the backdrop for God's unmitigated happiness). And that is exactly what we find. Since we are infinitely less in being and value than God, our pain and suffering are infinitely less important than God's happiness. God will value our happiness in its own right—that is, he will love it in itself considered and hate our suffering in itself considered. But if God's happiness is increased by means of the display of his perfections on the backdrop of our pain and suffering, then his happiness is going to infinitely outweigh our pain and suffering. If we feel that somehow this is wrong or that God is being unfair to us, it is probably because we have too great a sense of our own value. We do not yet grasp who we are and who God is. What God is doing makes perfect sense, once you get your views and priorities straightened out by a good dose of reality. It makes just as much sense for God to ordain evil to exist in the world to accomplish his good purposes as it did for J. K. Rowling to include Voldemort in her *Harry Potter* novels.

To add to the picture, not only do we not deserve to be treated any better, or to have God exempt us from wickedness and suffering, but we actually positively deserve suffering. If God is supremely valuable, then as I mentioned, any opposition to him is going to be supremely or infinitely bad. All of us have done things that are wrong from time to time. That is, we have acted against the true values of the universe, the values that God would hold. We have thus shown contempt for God, and therefore have committed a crime that God would rightly regard as infinitely bad. That which is infinitely bad deserves an infinite punishment. When we see someone do something that we regard as contemptible, we do not wish to see that action rewarded with happiness but rather punished with unhappiness. It is a psychological fact that any sentient being will find it unfit to see good rewarded with pain and bad rewarded with happiness. This would apply to God as well, which means that we can expect that God will be a strict upholder of a standard of justice based on his own values. We should therefore

understand that all of us are under a curse of a desert of infinite, or supreme, punishment. If this is the case, then we obviously have no basis to complain that God is treating us worse than we deserve when he allows us to experience pain, etc.!

So here's my conclusion: I see no reason whatsoever to think that God would not want evil to exist in the universe in order to accomplish a greater good, and much reason to expect that he would. So I do not see the existence of evil as a problem for theism.

(Note that I am not saying above that God does not value his creatures in their own sphere. He does, but our value is infinitely inferior to God's. Also, in Christ, God gives his chosen ones a value by adoption infinitely greater than we possess by nature. Through adoption in Christ, the people of God are brought to share in the relationship between the Father and the Son and so come to be loved by God infinitely above their own natural merit.)

On a related note, one of you said that according to my view, God ordains evil to exist to accomplish his good purposes; and therefore, I ought to be against eradicating evil (like the evil of public idolatry), because it would be going against God's will and purposes. Here is the response I gave in one of your papers (with some minor editorial revisions): "OK, so your argument is that perhaps forbidding public idolatry would be rebellion against God because it would get rid of more evil and more opportunity for evil than God would want. An interesting idea. The problem is that God has forbidden us from "doing evil that good may come" (Romans 3:5-8). Christians have historically talked about two different aspects of the will of God--the will of decree and the will of command. The will of decree refers to what God himself has ordained to happen in the world. This includes all the evil that happens as well as the good. The will of command refers to what God has told us to do. It is not our place to try to anticipate God's decrees. For one thing, we don't know what they are to a great degree. Secondly, we do not have the authority or the power to try to control the universe and ordain what happens. Our duty is to do what God tells us to do, even if it is sometimes the case that he ordains that something different happen. Almost anyone who believes in any kind of god must make this sort of distinction. An LDS person, for example, might recognize that there might be times when God commands a person to try to stop a murder, all the while knowing that the murder will take place and deliberately allowing it to take place to accomplish a greater purpose. So this kind of idea is not unique to me. It is not our place to go around trying to figure out what God would ordain and allow as best overall and then make that the rule of our duty, allowing and even orchestrating murders, etc. This would be to "play God," because it is God's role. Also, we would be very useless at such a role, for we don't know what we are doing, and God is quite capable of accomplishing his goals without our attempt to help him. Our job is to obey, in deference to the authority of God who commands us. John Piper, a Reformed Baptist theologian, has a very good article on this subject which you might take a look at. It is found here: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/are-there-two-wills-in-god>. God has told us what he wants us to do. He wants the civil magistrate to punish the public practice of false religion. He tells us this in Deuteronomy 17:2-7 and elsewhere. He will not be impressed if we disobey his express command in order to try to play God by fulfilling his decrees. If you

follow your own reasoning through to its logical conclusion, you will allow not only the public practice of false religion, but you will repeal laws against murder, theft, and all other evils, in the name of advancing a greater good. Your argument begs the question a bit because it is selective. You want to apply it to religious freedom but not to other laws. But such a distinction is arbitrary. You need to follow the logical implications of your position.”

37. Some of you have come up with some very imaginative explanations for why the law of God does not apply to us today. As I argued in #13, we must assume continuity with the Law of Moses unless the Bible itself indicates discontinuity in a particular area. This means that we cannot simply make up explanations in our imaginations for why particular laws don't apply anymore. I can always come up with a creative story explaining why a particular law does not apply, but without warrant from God's Word, I am changing God's law on my own authority rather than God's, and this is clearly to usurp the divine prerogative (as mentioned, for example, in Deuteronomy 12:32). For example, one of you suggested that the civil laws in the Law of Moses no longer apply to us because they were given to the Israelites due to their tendency to revert to bad practices. God had to be stricter with them, so he gave them a really tough law. But now, we are over that phase of things, and no longer need the tough law. Well, this is a very creative story, but without any biblical support for it, it is nothing but unwarranted speculation. I could argue all sorts of things from unwarranted speculation. Maybe God forbade adultery in the Law of Moses because he wanted to use family life to, say, be a symbol of our relationship with God. Well, now we've got the message, so the law against adultery doesn't apply anymore. I'm sure we could all come up with some amazing speculations if we put our minds to it. But that is not the way to follow God's law. (Going back to the idea that the Israelites needed a tougher law because they were more prone to wickedness, as I look around me at the world in general and the Christian world today, I have to ask, “Where are you getting the idea that the Israelites were more prone to wickedness than we are?!” But even if they were, speculation is no basis for altering God's law.)
38. Upon being asked why you believe in freedom of religion as defined in Article 18, one of you said, “You ask why I believe this—not because you are intolerant of the religious beliefs of your fellow men—but because it is your personal belief that the laws created by a higher being—God—are the divine laws by which all of his created beings should abide. Those practicing otherwise are under some degree of the wrong impression about morality and their own spiritual well-being; divine laws and man’s laws do not agree on subjects of morality or justice.” I had to quote this as a great example of listening to one's opponent rather than begging the question. Notice that this student has not simply attacked my view by calling it names--“You're mean and intolerant!”--but she has actually tried to understand my point of view first, even though it is very different from hers. She is other-aware enough to notice that my view isn't intolerant *if you assume my fundamental worldview beliefs*, although it is intolerant from an Agnostic perspective (and perhaps some others as well). She can see how her opponent thinks before she attacks (which she did indeed go on to do). I just thought that this was worth quoting as a good example for us all.

39. Some of you have raised another non-question-begging, dealing-with-the-issue kind of question: You have asked me why I think the Bible is reliable as the Word of God. This is an excellent question. If I have no reason to trust the Bible to be the Word of God, my worldview falls to the ground, and therefore so does my position on religious freedom. [At this point, the author provided some answers to this question, which we have not included here, as being beyond the scope of our use of this document.]
40. One of you said that you do not believe in any particular religion because to do so would (in some unspecified way) contribute to a stream of “endless bloodshed” that has filled the earth from the beginning. See #16 and #18 for responses to aspects of this. For now, I want simply to point out that it is not a “ruthlessly honest” approach to decide what is true based not on the evidence, but on one's personal desires. Just because you do not wish something to be true, that does not make it false. And vice versa. This is another example of how our desires often cloud our ability to follow the evidence where it leads.
41. A number of you asserted that I do not “respect” or “love” people of non-Christian religions. You inferred this lack of respect from my belief that the public practice of false religion should be punished by civil law. I respect all people, and love them, inasmuch as all human beings are made in the image of God. However, I do not respect all beliefs and actions. Beliefs and actions that are contemptuous towards and rebellious against God should not be loved and respected but should be abhorred and detested, and those who unrepentantly choose to live in such sins deserve our contempt inasmuch as they show their moral character to be despicable (while we always remember that we are no better by nature, and any difference in us is owing to God's grace alone, and that even the regenerate still fall into sin regularly in this life). If a person, made in God's image, commits such acts of rebellion, he is justly subject to the punishments that God prescribes. Let me turn the tables here: Do you respect and love all people? What about thieves, murderers, and child molesters? Do you want thieves to be punished by going to jail? If so, should I infer from that that you hate them and don't respect them as your fellow human beings? Is respect incompatible with punishment? If it is not for you, then why would it be for me? It is perfectly consistent to both respect an individual as a fellow human made in the image of God while at the same time detesting his moral character, beliefs and actions and believing that they deserve and ought to receive punishment.
42. There are some other arguments for Agnostic Naturalism that I would like to briefly respond to. Since I've discussed these in class, I'm going to make this short. I've already responded to GIPD in #24. A. Some say that reality is too complicated and big for us to be able to know what is objectively true in ultimate matters. Well, if God did not intend

to provide us help in doing so, the bigness and complexity of the universe might be a cause for concern. But what if God intends for us to be able to understand the answers to ultimate questions (at least many of them), and has provided means for us to do so? One cannot simply reject this possibility by simply noting that the universe is big and complicated. In fact, my experience says that God has indeed provided means to know truth, and I have already shown you how we can know that God exists, that Christianity is true, etc. So this speculative, ungrounded concern must give way to actual fact. B. Some people are concerned that we humans are all too confused and distorted by our different upbringings, cultures, etc., to be able to figure out what is objectively true in ultimate matters. Well, if that is the case, why are Agnostics so capable of overcoming all of their biases to figure out that my worldview is wrong and Agnostic Naturalism is true? The person who uses an argument like this always has to make an exemption in his own case. "Everyone is too biased to figure out what is really true—except for me, of course. What I am saying is perfectly objective!" Well, I say if the Agnostics can do it, I can too! And so can you. Sure, our upbringings and cultures create biases, but there is no reason to believe these biases are undefeatable. I see no reason to think that if we are diligent and honest, we cannot learn something new and change our minds if we find our original biases to be wrong. In fact, I have seen many examples of people doing this. Of course, without the grace of God, none of us will choose this honest path, but it is open to all of us who do choose it. So this is another ungrounded, speculative concern that flies in the face of the actual facts. C. Some would argue that the arguments for various religions are not very good, objectively speaking. Well, I think the arguments for biblical Christianity are objectively conclusive, as I have shown elsewhere.

43. Some of you have suggested that since we humans are capable of making our own ethics, based on our personal desires and the facts of the world, we don't need God for ethics. Well, it depends on what you mean by ethics. If you mean that we humans can figure out some of the things that make us happy in life simply by using common sense and paying attention to how the world works, I agree. But if my worldview beliefs are right, God exists, and he is the author of an objective moral law. Ethics is therefore ultimately about doing God's will, not simply about making oneself happy. So if God exists, a person who focuses on the question, "What do I want and how can I get it?" as the foundation for ethics has missed the whole real point of ethics, which is to do God's will. Also, with regard to our personal happiness, only God can secure that. God will ultimately sentence us to final happiness and misery based on our relationship to him, his gospel, and his law. So it is impossible even to be personally happy in any ultimate sense without centering oneself on God and his will. So if my beliefs are correct, we most certainly need God for real ethics.

44. Some of you have suggested that we do indeed need to base our ethics, and our laws, on God's will. But you think that God's will for law is found, not in the Bible, but in our human "conscience." God has given to all of us, you say, an inner ability to discern right from wrong, and it is this ability that we should use to determine God's will. I agree that God has given human beings a conscience that is intended to discern right and wrong. This is a biblical notion. It is taught, for example, in Romans 2:12-16 and 1:28-32. However, we are a fallen, sinful race. We have a tendency to let our consciences be clouded by false beliefs and sinful habits of thought and behavior, so that it is very difficult for us to accurately use our conscience to discern right and wrong in many areas. This is why, I think, appeals to "conscience" so often conflict between human beings. You all think that your "consciencess" are in favor of religious liberty; it "feels right" to you. The Puritans in Massachusetts would have said their "consciencess" opposed religious liberty; it "felt wrong" to them. Why the difference? I think it is because you all have been raised with a bias towards religious liberty from your surrounding culture, while they had been raised in another context. We need a more objective measuring tool outside of our minds to help calibrate our consciences and make sure they are functioning properly, and that objective measuring tool is special revelation, found in the Bible. If your "conscience" is opposed to the Word of God, it is exposed for a fraud, for God's revelation in general revelation cannot oppose his revelation in the Bible. Using the supposed dictates of "conscience" to oppose God's express will is a very common tactic used by the devil to get us to turn away from God's true will.

Now don't misunderstand me here. I do think that reasoning and general revelation are reliable sources of truth, and they can be and should be relied on when coming to conclusions about both theoretical and practical truth; however, we are very prone to biased thinking that obscures our ability to reason correctly, and therefore we ought to make use of special revelation whenever we have it to help provide a check on our tendency to run off into biases. Also, special revelation gives us additional information not available to general revelation. So when we are making laws, we should take both general revelation and special revelation into account. It would be foolish to rely only on general revelation. Biblical civil law gives us lots of principles and some specific applications that are very valuable in making modern laws. However, it doesn't spell out everything down to the tiniest detail; it leaves a good deal of application to us to figure out in terms of what makes the most sense as a reasonable way of applying biblical principles. That is fine; we can do that, although we must be very careful of confusion and bias. My position is not that good critical thinking based on general revelation can't be done, but simply that we should also take into account special revelation when we have it.

45. One of you said to me, "Western culture today nearly unanimously believes in religious liberty. How can you think that the vast majority of modern western culture could be wrong?" My answer: How can you think that the vast majority of the human race besides modern western culture could be wrong? Most humans have not believed in freedom of religion in the Article 18 sense. Of course, neither of these arguments should be persuasive. We should not derive our ethics from polls, unless we wish to simply be following the latest fads. Majorities have believed all kinds of interesting things, many of them contradictory. Fads come and go. We must rise above the fads and look at the evidence to see what is really true.
46. This is related to #39 above. Some of you have argued that the Bible is not reliable because there is no way to tell "which version is right," or you say the manuscripts have been corrupted over the ages, or we can't know which translation is correct, etc. Therefore, you conclude, we can't tell what the Bible actually said and therefore it is useless to us as a guide for knowledge or conduct. Obviously, if this objection is valid, it is a very serious objection that undermines my entire position. However, I don't think that any of these issues actually pose any serious threat to the reliability of the Bible or our ability to understand it.

Now, I could begin now to provide a thorough treatise on all the issues these sorts of objections raise, but I want you to do some of the work as well. If you are concerned about these issues infringing on the reliability of the Bible, I want more specific arguments. Show me specifically why you think a particular issue poses a problem for biblical reliability. If you want to argue that the multiplicity of manuscripts poses a problem for biblical reliability, show me that you at least have a basic understanding of the state of affairs in the world of textual criticism and that you can make a specific objection based on that data. Likewise if you are concerned about versions or translations. Show me specifically how the data involved in these subjects leads to the conclusion that the Bible is not reliable or that my reading of it with regard to religious freedom is not reliable. If you give me a specific argument, I will respond to it further. If you give me a vague, generalized objection (like "There are too many manuscripts!" or "How do you know which version is right?"), I will give you a vague, generalized response (like "No, there are not." and "I look at the evidence."). If you want more, give me more. If you don't want to do the research to be able to give me more, then you simply have no ground to stand on in making this kind of objection.

Some of you argued that we should not follow biblical law as a society because we would have to translate and interpret the Bible in order to do so, and you argued that translation and interpretation are impossible. "Translation" is the taking of the meaning

of a word, phrase, etc., in one language and putting that same meaning into another language. "Interpretation" is listening to what someone says (orally, in writing, etc.) and figuring out what they mean. So if translation and interpretation are impossible, then it is impossible to ever listen to anyone and figure out what they mean to say, and it is impossible to communicate anything to anyone else. Hmm . . . Are you reading this right now? Guess what! You're interpreting! It's not nearly as hard as you thought, is it? Of course interpretation and translation are both possible; we do both all the time. It is true that we mis-interpret and mis-translate from time to time, but that doesn't mean these actions themselves are impossible, any more than the fact that one misses the basket from time to time playing basketball proves that playing basketball is an impossible task.

I'll tell you what: I'm going to hold you to your words. As long as you maintain that interpretation is impossible, I am going to treat you in practice as if your words are true. I am going to act as if it is true, with regard to you, that all understanding of the meaning of another is impossible. I am going to do this in order to show you the absurdity of your position in a very clear way, so that you can be corrected from this error.

Skill #3 of the class is, "Deal specifically and thoroughly with all claims and arguments." If you think some particular interpretation or translation of the Bible (or anything) is wrong, it is not enough to simply say, "Interpretation and translation are impossible!" since that is evidently false. You need to show specifically where a particular interpretation or translation goes wrong.

47. A few of you argued that the doctrine of the atonement implies that public idolatry should no longer be punished, and we should grant religious freedom. Through the atonement, God has provided a means of forgiveness for the sins of all people who repent and receive it. Therefore, you say, since their sins can be forgiven through the atonement, they should not be punished. There are a number of problems with this argument, though it is indeed creative: 1. When the law against public idolatry was given (for example, Deuteronomy 17:2-7), in the very same law provisions were made for atonement. In the Law of Moses, there are many provisions for sacrifices for sin to bring forgiveness of sin. These sacrifices prefigured the true sacrifice of Christ who was coming. But even though God made provisions for atonement and forgiveness in the Law of Moses, in that same law it is said that the civil magistrate should punish crime, even to the point of executing certain people, such as murderers, adulterers, idolaters, etc. So God clearly did not see a conflict between the idea of atonement and the idea of civil punishment. And Jesus, in Matthew 5:17-20 (see #13 above), affirmed the

continuing validity of the Old Testament law. 2. In the New Testament, after the atonement of Christ has been accomplished, the role of the civil magistrate in punishing crime is still affirmed, such as in Romans 13:1-7 and Acts 25:11. So God still does not see a conflict between atonement and civil punishment. A person can be spiritually forgiven, and yet still subject to the temporal penalties of civil law. 3. I'll bet you are inconsistent in your reasoning here. If your reasoning is right, it would mean that because of the atonement, all civil punishment is invalid. That would mean that it would always be wrong to punish anyone for anything in terms of civil law. So traffic tickets would be invalid, as would the punishment of murderers, thieves, etc. When a person commits murder, you would have to advocate that he be let go and not punished, because an atonement has been made for him through the sacrifice of Christ. But I'll bet you aren't willing to take your own reasoning to its logical conclusion. I'll bet you believe that murderers and thieves should be punished by civil law even though there is an atonement. Therefore, your objection crumbles due to inconsistency. In conclusion, though it is a very fanciful idea (see #37 above) that civil justice must disappear if there is an atonement, it is an erroneous idea without support in any evidence and which is contrary to all available evidence and which has never even been held consistently by those who advocate it.

48. Some of you argued that the civil magistrate should not enforce biblical law because people don't like to be forced to do things. Forcing people to do something makes them hate to do that thing. If the civil magistrate enforces biblical law, it will be cramming biblical Christianity down people's throats, which will make them hate it.

If that is the case, then are you saying the civil government should never enforce anything good or promote anything good, so as to avoid making people hate what is good? If we have laws mandating that we are a democracy, we are forcing democracy down people's throats and making them hate it? If we have laws against theft, we are forcing non-theft down people's throats and making them hate it? If we have laws against murder, etc.? If we promote religious freedom, we are making people hate it? Perhaps what we should do, then, is avoid having any laws enforcing or promoting anything good. In fact, perhaps we should have laws only enforcing and promoting bad things, so that people will come to hate those bad things and not want to practice them. We should have laws and policies that encourage theft, murder, intolerance, dictatorship, etc., so that we will be forcing these things down people's throats and making them hate them. Right? Of course, when you think about it, you realize that when a society promotes something as good, it doesn't in fact tend to make people hate it, but rather the opposite, if the enforcement is done well and consistently and is not seen as opposed to the widely-accepted cultural morality of the nation in general. For

example, campaigns against drunk driving in this country, including public denunciations and disapproval as well as strong, consistent laws, have, I think, tended to decrease instances of drunk driving as well as to increase public abhorrence of the practice.

It seems to me that the attitude of the civil government towards a practice tends to have a great influence on the people at large. I have many times heard people talk as if *bad* is to be equated with *illegal*. I think it is natural in general for people to think of illegal things as bad and legal things as good or at least acceptable. If the civil government comes out strongly and consistently against a practice, I think the tendency is for that practice to come to seem wrong to the majority of citizens, unless other factors intervene (such as great cultural pressure from the outside or deep-seated general disrespect for the civil government, etc.). To cite one example, think of the issue of religious freedom itself. Most of you are completely in favor of religious freedom, but it is also obvious that most of you have not thought about the issue much before. You have simply absorbed a strong cultural bias in favor of religious freedom. Surely this is to some degree owing to the fact that you live in a nation whose leaders constantly promote the idea and protect it in their highest laws. Laws mandating religious freedom here in the US have not made you hate it and oppose it, but rather the reverse, so it seems.

49. Some of you have argued that God is the father of all humans, who are his children, and that a father would not have his children stone each other to death. Therefore, God does not want us to execute public idolaters.

I agree that there is a sense in which God is our father, in that he is our Creator, and everything we are comes from him. However, it is obvious that God's relationship to us cannot be reduced to being identical to a human father's relationship to his children. Notice, first of all, that in making this argument you are blatantly ignoring God's own Word, which tells us to execute public idolaters. Do you know what God wants better than he does? Also, let me ask you this: If you were a parent, and you saw that your child was about to be hit by a truck, and you could stop it if you chose to do so, would you stop it? Would you save your child from being hit by the truck? Of course you would. But God lets his human children be hit by trucks everyday. He could stop it, but he doesn't. (See #36 above for some reasons why.) God's relationship to us is far more complicated than our relationship to our children. To try to pigeon-hole God's relationship to us into being exactly like our relationships to our children requires us to blatantly oversimplify the former. The analogy is valid, but only to a point. We must look at all the factors involved in God's complex relationship with his creatures, not just

stuff everything into one analogy no matter how much of reality we must ignore by doing so.

50. I keep running across what strikes me as a very odd argument. Here is how one of you put it (grammar and punctuation unchanged): "I feel god would want to have a place where people could come to worship however they want. He wants us to be happy after all he created us we are his children." You have been provided with a quotation from God's Word, the Bible, in Deuteronomy 17:2-7, where God says he wants societies to execute those who publicly worship false gods. And this is your response to that? "God must not have meant what he said, because it wouldn't make people happy to be executed for their idolatry, and God wants everyone to be happy." Obviously, there are a lot of problems with this argument that could be pointed out. Does God really want everyone to be happy all the time, even if they are rebels against him and deserve his wrath and judgment? Should making everyone happy be our chief goal? Should we let murderers and thieves run free for fear we would make them sad by incarcerating them? I have dealt with this more in #9 above, but the main thing I want to point out now is how dismal this argument is in response to God's clear Word on this subject. It makes me think of a conversation between a father and his son: "Son," says the Father, "I asked you to clean your room before going outside to play. Why did you disobey me and go outside before cleaning your room?" "Well, you see, Dad," replies the son, "I know that you are a good father, and you want your children to be happy. Cleaning my room does not make me happy, but going outside whenever I want to does. Therefore, you must not really have meant it when you said you wanted me to clean my room." I wonder what Dad will think of this argument. What would you think of this argument if your child offered it to you? And yet that is the argument that is being offered to our Sovereign Lord and King! What pitiful rebels we human beings are! May God have mercy upon us!
51. Some of you have argued that public idolatry should be legal, contrary to the command of God, because if it is illegal it might encourage people to refrain from it and even possibly to profess to be against it for pragmatic and hypocritical reasons. Here was my response to one of you: "You are no doubt correct that there will be those who embrace Christianity from false motives, as there are even today. It may even be that there will be more of such people. However, this will not stop others from embracing Christianity from the heart, as God gives them grace to do so. You seem to be arguing that we should not make something illegal if it will have the consequence of encouraging people to do things for the wrong reasons, out of social pressure, etc. But do you really believe that? Do you want to follow it to its logical conclusions? What about theft? Does the fact that theft is illegal lead to people not stealing not out of love to neighbor, but out of

fear of the law? Should theft therefore be legal so that it is more likely that people refrain from stealing out of pure motives and not to avoid social or legal pressure? What about murder? Child molestation? Drug trafficking? I, for one, have no problem with laws against theft having a side effect of making people avoid stealing for pragmatic motives or even possibly encouraging them to hypocritically claim to be against stealing when they are really not. I can live with that. I can also live with laws against public idolatry having the side effect of making people not worship idols publicly for fear of social or legal pressure, and possibly even sometimes claiming to be Christians when they are not. God tells us to execute public idolaters, and this does not seem to be an adequate argument to show that it is right or best to break his commands in this area. I suspect God knows better than you all the pros and cons of how to run a society.”

I might add, related to what I said in #48 above, that while I have no doubt that outlawing public idolatry will have the effect of causing some people to refrain from idolatry for less than absolutely pure and holy motives, yet I also think that the condition of living in a nation that constantly promotes love and obedience to God will have the effect, by God's converting grace, of converting many more people to true love to God and faith in Christ than generally happens in a non-Christian society.

52. Some of you have raised the question of what should happen to a person who commits public idolatry but who repents of it afterwards. Should this person be let go or should the civil punishment carry through? We read in Titus 3:10-11 a rule that may have a bearing on this question: “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.” A divisive man would be one who quarrels with church doctrine or behaves schismatically in the church. Such a person is to have at least two warnings before being excommunicated from the church. Although Paul is speaking of rules for the church rather than for the civil magistrate, yet the general equity of this rule may have implications for the civil magistrate as well. An important part of the consideration of what punishment is deserved in a particular case would be the manner in which the offense is given. A person who unpresumptuously and more meekly slips into a publicly witnessed discussion in which he ends up promoting some fundamentally false religious idea should no doubt be treated with more leniency than one who clearly, boldly and presumptuously goes out to publicly spew forth offensive blasphemies. In the former case, a warning may suffice, and perhaps the person ought to be appointed to receive further instruction on how to think and behave properly. In the latter case, there does not seem to be a need for warnings or further education, for it is clear the person knows exactly what he is getting himself into. Such a person is not breaking the law through unintentional carelessness; rather, his purpose seems to be to bring down upon himself

the wrath of the law. However, even in the lesser cases, there should not be an infinite leniency. A lesser error is turned into a greater one by repeated offenses that disregard previous warnings and instructions. In biblical law, respect for the proper authorities is taken with great seriousness (see, for example, Exodus 21:15, 17; Exodus 22:28; Deuteronomy 21:18-21). Incurable disrespect for authority is rewarded with the death penalty. This is likely because of the essential importance for a society that its citizens behave in such a way as to respect the authorities and do not live in anarchy. Therefore, I think we can safely say that even in lesser cases, after warnings and instructions have been sufficiently given, the tolerance of the society will come to an end and there will be the full carrying out of the appropriate civil punishment.