

My Position on Legalism

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Having seen legalism from many different perspectives and being married to a woman who herself was legalistic for many years, I believe that I can say legalism is an ugly disease at its very root that has a way of wrapping its tentacles around those of us who are Bible-believing Christians and absolutely choking the life out of almost anything that is decent, godly, and holy. I can easily recognize legalism when I see it, and it's not glorifying to God. While it may seem that the deeds done by someone who is entrapped in legalism may be very difficult to identify from the pure heart of someone who does what they do because they love the Lord and want to please Him, it must be identified as displeasing to the Lord and not what He intended.

In order to recognize what legalism is, we must first determine what true Christianity is. Christianity "is to manifest genuinely Christ-like behavior by dependence on the working of the Spirit of God within, motivated by a love for the glory and honor of God. True Christian life is fulfilling a law by means of a unique power because of an overwhelming desire. It requires an outward standard or code of behavior, an inward power which makes it possible to meet it, and a motive which drives us on to do so."

On the flip side of the coin, it is legalism to establish standards for other people when the Bible does not address the issue. Even standards for one's self can be dangerous if they have the wrong standard. It is possible to be legalistic in the standards you set for yourself. Legality then becomes a making of unwarranted demands on your own self or on someone else, especially in areas that are not prohibited in the Scriptures.

It is legalism when a Christian or groups of Christians make rules for everybody else to obey. If others want to do the same things as a particular Christian group, having the same convictions as they do, that's fine. If, however, they are being forced to do something against their will, or without understanding, it is legalism. It becomes legality when we make unwarranted demands upon others in areas not prohibited by Scripture.

As a definition, legalism means strict or excessive conformity to a legal code or set of rules. In a Christian context, legalism has two negative connotations: (1) attempting to base salvation on the performance of good works or on the strict observance of rules and regulations and (2) imposing rules on self and others that are not based on clear biblical teachings or principles.

For the purpose of my position here, I want to focus on legalism as a way of life for those who have already accepted the forgiveness that is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. Legalism can root its way into our hearts and minds such that we begin to think that what we are doing can create a system of thinking leading to actions that make us better than almost anyone else.

In the setting of the local church, and here is when it becomes very dangerous, there are people who will follow a pastor, thinking that he knows what is best and is followed

almost blindly, abandoning their own creative thought processes. Please understand that it is not my intent to demean those pastors and the authority that they have within the church. We come to trust our spiritual leaders because they have received a call from the Lord and we as a church have accepted the place they have in our lives. Here's where the problem comes: that the pastor then comes to believe that he practically has a corner on the truth and that he's really something special by virtue of his lofty position in the church.

There are some, when they join a church and give a strong following to the pastor but after a while, for whatever reason, begin to doubt the validity of the system because of its harsh, arbitrary rules. As children grow up in the system they begin to question the rules. When new converts enter the system they often accept everything uncritically, but sooner or later, they also begin to analyze the rules.

If a church is founded on true scriptural principles, it will withstand scrutiny of its teachings. The legalist, however, usually gives no justification for his man-made rules except tradition and authority. "This is what our church believes, and you must obey the church. This is what the pastor teaches, and you must obey the pastor." Permit me to say with no second thought that this kind of teaching will not be successful in developing true holiness.

Because we live in a society that tends to question just about everything (especially our youth in their adoption of post-modern thinking), following a legalistic system without regard to whether it is right or wrong will just not work. Our youth are, at their age, a lot more open minded, and they begin to question why things ought to be done in the way that it has been done; it's challenging traditionalism and people who have a position of authority. If we are to be successful in reaching a lost generation for Christ, there will be hundreds and thousands of people entering our churches. This one fact is certain: if a church bases its position and various stances exclusively on tradition and legalism, the new converts will either devastate it or they will fall away. However, if a church teaches biblical principles of holiness, the new converts will embrace them as their own beliefs. And in the end, isn't that what we want to do?

Legalists always exhibit certain characteristics. Among the many, they exhibit periods of great highs and lows based upon their performance, frustrations with trying to become more holy, contentious, condemnatory towards others who don't do as they do, a lack of patience with others growing in holiness, and usually like to control others. It is my position that these characteristics do not exemplify the fruits of the Spirit and they need to be recognized as such.

Another way to recognize legalism is confusing personal convictions and/or persuasions with Biblical mandates, ascribing equal authority to both categories. An extension of this is enforcing extra-Biblical moral standards on other Christians. Simply put, if you elevate Christian traditions (particularly moral traditions) to a status on par with the teaching of Scripture itself, you might be a legalist. If you require others to live in the same manner

as you do, and yet you cannot find the behavior you are prescribing or prohibiting in Scripture, you might be a legalist.

There is no question that we must be holy, and that holiness applies to every area of our lives. Too many Christians, however, fail to apply Biblical holiness principles to their lives consistently. They do not apply them when it comes to where they go, what they say, what they watch, what they listen to, what they do, how they look, etc. When they encounter other Christians who are concerned about those areas and are applying Biblical principles to the same it is easy to label them as legalists, and have sort of a disdain for them as though they are too radical. I do not think these people are all that conservative, or too radical. I think the majority of us are simply too lax when it comes to being holy. Those we often look at as conservative are simply being consistent in their holiness, not relegating it to certain parts of their lives while ignoring the application of holiness to others.

I do not think we can be too conservative when it comes to Biblical morality and applying Biblical principles to every part of our lives. I am not opposed to ultra-conservatives in the least. What I am opposed to are conservatives turned legalists, damning and condemning everyone who does not do as they do. That is when it turns ugly, and when the title of “legalist” is justified.

In our Christian walk, we must seek to do everything for the honor and glory of Jesus Christ. I believe that there are few areas where the Bible gives no clear position and therefore cannot be considered a sin, except in the eyes of a legalist. What truly matters in the end is that the person who refrains from doing whatever it is that they think is wrong is refraining from doing it as unto the Lord. It's not a question of what happens to be right or wrong; the Bible is very clear in many areas. (Romans 14; I Corinthians 8, 10). They are doing it for His sake, trying to please Him, and such an attitude is pleasing to God. Conservatism only becomes bad when we impose our extra-Biblical persuasions on others, or judge those who do not line up with our own personal moral standards.