

# No Other Standard

## **Preface: No Other Standard**

Apologist and theologian, Dr. Greg Bahnsen, in one of his many appearances on the radio show, Religion on the Line, was confronted with a bitterly caustic caller. The man was blatantly anti-christian and accused Dr. Bahnsen of being an intellectual Jimmy Swaggart--something he clearly meant to be an insult. His attack on the Christian faith was based upon a hideous picture he had seen at his job, in a court-house evidence exhibit room, involving an abused baby. He asked Dr. Bahnsen how he could worship a God that would allow such a vile thing to take place.

Dr. Bahnsen took an interesting approach in his answer. He asked the caller how he came to the conclusion that the picture he just described was vile. This question seemed easy enough, but the caller had a difficult time coming up with an answer. After all, it should be obvious to anyone. Dr. Bahnsen also asked how he came to the conclusion that a God who would allow such things shouldn't be worshipped? Again, the answers weren't readily coming forth. The caller finally gave his answer. He simply thought it was wrong. Dr. Bahnsen then asked, "So you set the standard?" He took a deep breath and answered "Yes, I guess I do."

Dr. Bahnsen went on to say, "Let me tell you what happens in a world when people think they can set the standard for what is right and wrong. You have just described a pretty disgusting picture to me. That disgusting act was done by a person who thought he could set the standard for what is right and wrong. And the thing you must realize is that your criteria and his criteria for setting standards are the same...yourselves."<sup>1</sup>

## **I. Led by the Spirit**

I can't imagine any genuine Christian arguing against God being the ultimate law-giver. Who is more capable than the almighty, all-wise, ever-present God to be the giver of good standards? As discussed earlier, God's laws are the criteria by which we determine what love actually is. If God is love (1 John 4:8), how, or why, would we look elsewhere for counsel on how to love or how to live?

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a rough interpretation from Dr. Bahnsen's appearance on the Religion on the Line—Does God Punish & Reward in This Life? (Covenant Community Tape Ministry, 434 Greenwood Ave. Nash, TX 75560). #00928.

## Law Versus Led

Yet as we examine the role of God's law, (i.e. what is right and wrong—moral and immoral) in the life of a Christian, we see a very subtle method of determining morality creeping into the church. This method is very similar to the method of the aforementioned caller. Many who name the name of Christ, dismiss God's law as the standard for love and righteousness and replace it with the notion of being led by the Spirit (Romans 8:14, Galatians 5:18).

If I might put forth a gentle caution: those who utilize this method, if we push the logic of it, will end up, like the caller, setting their own standards. Proverbs teach, **“There is a way *that seems right to a man*, But its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12)**. Keep in mind that just because you think, feel, or are convinced something is right, even as a Christian, doesn't make it right.

## Universal and Transcendent

Of all people on earth, it is the Christian who should recognize that there are objective moral standards. These moral standards are universal and transcendent. In other words they apply to everyone and are above and independent of anyone. If I replace the law of God in the name of being led by the Spirit, the standards becomes neither universal (they only apply to me) nor transcendent (they originate with me).

Someone might argue that the law didn't originate with them, but God granted this information to them. If this is the case, then they are putting themselves in the place of a prophetic law-giver. And in the same way all of mankind was obliged to respect and obey the law given to Moses, we are all obliged to respect and obey the law given to those who are led by the Spirit. You can imagine the can of worms this opens. All you need are two Spirit-led law-givers who disagree before this whole system falls apart.

## The Sins of Others

Furthermore, people who determine right and wrong through the unmediated (without the benefit of the written law) leading of the Spirit have no basis for determining the sins of others. I know of a professing Christian woman who believed that God, by His Spirit, led her out of her marriage (without sufficient biblical warrant) into the arms of another man. She praised God for this. Yet we all know this is wrong. But how do we know it's wrong? By the leading of the Spirit in us? Then we merely have dueling spirits and we're at an impasse. We know it's wrong because the law of God declares it to be wrong. What she did was not an act of love for her husband or for God.

By now we must begin to realize where this method leads. It's all well and good when we discuss this unnamed woman, but what if you were the husband? What if another Christian were to lie to you or gossip about you? To what standard could you possibly hold them? This 'led by the Spirit' method leads to lawlessness.

In all of this I don't wish to sound harsh or critical. All I am trying to show is that if we genuinely desire to love God and love others, we must have a standard that extends beyond our own impulses. We ultimately have only two options, our own law or God's law.

### **What does 'Led by the Spirit' Mean?**

So what do we make of Romans 8:14 and Galatians 5:18? What does it mean to be led by the Spirit? Briefly, a study of Romans 8 reveals that Paul is pitting walking in the flesh against walking in the Spirit. Walking in the flesh means doing what you want to do, regardless of what's right. Walking in the Spirit means doing what God wants you to do, regardless of how you feel. Walking in the Spirit does not mean rejecting the law of God. Paul goes so far as to describe the carnal mind as one that is not subject to the law of God (Romans 8:7).

In short, being led by the Spirit means, by God's grace, you will, and to a certain extent can, walk in righteousness and put to death the deeds of the body (Romans 8:13). And as discussed earlier, the only objective standard for righteousness is the law of God. Paul teaches in verse 14 that those who are led by the Spirit are sons of God. In other words, seeking to walk in the law of God is how I can begin to have assurance of my own salvation. As John writes,

**“Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments” (1 John 2:3).**

Similarly in Galatians 5, Paul is pitting walking in the flesh against walking in the Spirit. What is interesting here is that Paul describes what walking in the flesh actually is. Paul, right after telling them they're not under the law, gives them a list of laws they are to keep.

**“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, <sup>21</sup> envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told**

**you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:18-21)**

We'll discuss being under the law in a moment. But again, we must emphasize that being led by the Spirit does not mean we are allowed to somehow conceptualize (out of our own minds or hearts) what is right and wrong. What it does mean is that, by God's grace and power, we will seek to walk in what God has revealed to be right.

### **Two words of caution**

Two words of caution. Firstly, this does not mean that those who profess to walk in the Spirit versus the law are not saved. For it seems very clear that people who utilize the 'led by the Spirit' method, will almost all try to walk in God's law whether they admit it or not. Secondly, if you have been presented a brand of Christianity which suggests that the effort to walk in God's law is of no consequence, and you take it seriously, you're soul is in great peril. Again, read the Apostle John.

**“Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments” (1 John 2:3).**

If you're not seeking to walk in His commandments, you don't know Him. These are very sobering words. It's important to note here that John is not expecting his readers to keep the law perfectly. This is obvious when we read verse one of the same chapter.

**“My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1).**

There is an expectation, regardless of how feeble the effort, that a born again person will begin to seek to walk in God's law.

## **II. Under the Law**

Let's discuss what it means to be under the law. I believe it was Martin Lloyd Jones who said, something to the effect, “If a preacher is not, once in a while, accused of being a legalist he must not be preaching the law. And if he is not, once in a while, accused of being anti-nomial (anti-law) he must not be preaching the gospel.” In other words, the law should be preached with such great obligation to keep it, that the listener might (mistakenly) begin to think he

needs to keep the law to be saved. We see examples like this in James and in the parable of the unmerciful servant, as well as many other places including the Lord's Prayer. Yet at the same time the gospel should be preached in such a way as to make the listener (mistakenly) think that obedience to the law is totally unnecessary at all in any respect. We see this through most of Romans.

### **Am I a Legalist?**

So I must ask myself if I am a legalist (salvation by works). As Christians, I don't think we should shrink back from using the word 'law'. It's used over two hundred times in the New Testament and almost always in a positive sense. Yet I must say, that even though I believe we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, my continual usage of the word 'law' has caused many to accuse me of seeking to put people back under the law. If I am doing that, I most certainly need to repent. But before I can determine whether I am seeking to put people under the law, I must find out what that means.

### **Under the Law?**

Am I to understand that if I, as a Christian, pastor, or radio host, teach a brand of Christianity which suggests that we ought not follow other gods, make graven images, use God's name in vain, neglect the sabbath, dishonor our parents, murder, commit adultery, steal, lie or covet, that I am trying to put people back under the law? Does merely trying to obey what God commands mean you're under the law? Let's examine the 'not under law' passage in Romans 6:12-16.

**“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. <sup>13</sup> And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. <sup>14</sup> For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. <sup>15</sup> What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! <sup>16</sup> Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin *leading* to death, or of obedience *leading* to righteousness” (Romans 6:12-16).**

Are we to understand Paul's words here to mean that if Christians try to obey the law of God, that they are putting themselves under the law? How does that jibe with the main point of Paul in this passage, which is to be obedient?

Verse 16 seems to indicate that obedience will evidence who your master actually is. Similar to the words of Jesus,

**“He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me” (John 14:21).**

### **Obedient to What?**

It would seem a bit inconsistent of Paul to tell us we're not under the law, while in the same paragraph give us all sorts of admonitions to be obedient. Obedient to what? Our own hearts? A new law? Are we to look to Paul for our law? Are we to look to the New Testament for our law? But the law was given through Moses, grace and truth through Jesus. Why would we go to Jesus for law when it was already here? Jesus didn't come to bring the law.

### **Under the Terms of a Covenant**

So what does it mean to be under law? A study of Romans and Galatians (as well as other epistles) reveals to us what was taking place. In short, Judaizers (Jewish influences in the church—some perhaps Christian Jews) were persuading Christians that they had to fulfill some of the old covenant requirements (mainly circumcision) in order to actually be justified before God. But their understanding of the role of the old covenant requirements had become perverted, since even Old Testament saints were not saved by works but by faith (Hebrews 11).

In a nutshell, being under law means being under the terms of a covenant which states, 'if you violate the law, you will die (or are eternally damned).' It was the covenant given to Adam. It is the covenant that all of mankind is under until they trust in Christ. Being under the law does not mean you're doing your best to obey God unless you're doing your best in order to save your own soul. A child who is working very hard to win their parent's love is under law. A child who is working very hard because their parents love them is under grace.

### **III. Written on our Hearts**

What about the law written on our hearts (Romans 2:15; Hebrews 8:10; 10:16)? First we must realize that the idea of having the law of God in one's heart is not merely a new covenant concept.

**“The mouth of the righteous speaks wisdom, And his tongue talks of justice. <sup>31</sup>The law of his God is in his heart; None of his steps shall slide” (Psalm 37:30,31)**

## Mind and Heart

The author of Hebrews writes,

**“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Hebrews 8:10).**

Firstly, there is nothing to suggest here that God uses anything other than the preached or written word to put His law in our minds. But what about writing it on our hearts? What is the difference between God putting it in our mind and writing it on our hearts? It is as simple as this. We can preach the law all day long. We can put it on our doorposts and on our gates. But all our efforts will be of no avail unless God writes it on the hearts of men. I believe the heart is distinguished from the mind here in terms of affection and will.

It may very well be that God’s law is purely and accurately conveyed to the hearts of all men through, what theologians call, general revelation (what God reveals to everyone). But even if that is the case, we must also recognize that the human **“heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9)**. The man at the other end of the phone line may be speaking very true words. But if the phone is defective, my ability to properly understand is compromised.

One last thought. Even if we were to govern our lives by the law of God written on our hearts. We certainly couldn’t think that that law would be inconsistent with the law written in His word. If we truly wish to enjoy the law of liberty, we must trust the word of God, even over our own hearts.

## IV. Freedom

James calls the law the law of liberty or freedom. Our nation was built on the promotion of freedom. Patrick Henry said, “Give me liberty or give me death.” President Woodrow Wilson, a Scotch Presbyterian, in his speech entitled ‘The New Freedom’ stated,

**“I have long had an image in my mind of what constitutes liberty. Suppose that I were building a great piece of powerful machinery, and suppose that I should so awkwardly and unskillfully assemble the parts of it that every time one part tried to move it would be interfered with by the others, and the whole thing would buckle up and be checked. Liberty for the**

**several parts would consist in the best possible assembling and adjustment of them all, would it not? If you want the great piston of the engine to run with absolute freedom, give it absolutely perfect alignment and adjustment with the other parts of the machine, so that it is free, not because it is let alone or isolated, but because it has been associated most skillfully and carefully with the other parts of the great structure.**

**What is liberty? You say of the locomotive that it runs free. What do you mean? You mean that its parts are so assembled and adjusted that friction is reduced to a minimum, and that it has perfect adjustment. We say of a boat skimming the water with light foot, "How free she runs," when we meant, how perfectly she is adjusted to the force of the wind, how perfectly she obeys the great breath out of the heavens that fills her sails. Throw her head up into the wind and see how she will halt and stagger, how every sheet will shiver and her whole frame be shaken, how instantly she is "in irons," in the expressive phrase of the sea. She is free only when you have let her fall off again and have recovered once more her nice adjustment to the forces she must obey and cannot defy."<sup>2</sup>**

Human liberty consists in nothing less than the skillful adjustment of humanity to the perfect law of God. The more we are perfectly aligned with the law of God the more our freedom. When we obey the breath out of heaven our sails are full. When we throw our heads back and stiffen our necks to the law of God, we too shall halt and stagger until we repent to the force that we must obey and cannot defy.

### **Alive in Christ**

And yet, on this side of heaven, we continually find ourselves at odds with the breath out of heaven. We simply fail to yield to the laws of perfect alignment. As if hell is attached to our feet and we run amuck at best. But in our knowing this, the law has achieved one of its goals. It has reminded our flesh that it, that is the law, needs to be nailed to the cross. And we are alive, and only alive in Him, having forgiven all our trespasses and having defeated the enemy of our souls.

So if I teach this law in such a way as to think you can ignore it, I have become least in the kingdom of heaven. But even more treacherously, if I teach

---

<sup>2</sup> Essie Chamberlain, *Essays, Old and New* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, Chicago, 1926), pp. 112,113.

this law in such a way as to think you can keep it, I have consigned your soul to hopelessness. Know the law, embrace the law and seek to keep the law with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. This, above all things will cast you into the outstretched arms of only true law-keeper, Jesus Christ the righteous.

### Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss Dr. Bahnsen's response to the caller. Is it possible for there to be absolute standards apart from God? Why or why not?
2. Can you imagine any method of obtaining law or counsel on how to live other than from God?
3. Romans 8:14 and Galatians 5:18 refer to being led by the Spirit. Can you see a connection between a misunderstood notion of being led by the Spirit and the method of the caller?
4. What are some difficulties with the idea of dismissing the law and replacing it with being led by the Spirit?
5. What does it mean to be led by the Spirit?
6. Discuss the two 'cautions' given regarding this subject.
7. What's a legalist? What does it mean to be anti-nomial?

8. Discuss Martin Lloyd Jones' comment.
9. Is seeking to obey the law the same as being under the law? Discuss your answer.
10. Is the law written on our hearts strictly a new covenant concept?
11. What is the difference between the law put in our minds versus written on our hearts?
12. What are some difficulties with the idea of replacing the written law of God in the Bible with the law written on our hearts?
13. Discuss President Wilson's speech on freedom. How could this relate to the law of God?
14. When we fail at keeping the law, how has the law achieved one of its goals?
15. In what respect must the law be nailed to the cross?
16. Should we ignore the law? Why?
17. Should we think we have kept the law? Why?