

Revisiting Legalism

It's one of the easiest terms in the world of "churchdom" to toss about. If anyone questions the product of a group's brainstorming or the wisdom of someone's fruit of thinking out-of-the-box, the challenged might very well mutter about the challenger, "Crotchety old legalist." If someone presses for the church to address some gross sin in a community of believers, that person would inevitably be labeled by some as "legalistic." The term shuts down dialogue. It shuts down accountability. It shames into silence voices that merit a hearing. No one, after all, wants to be thought of as a legalist.

What a sloppy use of a term! To revisit legalism and to get a handle on this important concept, perhaps, a few thoughts are in order to define it in the negative, *i.e.*, a few things that legalism is **NOT**.

A proponent of an old way daring to question a proponent of a new way is **NOT** legalism. When one's idea is questioned, that person has a choice of listening to the questions or of becoming immediately defensive. There might be value in the tribal insight of an elder, insight that is lost when walls to dialogue fly up. The opponent might very well be a legalist and that might become evident in the course of dialogue. On the other hand, knee-jerk defensiveness is a rather overt mark of immaturity.

A passion for the holiness of God and for that of His church is **NOT** legalism. Some things are wrong, period, no matter what liberal biblical scholarship explains away and regardless of any light shed by geneticists, psychologists and sociologists. (That is not to say that there are not factors that play into someone's propensity to sin in a specific way, but we are each responsible for dealing with such things.) We are to call one another into account for gross sins, and, where private and gentle confrontation yields no positive result (repentance), a point may come when the church itself has to invoke discipline. In a sea of cultural relativism, that will inevitably solicit a charge of legalism. But, where gentle grace has led the way, such a charge is false. Just because God showed Himself to be rich in grace does not mean that He ever ceased to be holy.

Legalism is a spirit that displaces the wisdom of God, but not necessarily in full. It often just tries to nudge Him over so that one can share the throne with Him. True legalism expresses itself in ways that are really not all that hard to identify ...

The most dangerous and odious form of legalism is that which is dealt with most severely in the Bible, which is adding to what God has said about coming to salvation. Paul wrote the letter of Galatians to address the dangers of what is known as the Judaizing heresy. Certain teachers of Jewish descent were insisting that a Gentile can only come to Christ by way of the Law *and* the cross. The most conspicuous requirement was that a Gentile must be circumcised. Of such a teacher, Paul wrote and then repeated himself: "...let him be eternally condemned!" (Galatians 1:8, 9).

Of course, there are other things that fall under this general heading of legalism that do great damage to personal growth, Christian community and mental psyche (assurance).

When opinion, preference or personal experience are elevated to the level of divine revelation, this is a kind of legalism that sows many seeds of discord, anxiety and doubt. Legalism is not the sole property of the conservative guardians of the old ways. They certainly have their share of it, but I have also heard and seen many profoundly stupid and legalistic comments from the worlds of church growth, church marketing and contemporary worship. A few years ago, I actually heard one brother say of whatever worship style *du jour* he was pushing, "This is how God prefers to be worshipped." He even cited a psalm.

Legalism occurs when the application of a principle is given all the force of the principle itself. One's own practice of virtue can become a vice when he dares to impose his practice on others without ever recognizing the false guilt his personal scruples can awaken in others. The personal scruple of total abstinence that might keep one man from becoming a fall-down drunk is a gift from God, but that scruple does not need to be imposed on the general Christian population. There are many pointers and principles that we pick up along the way that help us in the realms of marriage, family, finance, health, prayer and spiritual discipline. Thank God for them. Share them with others in a spirit of "this helped me so take-this-for-what-it's-worth." But remember, you have no authority to impose your findings on others as the sole God-pleasing ways "to do life."

Legalism occurs when virtue becomes vice through self-imposed scruples. The virtue of honesty can become a cruel vice. The virtue of justice can become the vice of gracelessness. The virtue of grace can become the vice of moral indifference. The virtue of self-respect can become the vice of pride. As Paul would remind us, over all our pursuits of virtue, "put on love ..." (Colossians 3:14).

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