

A BIBLICAL PHILOSOPHY OF RULES

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While the Bible is not a textbook on writing rules, it does have a great deal to say about the subject. Some of this is taught by decree and some is taught by example. The one who has been charged with the responsibility of composing rules must be familiar with the Biblical teaching about rules and its implications.

To begin with, there are four specific reasons found in Scripture for composing rules. They are: 1) to provide security, 2) to warn of dangers, 3) to maintain order, and 4) to reveal the will of God. There seem to be no Biblical basis outside of these for rules.

Just as there are Biblical reasons for writing rules, there are Biblical reasons for not having too many rules. These are: 1) rules can become burdensome to those charged with obeying them, 2) rules cannot produce righteousness, 3) rules can provoke disobedience, and 4) rules can cast doubt on inspiration. Each of these statements is Biblical, thus it would seem that the proliferation of rules is to be shunned.

The Bible also speaks of our attitude towards rules, both as one under authority and as one in authority. As one under authority we are to regard all rules, God's or man's, as absolute; however, as one in authority we are to allow for exceptions to our rules. The grounds for such exceptions seem to be in whether or not it was in the best interest of the individual to observe the rule. When it is not, then an exception is to be granted.

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "E. William Male", is written over a horizontal line.

Adviser

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INTRODUCTION

Many people today have confused rules with discipline. They think that because a Christian home or school has many strict rules it has Biblical discipline. But the Bible does not necessarily agree.

Discipline is the process of teaching and training. It is cognate to the word "disciple," which, in the Scriptures, is a translation of a word which means "a learner." Discipline, then, is more than just rules; it is the whole process of teaching and training, of which rules are only one part.

Rules are the standards of conduct which those in authority impose upon those under their leadership. These rules may be written in a formal code, or they may be informal. Whether formal or informal, rules are the basis of discipline; they are a primary means of teaching what is regarded as proper conduct. How obedience to rules is taught and how disobedience is punished are both parts of a philosophy of discipline. While these two aspects have been

treated at length by various authors, they both presuppose the existence of a set of standards which need to be obeyed. It is with the composition of that set of standards that this paper concerns itself.

A Biblical philosophy of discipline includes a Biblical philosophy of rules, but it goes far beyond that starting point. But rules are the starting point. Unfortunately, many Christian homes and schools have tried to forge a Biblical philosophy of discipline without starting at this starting point. They may have examined the Biblical attitude towards rebellion. They may understand that, because of his depravity, a child left to himself will get worse and not better, and they may have studied which forms of punishment are Biblical; but, they have not started at the beginning. They have not examined their standards for conduct to see whether or not they are Biblical.

Those who have not formulated a Biblical philosophy of rules are not sure just why they have rules. When a youngster challenges a rule, he can only reply that God commands children to obey, not to ask questions. What is worse is that these people are dangerously unaware of the potential damages rules can do. Perhaps they have not considered the fact that

Satan uses rules to accomplish his ends! The rule-maker assumes that the Bible is silent about his task. It is not.

The Bible is not a handbook on rule-making; however, there are portions of Scripture and Biblical examples which apply to the processes and attitudes involved in making rules. It is the thesis of this paper that those Scriptures and examples can be molded into a Biblical philosophy of rules, and that an understanding of that philosophy is indispensable for the Christian rule-maker.

This paper has been written for Christian parents, school administrators, and board members who have been charged with the awesome responsibility of codifying Christian conduct. These pages do not contain a list of sample rules or suggested standards; that is not the purpose. The purpose is to give the Biblical principles which must be applied to all rules before they can be regarded as Biblical rules.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, have been taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

A deep debt of gratitude is owed Dr. Anthony Fortosis for his challenge to undertake this task.

His probing questions during the summers I sat under his tutelage initiated the search which has culminated in these pages.

CHAPTER ONE

REASONS FOR RULES

Is there a Biblical purpose for establishing rules of conduct? To answer this most fundamental question, it will be necessary to examine several passages of Scripture. In addition to the Scriptures, three prominent Christian psychologists will be consulted. From these sources will be proffered four possible motivations for having rules:

- A. There is security in limits.
- B. There are dangers to be pointed out.
- C. Rules are needed for a well-ordered society.
- D. Rules are revelatory of God's will.

SECURITY IN LIMITS

Rules are needed to give a sense of security to the ones being governed, especially when they are children.¹ There is security in knowing what can

¹Bruce Narramore, Help! I'm a Parent, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), pp. 116-118.

be done without fear of punishment. Dr. James Dobson has stated:

The most important step in any disciplinary procedure is to establish reasonable expectations and boundaries in advance (emphasis original). The child should know what is and what is not acceptable behavior before he is held responsible for those rules. This pre-condition will eliminate the overwhelming sense of injustice that a youngster feels when he is slapped or punished for his accidents, mistakes, and blunders.²

As Dr. Dobson implies, the important thing for the child is not knowing what cannot be done, but knowing what can be done. When the child is confident that he knows what can be done, he will be able to do it with the secure feeling that what he is doing will cause him no harm.

The opposite of security is fear. Fear is culminated in exasperation and despair. Dr. Jay Adams suggests that the child who is confronted with unclear or changing boundaries may engage in the following mental soliloquy:

Today you get murdered for doing nothing, but tomorrow you get away with murder. You never know what you're going to get; you never know what the limits are; you never know what the penalties might be. What's the use? You might

²James Dobson, The Strong-Willed Child, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1978), p. 31.

as well do what you want to do anyway.³

Such a child is never sure that what he is doing is right or "safe." In Ephesians 6:4, Paul warns parents not to "exasperate" their children (NIV). The Greek term here rendered "exasperate" is a compound of two Greek words: "παρά" - which, in its combining form means bringing along side or to the side of,⁴ and "ὀργή" - which indicates a violent emotion such as anger or indignation.⁵ When placed together in one word these two carry the idea of one who brings violent emotions to another. In light of that admonition, it would seem clear that Christian parents have an obligation to set limits and clearly define them.

Constant insecurity over the rightness of one's actions can cause a loss of self-esteem. Dr. Dobson cites a study done at the University of California which was aimed at determining what produces

³Jay E. Adams, Christian Living in the Home, (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1972), p. 108.

⁴Joseph Henry Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), pp. 476-478.

⁵Ibid., p. 452.

a high level of self-esteem in a child. After the youngsters being studied had been classified as either of high or low self-esteem, it was learned that those of high self-esteem came from rather strict homes, but, "by contrast, the parents of the low-esteem group had created insecurity and dependence by their permissiveness."⁶

Thus it appears that clearly defined limits are a must for the development of an emotionally secure child. Dr. Dobson cites what happened when a well-meaning educator took down the fence separating the playground from the busy street in the interest of giving the children more freedom. With the fence taken out the children stayed near the center of the play area. They did not even go near where the fence used to be!⁷ Children need to feel that what they are doing is free from danger and that it is right. Rules are an instrument for giving them that assurance.

⁶James Dobson, Hide or Seek, (Old Tappen, New Jersey: Flemming H. Revell Company, 1974), p. 72.

⁷James Dobson, Dare to Discipline, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), p. 56

WARNING OF POTENTIAL DANGER

Many of the rules in the Bible are there for the purpose of protecting the individual. The most obvious of these rules are the Old Testament dietary laws. A number of the foods forbidden in the Old Testament have been shown by modern scientists to be unsafe, especially if improperly prepared. Two clear examples of such unsafe foods are pork and shellfish. However, these are by no means the only Biblical rules which are intended to protect the individual.

Dr. S. E. McMillen has written a book which examines the causes and cures of a number of physical disorders. The following are two examples, taken from that book, which demonstrate rules which protect the well-being of the individual: For years it was thought that circumcision was a religious rite with no real value. Then, in 1954, it was discovered that "both Jewish women and Indian Moslem women have a low incidence of cervical cancer, and . . . that these two otherwise dissimilar people have only one pertinent common denominator, . . . circumcision of the males."⁸

⁸S. E. McMillen, M.D., None of These Diseases, (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1963), p. 20.

For over 4,000 years followers of Abraham have observed a seemingly worthless rule to have modern scientists learn that it has been saving lives all those years! The second example has to do with the handwashing procedures outlined in Numbers 19. The antiseptic method of washing hands and instruments was not accepted by medical science until around 1876. Less than 50 years before that date a doctor who tried to require a hospital staff to wash their hands between patients was fired for being a bother.⁹

Not all of these rules are there strictly to protect man's physical health. Some are also intended to protect his emotional well-being. Take, for example, the commandment forbidding sexual activity outside of the marriage bond. During the sixties and seventies, Biblical fidelity was looked down on as an antiquated inhibition. Everything from living together, to wife-swapping, to mass orgies was promoted in the name of "freedom." However, in the past few years, psychologists are starting to take a new look at those "antiquated inhibitions." Rollo May, a well-known psychotherapist, author, and lecturer, in his

⁹Ibid., pp. 17-18.

book, Freedom and Destiny, suggests that promiscuity is a trap with severe emotional consequences. While his suggestions are far from Biblical, he does assert that "free sex" is emotionally damaging!¹⁰ God knew that when he met Moses on Mt. Sinai and included among the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

It cannot be denied that each of these commands is protective in nature. It has taken humanity several thousand years to realize the protective nature of some of God's rules, and, in the same way, it may take some children many years to realize the protective nature of some of the rules imposed upon them. But, regardless of the child's understanding, these rules are needed.

A WELL-ORDERED SOCIETY

Some rules are needed for the simple purpose of maintaining a well-ordered society. Chapters 19-25 of the book of Deuteronomy list a number of such regulations. The first 13 verses of chapter 19 illu-

¹⁰Rollo May, "The Promiscuity Trap," Reader's Digest 120. (January 1982), pp. 87-89.

strate this fact well. These verses deal with the establishment of cities of refuge for those who have unintentionally killed another person. Notice the detailed procedural instructions given in the passage:

1) The location of the cities is set forth (v. 2).
 2) The distance between cities and a network of roads for reaching them is commanded (v. 3). 3) A definition and an illustration of unintentional murder is given along with the instructions on what to do if one of these murderers tries to take refuge in one of the designated cities (vv. 11-13).¹¹ The chapters which follow cover everything from settling family disputes, to moving boundary markers, to the proper conduct of a war. For the most part, these rules do not deal with moral or religious issues, their sole purpose is to keep the nation running smoothly.

It has been said that the difference between an army and a mob is organization. Organization means rules. Since God saw fit to include organizational rules in His instructions to the nation of Israel,

¹¹p.C. Craige, The Book of Deuteronomy, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 264-268.

then it would seem proper for Christian homes and schools to do the same.

KNOWING GOD'S WILL

The final class of rules to be examined includes those whose purpose is to reveal to man the mind of God. These rules are embodied in the Decalogue, especially in the first three commands: (1) "I am the Lord your God. . . You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2-3). (2) "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything. . . ." (Exodus 20:4), and (3) "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. . . ." (Exodus 20:7). These commands do not protect the physical or emotional well-being of the Israelites, nor are they needed for a well-ordered society. These commands are God's declaration of His will.

IN SUMMARY

Why have rules? Four reasons have been given:

- 1) Rules provide a measure of security by showing children where the boundaries are, thus freeing them to go anywhere within those boundaries.
- 2) Rules warn of potential dangers, dangers

which may not be readily seen by those who are required to follow the rules.

- 3) Rules are the basis of organizational efficiency. Without rules, there is chaos.
- 4) Rules reveal the mind of God to man.

These are legitimate reasons for having rules. It is the thesis of this work that all Biblical rules, with the exception of ceremonial laws, can be classified under #'s 2-4 above. If that is the case, then it would follow that a Biblical philosophy of rules would demand that all rules be made for these same reasons.

CHAPTER TWO

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH RULES

Chapter one dealt with the fact that rules are needed. This chapter will focus on four types of problems which can be created by having too many rules. They are:

- 1) Rules are potential burdens.
- 2) Rules cannot produce righteousness.
- 3) Rules can provoke disobedience.
- 4) Rules can cast doubt on inspiration.

Each of these problems is capable of being taught or illustrated directly from the Scriptures.

POTENTIAL BURDENS

In chapter one of this work, it was demonstrated that one of the purposes of rules is to give freedom. Yet, it is possible to do the exact opposite! Rules can become burdens to those who are required to keep them.

The Scripture is clear on this point. Note

Matthew 23:1-4:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

The figure here is of a camel driver who mercilessly overloads his beast with no regard for the creature's inability to bear it.¹ It is important to note from this passage that human regulations can become unreasonable and burdensome.

It is unfortunate that, in their rush to condemn the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, many commentators have completely overlooked the teaching about the unreasonable nature of Pharisaic regulations.² Tasker has caught the importance of what is being said here. Speaking of these Pharisees he notes:

. . .when they insist on a meticulous observance of the minutiae of the law, or unreasonably extend the sphere in which a particular precept

¹R.V.G. Tasker, The Gospel According to St. Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), p. 219.

²For a typical example see: H.A. Ironside, Matthew, (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1948), pp. 300-303.

is to be regarded as operative, or enjoin new precepts for which there is no authority in the law itself, they become not the guides but the oppressors of mankind.³

In similar phrases the prophet Isaiah declared, "Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees" (Isaiah 10:1). The Apostles and Elders at the Jerusalem council expressed a restrained attitude when they said, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things" (Acts 15:28-29). The principle then, would seem plain: God does not intend rules to be a grievous burden for the ones being ruled.

Two further facts need to be brought out. First, consider the source of extra-Biblical rules. 1 Timothy 4:1-5 speaks of those who will come in the last days with two specific man-made regulations: celibacy and abstinence from certain foods. Paul identifies these seemingly harmless rules as "things taught by demons" (1 Timothy 4:1). Dean Fetterhoff has sug-

³Tasker, Matthew, p. 216.

gested that those words identify the source of these rules. "It is not in the superior intellect of some college professor nor in the advanced understanding of some religious leader. It comes from the pit of hell."⁴ Guthrie associated these rules with the "taboos" commonly found in heathen religions and points out the inconsistency of a Christian holding such an attitude.⁵

Secondly, consider the source of all Christian conduct. Galatians 5:22 identifies Christian conduct as "fruit of the Spirit." These Christian virtues are ". . . manifest in the believer because of the Holy Spirit's indwelling."⁶ Virtue does not spring from observing burdensome regulations, but from the indwelling Holy Spirit.

FAILURE TO PRODUCE RIGHTEOUSNESS

Observing rules, God's or man's, does not pro-

⁴Dean Fetterhoff, The Making of the Man of God, (Winona Lake, Indiana: B.M.H. Books, 1976), p. 60.

⁵Donald Guthrie, The Pastoral Epistles, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 93.

⁶Lehman Straus, Galatians and Ephesians, (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1957), p. 87.

duce a heart that is right with God. In fact, it does not necessarily follow that the person who is capable of observing rules does so because his heart is right with God. Scripture testifies to these facts in Romans 3:20, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in (God's) sight by observing the law."

Following rules does not make one holy in God's eyes. In commenting on Romans 3:20, Newell states quite simply "that keeping the law is NOT God's way of salvation, or of blessing."⁷ Luther in a lengthy discussion on Romans 3:20 states,

The works of the law are those, he (Paul) says, which take place outside of faith and grace and are done at the urging of the Law, which either forces obedience through fear or allures us through the promise of temporal blessings. But the works of faith, he says, are those which are done out of a spirit of liberty and solely for the love of God. And the latter cannot be accomplished except by those who have been justified by faith, to which justification the works of the Law add nothing, indeed, they strongly hinder it, since they do not permit a man to see himself as unrighteous and in need of justification.⁸

⁷William R. Newell, Romans Verse by Verse, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1948), p. 89.

⁸Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), p. 234.

Following the passage quoted above, Luther devotes several paragraphs to developing the point that observing laws can be a hindrance to salvation rather than an evidence of it. He is not suggesting that the law needs to be abandoned; he is merely pointing out that observing a form of religiousness gives one a false sense of holiness. Thus the rules which were intended to point out man's need for a Savior have become the means by which man feels he can save himself.⁹

It would seem, then, that rules fail to produce righteousness in two ways: 1) observing them does not make one holy in God's eyes, and 2) observing them may produce a false sense of acceptance before God, driving away an unregenerate man's feeling of need for God. From the second of these points, a third can be extrapolated: Just because someone is capable of observing rules does not mean that he is a Christian. This fact creates an additional problem for those in leadership positions. Stated simply, observing rules can produce a false sense of security in the one charged with enforcing them. The leader

⁹Ibid., pp. 234-236.

who sees his detailed rules meticulously observed by a follower is not inclined to point that one to Christ on the assumption that he/she is already a child of God. (The opposite of this would be the leader who doubts that any of his followers are saved, because none of them observe his rules to his satisfaction. Therefore, he is constantly preaching salvation rather than trying to lead them on to Spiritual maturity.)

PROVOKE DISOBEDIENCE

An old adage attests that "the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." It has also been said that "nothing tastes so sweet as forbidden fruit." While these folk sayings are not Scripture, they do express a principle that is Scriptural.

In Romans 7:10-11 Paul makes this enigmatic statement:

I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, put me to death.

What does it mean? Dr. Murray, in his commentary on Romans, makes the following observations:

The more law is registered in our consciousness the more sin is aroused to action, and the law, merely as law, can exercise no restraining or remedial effect. . . . The more cognizant he (Paul) became of its demands, the more he relied upon it as the way of life, the more the opposite fruit was borne. This is the deception - it yielded the opposite of what he had anticipated.¹⁰

How is this accomplished? How is it that what God intended for good has been perverted to do the work of Satan? To fully answer that, one must fully understand the totality of man's depravity. While the doctrine of depravity cannot be fully developed in this work, the following comments from Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones must be noted:

Sin. . . deceives us by creating within us an antagonism to the Law; it makes us feel that God is against us. That is what the devil did with Eve. . . . The moment the law begins to speak, sin always comes in at that point and says, "Yes, that is exactly what it does say, and that is because God is what He is - He is against you, a stern, feelingless Lawgiver."

But sin does not stop at that. It also makes us feel that the law is unreasonable in its demands upon us. . . sin persuades us to hate it (the law); when it tells us not to do something it creates within us the desire to do it.¹¹

¹⁰John Murray, Epistle to the Romans, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), p. 252.

¹¹Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Romans: The Law: Its Functions and Limits, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), pp. 156-157.

In reality, a man's disposition to sin leads him to say to God or any other lawgiver, "Who are you to tell me what to do? You are nobody, and to prove it I will do what you have forbidden!"

While man's propensity to rebellion should not totally deter leaders from making rules, it would seem to be a factor that must be considered. Ephesians 6:4 states, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children. . . ." The proliferation of rules can do exactly that - exasperate children. This exasperation can take two forms: 1) the child may feel that there are so many rules that he could not possibly obey them all, so why even try, or 2) the child may feel that every pleasure in life has been forbidden by dictatorial fiat; therefore, one must break rules if one hopes to have any fun at all. To put it in the child's words, "If it's fun, it must be sin, and if it's forbidden, it must be fun." As amusing as that may sound to an adult, the mind of a child, even a regenerate child, distorted by sin can easily fall into that reasoning.¹²

¹²For a detailed study of how over-regulation exasperates a child see works by Dobson and Adams cited in the bibliography.

Satan is aware of the fact that rules can provoke disobedience. It was noted in the first section of this chapter that 1 Timothy 4:1-5 attributes certain rules to Satan. It seems safe to assume that, given the character of Satan, he knew that their effect would be the opposite of their supposed intent. Christ called him the father of liars. When making rules for righteousness he is lying, he knows his rules incite rebellion.

DOUBTING INSPIRATION

The Bible is the inspired Word of God. It is held as the final authority on all matters of faith and practice. Deuteronomy 4:2 states: "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it."

Have the implications of Deuteronomy 4:2 been fully fathomed? "In its immediate context. . .the injunction relates to the law, . . .the gift of God at Horeb, that could not be supplemented or reduced."¹³ A great deal of emphasis is placed on the last part

¹³P.C. Craige, The Book of Deuteronomy, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), p. 130.

of the verse which, along with Deuteronomy 12:32 and Revelation 22:18-19, has been interpreted to mean that man must not remove anything from the text of Scripture. However, all three passages also contain the warning against adding to God's revealed will. At this point the conservative leader would no doubt assert that his regulations do not add to Scripture, they merely interpret it. But this distinction needs to be understood by those who are told that God says they must obey. When a child is told, "If you disobey me, you are disobeying God," the natural implication is that there is no difference between man's rules and God's rules.

What does it do to a child's view of inspiration when he/she is told by an adult leader that it is sin to participate in some activity, only to discover that some other equally conservative leader sees no harm in it? The child may conclude that God is contradicting Himself, or that Scripture is too vague to be understood. By presenting conflicting interpretations without identifying them as interpretations, are they not casting doubt on the doctrine of inspiration?

There is one final verse of inspired writ

which needs consideration: Philippians 4:5, "Let your moderation be known unto all men. . ." (KJV). What is "moderation?" Webster defines "moderate" as, "avoiding extremes of behavior or expression. . ."¹⁴ The Greek term translated "moderation" in this text is a compound of two Greek roots meaning "extreme" and "faintness." It carries the idea of something which is very unnoticeable.¹⁵ In 2 Corinthians 10:1 the same word appears as an attribute of Christ and is rendered "gentleness." Trench suggests that in using this term Paul has in view the fact that God always keeps in mind the weakness of our flesh when dealing with us; therefore, He tempers His justice with mercy.¹⁶ It is, in short, the absence of harshness. When men look at the regulations which are imposed upon Christian young people today, do they see moderation, do they see an unyielding harshness, or do they see total permissiveness?

¹⁴Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1965 ed., S.V. "moderate."

¹⁵Joseph Henry Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), S.V. "Epieikeia."

¹⁶Richard Chenevix Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 153-157.

CONCLUSION

Rules are not always good. There are four potential faults to be found in them: 1) Rules can become burdens to those who are required to obey them. 2) Rules do not produce righteousness, and they may hinder one from becoming truly righteous by giving a false sense of security to the one keeping them and the one enforcing them. 3) Rules can provoke disobedience and thereby accomplish the opposite of what they were intended to do. 4) Rules can cast doubt on the inspiration of the Scripture in the mind of a child by suggesting that the Bible is not all we need for faith and practice. A Biblical philosophy of rules needs to recognize these potential dangers.

CHAPTER THREE

THE QUESTION OF ABSOLUTES

There is another question which must be examined before a Biblical philosophy of rules can be set down. It is the question of absolutes. This question would be irrelevant to this study but for one fact: Americans, on the whole, do not regard rules as absolutes, only as suggestions. Take, for example, the speed limit. Does it mean that one may not drive 56, or does it mean that one must not go unreasonably beyond 55? One needs only take a short trip to see what the speed limit means to most Americans - it is a suggestion that is not to be unreasonably exceeded.¹ This attitude represents a double standard when the one holding it insists that the rules he writes must be obeyed.

Such an attitude regarding rules can be very

¹Edward T. Hall, The Silent Language, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1973), pp. 82-85.

influential in the formation of rules. If the rule-maker fully expects those charged with following the rules to live slightly beyond the boundaries he sets up, he is inclined to make the boundaries narrower than they need be. He is a victim of his own experience. He knows that he drives 10% beyond the speed limit and so he expects his followers to live 10% beyond his rules. Therefore, he allows them 90% of the freedoms he knows they should have and assumes that they will take the remaining 10% on their own.

The numbers expressed in the previous paragraph may not be exact; however, the principle is accurate. If human regulations are binding on those who are charged with following them, the extent and the possibility of exceptions must be considered. These issues will be dealt with in the paragraphs which follow.

WHAT ARE ABSOLUTES?

Webster defines "absolutes" as, "Having no restriction, exception, or qualification."² To seek

²Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1965 ed., s.v. "Absolute."

a "Biblical" definition is difficult since the word "absolute" does not appear a single time in the King James Version of the Bible! Therefore, the modern English definition will have to suffice. From Webster's definition it would seem that something that is "absolute" is operative at all times, under all circumstances, and for all people. It has no restrictions, no exceptions, and no qualifications.

ARE MAN-MADE RULES ABSOLUTE?

On the surface this appears easy to answer in the affirmative. One need only call to mind Matthew 23:1-3 (cited earlier) where Christ says, "the teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, so you must obey them and do everything they tell you." Christ asserts that the regulations imposed by these men are unreasonable and that they do not follow them themselves, yet He says, "you must obey them!" This is not a mere suggestion, it is a clear and specific command! Should there be any lingering doubts, Romans 13:2 is crystal clear, "Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves."

Yet, our Savior did not adhere to the standards set down by the Scribes and Pharisees. Matthew 12:1-2 says,

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the sabbath.

The disciples had not violated God's law, but they did violate man's law. According to the Talmud, one was not allowed to reap and grind corn greater in bulk than a dried fig on the sabbath.³ Yet, Christ clearly asserts that they are guiltless. How so?

CAN THERE BE EXCEPTIONS?

The preceding paragraph suggests that there can be exceptions to man-made rules. The Scriptures forbade work on the sabbath, but it was the Talmud which defined the plucking of small amounts of grain as work. Thus the violation was not of God's "absolute" standard, but of man's interpretation of that standard. Were that the end of the incident, that explanation would satisfy, but it is not.

³Leon Morris, The Gospel According to St. Luke, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), p. 122.

In verses 3-4 of Matthew 12, Christ gives the account of another law breaker--David. Only this time it is God's law that is violated, not man's.

He answered, Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread--which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests.

In this incident (recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6), David clearly violated God's rules, yet Christ holds him guiltless. On what grounds was David guiltless? Tasker asserts that Christ is here suggesting that "human necessity must take precedence of legal technicalities."⁴ Some have asserted that David violated only the ceremonial law, not the Decalogue and was thus guiltless.⁵ However, that reasoning seems inadequate when set along side of 2 Samuel 6:6-7 where Uzzah was struck dead for violating a ceremonial law when he touched the Ark of God!

How then was David guiltless? The answer

⁴R.V.G. Tasker, The Gospel According to St. Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961), p. 124.

⁵Alan Cole, The Gospel According to St. Mark, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961), p. 124.

lies in the words of Jesus recorded in Mark's account of the incident. "Then he said to them, the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Cole has caught the spirit of these remarks when he asserts that the sabbath was created to provide for man's physical need for rest. The Pharisees had taken that which was designed to replenish man's strength, and had made it a burden to bear.⁶ Yet, when applied to the incident with David (as Christ here has done) this principle grants exceptions to God's law as well as man's laws! Christ truly meant it when he said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). How unlike the religious leaders who "tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders" (Matthew 23:4).

On what grounds was the exception granted? The exception was based on the fact that it was not in David's best interest to obey the law in that situation. The question could be asked, "what of the martyrs? Was it in their best interest to die?" If only there were an easy answer to that question. But there is not. What of Uzzah? He thought him-

⁶Ibid., p. 74.

self to be helping God by steadying the ark and he was not granted an exception. These are questions for greater minds to ponder. For the purposes of this study it is enough to note that exceptions can be made.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

There are three implications that seem to follow the material presented in the chapter:

1) Christians are under divine obligation to follow man's rules, 2) men ought not to make rules which are not clearly in the best interest of those who will be required to follow them, and 3) exceptions can be considered. A Biblical philosophy of rules must acknowledge these facts.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LINES OF AUTHORITY

While this paper, as a whole, is addressed to those who make rules for the Christian home or school, this chapter is addressed primarily to the Boards and administrators of Christian Schools. There needs to be a Biblical examination into how far-reaching a Christian school's rules can and should be. To state the problem quite simply, does the Christian school have the right to impose regulations on the student's home life?

Throughout the decade of the seventies and now into the eighties, Christian schools have been fighting against the rising tide of governmental control. Organizations have been formed, court battles have been fought, and books have been written on the premise that the Christian school has the right to operate free from governmental regulations. While this premise is supported legally by the first Amendment to our Constitution, it is supported Bib-

lically on the basis of God's three separate and distinct institutions: The State, the Church, and the family. It is maintained, by those fighting for this cause, that the Bible clearly defines the responsibilities of each of the three institutions, and that the three exist as co-equals with no one having the power to subordinate either of the other two.

The responsibilities of the state, briefly stated, are:

- 1) to defend the country from outside attack,
- 2) to provide a peaceful environment free from fear,
- 3) to punish those who do evil,
- 4) to reward those who do good.

(See Romans 13:1-8; 1 Peter 2:13-14; et al.)

The main responsibilities of the church are:

- 1) evangelism,
- 2) doctrinal teaching,
- 3) baptism,
- 4) training,
- 5) care of widows and orphans.

(See Matthew 28:19; James 1:27; and 1 Timothy 5:3-16).

The main responsibilities of the home are:

- 1) training of children,
- 2) care of the physical needs of children,
- 3) teach children what they need to know.

(See Ephesians 6:4; 1 Timothy 5:8; and Deuteronomy 6:6-8).

While these lists are not exhaustive, they are intended to show that God has set down in His Word what He wants each of His institutions to accomplish. It is significant that He has given each one some "clout" for enforcing its standards. The state has the sword (Romans 13:4), the church has the membership list (1 Corinthians 5:9-13), and the home has the rod (Proverbs 23:13-14). However, the most significant factor to be demonstrated by these lists is the fact that none of these institutions has the power over any of the others. Paul, in 1 Timothy 3:1-5 and other passages, shows that God has commanded that one perform well in the home before becoming a leader in the church. However, the purpose is not regulation of the home by the church; but the testing of a potential church leader. The head of a home, the head of a church, and the head of the state must each answer to God, not one another.

These facts have a clear and distinct implication for Christian school rule-makers: The Christian school, as a ministry of the church, does not have authority from God to regulate the way in which the home is run or the standards which are imposed on a child in that home.

This does not deny the right of the church to disassociate itself from one who violates God's revealed will in order to protect its own testimony and call the sinner to repentance; however, some have gone beyond this. Such things as bed times, T.V. programs, music selection, leisure time attire, and the time and length of family devotions are responsibilities of the home, not the church. Good intentions are no excuse for overstepping Biblical boundaries. A Biblical philosophy of rules mandates that the rule-maker not attempt to impose regulations on a realm over which God has given him no authority.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

What is a Biblical philosophy of rules? A Biblical philosophy of rules is one which has a Biblical purpose, an understanding and respect for the Biblical cautions regarding rules, a Biblical attitude towards rules, and a Biblical scope for its rules.

BIBLICAL PURPOSE

Rules are needed to avoid creating an exasperating insecurity in children.

Chapter one listed four Biblical purposes for rules:

- 1) Provide security,
- 2) Warn of danger,
- 3) Organizational efficiency,
- 4) Reveal the mind of God.

A Biblical philosophy of rules must create rules which are consistent with these four purposes.

These four categories are very broad, and they allow for a great deal of latitude. It is doubtful that most Christian homes and schools could not fit all of their rules into one of these areas. Even those rules which are made just for the convenience of the rule-maker could no doubt be classified as organizationally efficient. The question which ought to be examined is, "How many rules of the family or school fall into each of the categories?" If there is a large number of rules in the organizational category is it not possible that the institution is over-organized? Or if there are many rules intended to reveal the mind of God, is it not possible that the institution has taken upon itself the work assigned to the Holy Spirit? A large number of protective rules could be symptomatic of an over-protective nature.

A Biblical philosophy of rules would mandate that rules be divided into these four categories and that their number be examined for appropriateness.

BIBLICAL CAUTIONS

Chapter two listed four possible problems

created by rules:

- 1) Potential burdens,
- 2) Cannot produce righteousness,
- 3) Provoke disobedience,
- 4) Cast doubt on inspiration.

A Biblical philosophy of rules must be aware that the rules being created can have damaging effects.

These cautions should prompt the rule-maker to:

1) set less severe standards, so as not to be a burden; 2) set less minute standards so as to allow the unregenerate enough room to expose themselves without violating institutional rules; 3) set reasonable rules that do not provoke disobedience by prohibiting all that is enjoyable in life; and 4) keep the Scriptures as the pre-eminent and final authority.

These cautions clearly show the unbiblical nature of the "military academy--drill sergeant" atmosphere in the Christian home or school.

BIBLICAL ATTITUDE

There are really two Biblical attitudes towards rules - one for the follower and one for the enforcer.

The follower is to see rules, God's and man's, as absolute. The enforcer is to see the potential for exceptions in the rules that are made. While only God may grant an exception to His rules, anyone who makes a rule has the privilege and, indeed, the responsibility to make an exception to that rule when it is not in the best interest of the one charged with obeying it. How often has it been said to a child, "I know you had a good reason for doing what you did, but the rule is the rule; therefore, you must be punished!"

When he is under authority, the rule-maker must be an example of obedience in all things. When he is in authority, the rule-maker must be disposed to mercy whenever possible.

BIBLICAL SCOPE

In chapter four it was pointed out that there is a special problem in the area of the scope of rules made by Christian schools. The Christian school, functioning as a ministry of the church, does not have Biblical authority over the home. A Biblical philosophy of rules recognizes that it cannot be Biblical if it is operating outside of God's pre-

scribed boundaries. The school is free to scold, rebuke, and counsel the family's actions in the home, but it must not mandate them.

THE PHILOSOPHY STATED

It is the thesis of this paper that a Biblical philosophy of rules should contain the following eight statements:

1) Rules are necessary.

2) Rules are tools with specific purposes.

Before making a rule, the purpose needs to be examined to determine whether or not it is Biblical.

3) Rules are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. If the rule is not needed, it should not be made.

4) It is not God's intention that the Christian life be a burden; therefore, rules should not be burdensome.

5) In any listing of rules, a distinction needs to be made between those rules which are:

(a) clearly Biblical; (b) derived from Biblical principles; and (c) purely of human origin. Those under "c" ought also to be subdivided according to purposes such as "organizational" or "protective."

6) Rules are made for the benefit of those being governed.

7) Rules must not exceed the God-given sphere of authority of the one making them.

8) Following rules, regardless of how few or how many, does not produce a right relationship with God. Christianity is a walk of faith, not laws.

IN SUMMATION

Writing rules for a Christian home or school is not a task to be taken lightly. Nor is it a task to be undertaken by those who have not first considered what the Bible has to say about the making of rules. It is a task for those who have prayerfully considered the full implications of what they are doing. It is a task for those who hold a Biblical philosophy of rules.

Father, teach us to love Your way, Amen.

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