

Will the Real Legalist Please Stand Up?

Conservative Christians are not strangers to the charge of legalism. Begin tinkering with the sacred cows of worship - music and Christian culture, and you will attract the title *legalist* like running past a hive with honey on your head attracts a swarm. As a pastor, one of the most stinging things that can be said of you is that you or your church is legalistic. After all, Christian pastors are ministers of the gospel of grace. To be a Christian pastor and be called a legalist is really like being called a traitor. Instead of ministering grace, you are said to be bringing people into bondage.

Nevertheless, it's not uncommon to hear people throw this charge around, particularly toward those who hold conservative principles. I sometimes half-wonder if any pastor who simply expounds the Scriptures has not been called a legalist by someone, somewhere. Nevertheless, there is a real perception that Christians who seek to conserve the best of the Christian past are probably legalists. At least two factors make it likely that Joe Christian will associate conservative Christianity with his current perception of legalism.

First, our era is one that is deeply suspicious of authority, and hates dogmatism. It is an era where the individual is king, and personal, internalised spirituality is what people want. If a church begins applying Scripture to real-life situations, resisting certain cultural trends, and calls for obedience to the Scriptures, it is not unlikely that people used to autonomy and independence will feel constricted and begin to struggle. Many call this sense of constriction *legalism*. For such people, a church is "grace-filled" as long as it keeps its messages broad and generalised, as long as it does not try to bridge the cultural and time gap from Scripture to today's living, as long as it accommodates current popular culture, as long as it does not mention the duties and obligations of a Christian too much, and as long as the leaders of a church do not act as if they have real spiritual authority. It is to be expected that conservative Christianity is going to collide head-on with this kind of thinking, and we should not be surprised when the occupants of the crashed car get out and start blurting out, "legalism!"

Second, on the other side of the coin, we know that real legalism has often found a favourable host in churches ostensibly regarded as conservative. I would argue that such churches are conservative in name only; however, the perception is there. Pastors are sinners too, and not every pastor or Christian leader properly understands, or properly communicates, what it is to be under grace. Horror stories of spiritual abuse are a dime-a-dozen. Some churches in the evangelical and fundamentalist tradition have been guilty of binding the consciences of God's people to matters without Scriptural warrant. They have been guilty of creating the perception in God's people that certain acts, or a certain level of conformity, would commend them to God, or grant them meritorious status before Him. They have been guilty of ruling God's people with force and cruelty. While self-identified progressive churches can be just as guilty of legalism, it is often those churches that are nominally conservative that are guilty of these things.

In other words, while many are confused as to what legalism is, real legalism is a serious problem. Legalism is an attack on the gospel and on biblical sanctification, and every Christian should be very aware of what it is, and how to avoid it.

But that's just the problem: little consensus exists on what legalism really is. Legalism has become a kind of pliable word that is used by disgruntled Christians to express distaste or disapproval of a church or ministry, or by theological opponents who wish to tar their enemies. All too often, it becomes a kind of smear-word to dismiss the arguments of conservatism before they have even been heard. This word seems to have been vacuumed of clear meaning, and is now used in all sorts of ways. And if a word can mean anything, then a word actually means nothing.

Conservative Christians believe they are conserving authentic Christianity. Since all would agree that authentic Christianity is not legalistic in nature, conservative Christians ought not to be guilty of legalism. We may be falsely labelled as such; we should never be so in practice.

If we are to avoid true legalism, we must strip away false connotations of the term. Once we have done that, we can see what Scripture insists we do and do not do as true ministers of grace.

Avoiding legalism is firstly a matter of rightly understanding what it is. To begin with, we must reject incorrect definitions of legalism. One such error is the belief that *interpreting Scripture literally and applying it to modern living is a form of legalism*.

For some people, *legalism* is another word for taking Scripture literally, and making claims that God actually commands or forbids certain actions in the 21st-century. Apparently, to remain a minister of grace in the eyes of these folks, you need to keep all teaching broadly generic, and keep Scripture wrapped in its historical cocoon. If you attempt to draw a line from text to Tuesday morning, you're a wooden literalist, and a legalist. (On the other hand, if you take their advice, you'll be told by others that what people really want is "practical sermons" that "deal with the real world".)

Now where there's smoke, there's sometimes fire. And a jitteriness about sermons making modern applications from ancient texts isn't to be solely attributed to disingenuous hearts. Some of it comes from having heard one too many preacher produce applications from thin air. Perhaps you've sat listening to a sermon and been jolted by applications that seemed to burst in unexpectedly (for nothing in the text warned us they were coming). That's not to say such applications are Scripturally indefensible or, for that matter, equally destructive. The problem is, often enough, good pastors and parents have correctly warned their charges against certain practices, but have done so with little **warrant** from Scripture. The warrant may or many not have been there in Scripture; too often it was not made clear.

A generation of people were simultaneously told that everything must be 'Bible-based' and told that such-and-such an application was 'obviously what godly people have always done'. The dissonance between the two has produced some scepticism. It's also produced a pendulum swing in the other direction, where people supposedly devoted to the authority of Scripture will not let it speak outside its own covers. If Scripture does not supply the application in the text, they regard it as legalism to supply one. And such neo-legalists are in danger of becoming libertarians at the same time, for in their minds, Scripture forbids little of what they do.

Once a pastor includes an application from the pulpit, he is, in essence, bringing such a matter to the consciences of his people as a matter of obedience or disobedience. This task he must not shirk, but this task he must do very skilfully. For if he insists people do what God has not called for, God may one day say to him, "This I commanded not, neither came it into My mind." On the other hand, should the preacher decide that certain applications would be upsetting and unpopular and therefore skirts them, he will be guilty of having failed to unleash the power of Scripture to speak to all of life.

Warrant is the issue here. If there is warrant to connect a Scripture to contemporary life, then a reasonable application can, and in fact, *has* to be made. The right approach is neither to retreat to applications made purely on the assertive confidence of the preacher, nor to move out to the irony of legalistic antinomianism. What is needed is for teachers of Scripture to think clearly about the warrant for applying Scriptural principles to contemporary life.

The three sources of knowledge are authority, reason and experience. Authority is Scripture. Reason is the God-given ability to inductively or deductively reach the truth through logic. Experience is

observation and analysis of observable experience in the universe. If reason and experience provide us truth about matters like music, aesthetics and culture (and they do), and Scripture expects us to worship with music, approve what is excellent and obey God in the world (and it does), then there is sufficient warrant to make applications about such things. That isn't *legalism*; that's furnishing a believer for every good work (2 Tim 3:17).

If a warrant is tenuous, we ought to say so. On the other hand, if the warrant is established through sound reason, and the good judgement of experts, critics, professionals, or other authorities in that field of knowledge, it is not legalism to make the application. In fact, it's the opposite. It is being responsible enough to apply truth from Scripture to the lives people lead.

A second common misconception is that legalism is *teaching and requiring God's people to submit to Him*.

People take to authority today like they take to a cold slap in the face. Anti-authoritarianism is preached in the cartoons, the movies, the soapies, the talk shows, the magazines, the adverts and the comments on the blogs. One of the inalienable rights of 21st-century man is *to do what I want without anyone judging me*. Any talk of obedience and, *gasp*, submission to God-ordained human authorities, produces a stampede toward the fire exits, with screams of "Legalism!" heard as the building empties. Tell some people that there is an authority above them which requires their obedience and submission, and by the time it is goes from ear-drum to brain, it sounds something like, "You must sell your soul to me, so I can manipulate your puppet strings as I wish." (*Insert evil, maniacal laugh here.*)

In spite of all this, teaching the commands and prohibitions of Scripture, and insisting that those who call themselves God's people submit to Him is not, in itself, legalism. Indeed, you can hardly read ten verses of Psalm 119 without detecting the psalmist's unbridled relish for obedience and discipline. The Sermon on the Mount is actually Law 2.0, the Son of God's authoritative commentary and update on the Law. Paul, the apostle of grace, has no problem with imperatives either, often rapid-firing them off at his readers. Most tellingly, the apostle of love, John, is quite emphatic that love and submission to God's authority are precisely the same thing (1 John 5:3, 2 John 6). For that matter, the supervision of God's people by elders, and their submission to them is taught in Heb 13:17. Church discipline itself implies that God wants accountability, mutual discipleship and a healthy provocation of one another towards obedience and away from disobedience.

Since the biblical case for submission to God and his ordained authorities seems incontrovertibly part of healthy Christianity, why is it so often called *legalism*?

Probably because the contemporary view of love is rather twisted. As Jonathan Leeman points out, the two great commandments of modern love are "Know that God loves you by not permanently binding you to anything (especially if you *really* don't want to be)" and "Know that your neighbor loves you best by letting you express yourself entirely and without judgement". In a climate where love is setting me free to choose my own path and affirming me as I do so, authentic Christianity seems like a claustrophobic mind-control sect. The reasoning sounds like this: Love is being affirmed and set free to be myself. God loves me, and the church is supposed to represent God's love. However, this church imposes limits and restrictions on me and actually insists I obey. This church doesn't represent God's love. They're trying to bind me, and that's - why that's - *legalism*!

The problem is a faulty and, I think we can say, *idolatrous* view of love. For many, love is actually about enjoying my own expression of love, whoever and whatever the object of love. Love is without the limits, boundaries or structure of truth. If I am worshipping the idol of my own love,

Jesus Himself will seem like a legalist.

To be sure, the commandments of Scripture can be taught legalistically. That is, they can be taught without reference to the gospel, or to the Spirit's enablement. If biblical commandments or prohibitions are taught in a way that suggests we gain acceptance through the doing of them rather than through the merits of Christ, this leads people back into self-effort and the bondage of leaning on a code for righteousness. Here the problem is not the teaching of submission, but the failure to teach submission in light of God's fuller revelation. Subtract the Father's love as the believer's motivation, the Son's work as the believer's position and the Spirit's work as the believer's enablement and you have moralism, and eventually legalism.

The solution is not to withdraw from the preaching and teaching of commands, even on matters where the application is supplied from reason and experience. The solution is twofold: teach what Christian love really is, and emphasise the motive, means and methods of Christian obedience. This isn't *legalism*; this is loving God.

A third wrong definition of legalism is the idea that legalism *is the act of judging contemporary cultural phenomena*.

Christians live in the world, and therefore Christianity is to be incarnated in the world. The world Christians live in is full of meaning, because it was created by an intelligent Creator who **invested** it with His intended meanings, and because it has been fashioned and shaped by intelligent creatures who have fleshed out their understanding of its meaning.

Meaning is everywhere. Wedding ceremonies have meaning. Eating a table versus eating a TV dinner in front of the box has meaning. Churches with high arches have meaning, and churches with flat ceilings lit with fluorescent-lights have meaning. The colours worn to funerals have meaning. The music played at Arlington National Cemetery has meaning. A mini-skirt has meaning, as do ties, earrings, sunglasses, tattoos, and lip-stick. Having a cell-phone has meaning, as do the paintings on your wall. Language has meaning, as does art. Economics has meaning. Politics has meaning. Science has meaning. Jurisprudence has meaning. Everywhere we turn, human beings **invest** the raw materials of creation with meaning. We are intelligent beings created in the image of God, and it is our reflex action to organise our environment, and whether or not we are conscious of it, **invest** the results of our hands with significance.

Sometimes these meanings exist purely because they have come through use. In South Africa, there is a mini-language used by commuters who catch mini-bus taxis. It consists of holding up a certain number of fingers held in a certain direction that indicates your desired destination. Taxi-drivers and taxi-riders know the meaning of this 'language', a system of meaning that arose purely through use.

Sometimes these meanings exist through association. The 'rainbow-flag' is now associated with homosexuality. The living-dead look is associated with Gothic music. Whether the meaning created the association, or whether the association created the meaning is debated. What is clear is the practical result: the shoe fits.

Sometimes these meanings exist because there is something inherent in the thing which dictates what meanings it can signify. Darkness comes with some meanings inherently opposite to light. Loud sounds inherently communicate the opposite of soft sounds.

Whether people correctly perceive these meanings does not make them non-existent. If I am in an elevator and three Bulgarian men are mocking my clothing in Bulgarian, my blissful non-comprehension does not mean their conversation lacked meaning. Perception of meaning does not

affect its existence. It is post-modernity to suggest that meaning is alone in the eye of the beholder.

In a world full of meaning, it is up to the church to understand the meanings of things around them. Scriptural principles must be applied to life in the world. The only way this can be done is if the truth of life in the world is connected to the truth of Scripture. In other words, we need to know both the meaning of Scripture, and the meaning of the world. If we know only the meaning of Scripture, we lock it within its own covers. If we know only the meaning of the world, we may know the problems well, with no solutions. We must know both Scripture and the world around us.

Is a mini-skirt a violation of 1 Timothy 2? Does Proverbs 18:24 affect the use of Facebook? Does James 1:19 speak to blogging? Does a church that builds an ugly building disobey Philippians 4:8? Do Christians who use shoddy music in worship fail to practise Philippians 1:9-10? Does Romans 12:2 speak to how we use the mall? Does wearing beach-ware to church violate Hebrews 12:28? Does our culture's use of time contradict Psalm 4:4? These questions can only be answered if we examine the meanings of mini-skirts, Facebook, blogging, architecture, music, the mall, clothing, time and so forth.

It has become a kind of reflex action to accuse Christians who examine the meaning of modern cultural phenomena of legalism. However, Christians, and particularly Christian pastors who cannot discern the meaning and implications of the environment in which their people live will fail to bring Scripture to life, in both senses of the term. Pastors must lead the way in scrutinising life. The excuse that "We didn't know it meant that" will not excuse us at the Bema seat.

It is easy to lampoon the fundamentalist pastors who forbade steel-rimmed glasses, beards, and bell-bottoms in their time. One forgets that such men were often trying to deal with the meanings of those things at the time. When meaning is purely associative or conventional, it may change with time, meaning it is no longer hostile to the Christian message at a later time. This makes men of earlier times seem alarmist, just as faithful pastors who warn their congregates against current threats to healthy Christianity may seem so to future generations.

In an increasingly complex world, shepherding is an increasingly complex task. The amount of devices, technologies, activities, media, and social sub-cultures seems to grow exponentially every few years. These are not without meaning. Conservative Christians argue that timeless Scripture has something to say to them; therefore, conservative Christians regard it is an obligation to learn what these things mean. If we love Scripture and love obedience, we should love to learn how to apply Scripture in our world.

Regardless of whether meaning is conventional, associative or inherent, it is there. For Scripture to be faithfully applied, we need to know the meaning of Scripture, and the meaning of the world around us. This is not legalism, this is *wisdom*.

Included in faulty ideas of what legalism is are the notions that it is interpreting Scripture literally, making applications for modern living, exhorting submission, and judging various cultural phenomena for their meaning.

Now it is obvious that legalism cannot be all of these things. In fact, when examined closely, legalism is not *any* of these things. For Christianity to be robust and relevant, it has no choice except to call the people of God to submit to Christ's authority by interpreting His Word accurately and applying it to the times and culture that Christians currently live in.

If these things are not legalism, why are they so often called such? At least two reasons can be offered.

First, for some, *legalism* has come to mean a vague kind of protest for one's own independence within the local church. It's obvious to us that when we humans, with our deceitful hearts, want to get away from accountability and submission, we will not say as much. We will rather say that those who we were under were authoritarian, abusive, controlling, unreasonable and narrow. If you can make the authority seem illegitimate, then it legitimises your actions. Your actions were not acts of rebellion; they were brave fights for Christian freedom. *Legalism* functions as a pretty handy word to get yourself out of a tight spot.

A second reason is that things necessary to a robust Christianity can be wrongly implemented or unwisely used, and thus justly earn the title of *legalism*. Unfortunately, this tends to tar the good as well, leading to pendulum reaction in the other direction. Some elaboration here is necessary.

While legalism is not applying Scripture to contemporary life, it is possible to make applications that could be called legalistic. As we have considered, making an application with little warrant is the equivalent of asserting one's own authority as the basis for obedience. If the warrant is tenuous, and yet a code of obedience is built up around such a tenuous warrant, it is hard not to see Christ's injunctions against the Pharisees from Matthew 23:4 applying here. To add to the obligations of believers with little to no warrant from Scripture certainly does not lighten their burdens. When a thoughtful, attentive and submissive believer cannot in good conscience see how a matter is one of obedience to Christ, some kind of legalism is probably present.

While legalism is not requiring the submission of God's people to Him, such submission can be taught or enforced in a legalistic way. Legalism is conveying a kind of leadership that is coercive and not persuasive, that manipulates and browbeats, that bullies and shames, so as to gain conformity of opinion and action. In such a situation, it is not uncommon to be taught that certain actions on your part will gain you merit and favour from God, for salvation or sanctification.

Strictly speaking, legalism is what Paul wrote against in his epistle to the Galatians. Legalism adds to the grace-alone gospel, and calls on man to perform certain works besides trusting in the completed work of Christ. While legalism is an attack on justification, it can also raise its head in the area of sanctification, since the two are so closely related. Sanctification is also by grace through faith, as the believer absorbs the mind of Christ, puts off the old and puts on the new, by the work of the Spirit. Here legalism dispenses with mention of the believer's position in Christ, or the love of God as motivation, or the power of the Spirit. It suggests, by word or by deed, that certain works must be performed for the believer to remain in good standing with God.

Once again, Christ's words in Matthew 23:13-15 seem to condemn such rapacious leadership, which uses God's Word as a means to control and exploit. Matthew 23:23-28 speaks against gaining outward uniformity and ignoring inward devotion and piety.

While legalism is not judging culture, it is possible to make judgements about cultural phenomena in a spirit of legalism. Once again, this would be making glib or uninformed judgements that ignore the opinions of tradition or authorities, and making such judgements binding on the consciences of other Christians. It would be inventing idiosyncratic responses to culture that serve more as a sign of loyalty to a group or leader than as a conscientious response to the meaning of things in the world. To invent judgements about culture for these purposes surely falls under the sweep of Christ's indictment of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:16-22.

In summary, you are not legalistic for interpreting Scripture literally and making applications, but you can be. You are not legalistic for requiring submission to Christ and His authorities, but you can be. You are not legalistic for judging the meaning of culture and applying Scriptural principles, but

you can be.

One solution to this difficulty is to look for wisdom and maturity in those we appoint into positions of spiritual leadership. Spiritual, emotional and intellectual maturity are needed in those who teach and lead. The human heart is perverse enough without poor leadership adding fuel to the fire. Only when leaders model Scriptural interpretation with integrity, leadership with winsomeness, and intellectual judgement with thoughtfulness will we navigate the narrow path between legalism and licentiousness.