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By This Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today

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Abstract

Bahnsen, Greg L. *By This Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today*. Covenant Media Press. ISBN-13: 978-0998025216. 275 pages. 2020. \$16.95.

Keywords

Presuppositionalism, Calvinism, Reformed Theology, Greg Bahnsen

Cover Page Footnote

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Is God's Law authoritative today? That is the question Greg Bahnsen seeks to answer in his book *By This Standard*. Many Christians fall into antinomian traps and do not know how the Old Testament applies to believers. A large part of Bahnsen's ministry was trying to help Christians understand the value of the entire Old Testament. His *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* attempted to answer these questions for believers but was not as accessible to the household theologian. To allow all readers to understand the beauty and relevance of God's law, Bahnsen wrote this book for the layman. Bahnsen makes the compelling argument that without God's law, the Christian has no standard of right and wrong, good and evil.

The book layout consists of three parts: The Authority of God's Law, Application of God's Law to Political Ethics, and Antagonism to God's Law. In the first section, Bahnsen makes powerful arguments for the applicability of God's law to current society. He believes that there are many discontinuities between the Testaments, but regarding the moral standards and requirements of God's law, he claims that we ought to assume continuity. The difference in Bahnsen's viewpoint is the hermeneutical principle he employs. Most Christians today use the principle that whatever the New Testament affirms of God's law is still applicable and the rest is done away with. Bahnsen argues that the believer should assume the continuing validity of the law of God unless the New Testament says otherwise (5). Bahnsen believes that this hermeneutical method comes from Scripture itself and points out devastating flaws in the inconsistency of the opposite hermeneutical method when taken to its logical conclusion.

The proposition advocated for throughout this book is called theonomy. This viewpoint is the belief that God's law is applicable and should be the standard for living, even in New Testament times. Bahnsen considered himself a part of the theonomist camp. Some slanderously charge theonomy as being synonymous with legalism. Bahnsen makes it overwhelmingly clear that this is not the case. Within Section 1, chapter 19, entitled "What the Law Cannot Do," Bahnsen points out that the law can never save anyone from their sins and that it adds nothing to justification. The law is unable to sanctify the believer. Rather, sanctification is achieved through the Holy Spirit conforming us to the will of God as found in His law (134). In the next two chapters, Bahnsen gives his interpretation of what the law actually can and should do. He notes that the reformers saw the law acting in political, pedagogical, and didactic ways (145-146). Simply put, the law is a guide in governing a nation, teaching a student, and exercising personal holiness.

In the next section, entitled "Application of God's Law to Political Ethics," Bahnsen explains how God's law is both obligatory, and useful in modern-day societies. He explains that God's law was not only meant for Israel but for the world. He also continues to poke holes in the argument that there can

be a consistent ethical standard apart from God's law. The law of man will never be an adequate substitute for the law of God. When man's law is put above God's law, justice is perverted and there remains no transcendent standard of righteousness (187-188). In this section, Bahnsen also correctly distinguishes the two biblical spheres of Church and state. The original intent behind this separation did not mean that the state should be secular and neutral. Rather, Bahnsen argues, the state should still be submissive to God but not necessarily controlled by a particular denomination of Christianity. The Church also should not be identical with the state (i.e., the Church having control over the government) (204-205).

In the final section of the book, Bahnsen addresses common arguments made against theonomy. He points out the many logical fallacies created when trying to argue for man's law over God's law while still claiming to have Scripture as one's authority. Any biblical scholar ought to appreciate the fact that Bahnsen roots his arguments in Scripture rather than appealing to pragmatism or philosophizing without biblical warrant. The discussion of penal sanctions was especially helpful in this section. Bahnsen shows from Scripture that the penal sanctions in God's law apply both in our day now and during the time of Israel (233). By refuting common arguments, Bahnsen shows in this last section that God's standard for social and personal righteousness does not change and that we are still obligated to live righteously by that standard.

In the current era, even Christians tend to live by their own ambiguous and man-made moral standards. God's law is abandoned along with the Old Testament because Evangelicals are told that those primitive ideas are outdated and oppressive. This ignorance has left Christians unable to give an answer to unbelievers about a fundamental basis for morality. Jesus is king, and kings have laws. Bahnsen understood that too many Christians proclaim Jesus as their Savior but are unwilling to call Him Lord. Every Christian should read this book - especially those that are tired of not having a standard for right and wrong. God's law as a moral standard provides the Christian with a powerful argument against evil, a sense of clarity regarding the will of God, and a weapon against the myth of neutrality. When the teaching of God's law is a part of discipleship, Christians will see societal change. Bahnsen's thought provoking work on this subject has caused many to realize the inconsistency and futility of living life without a standard. I highly recommend this book to anyone who cares to have a consistent standard for morality.