

## LEGALISM

### I. Biblical references to "legalism"

- A. The term "legalism" is not used in the Bible
- B. The concept of "legalism" is found throughout the Bible.
  - 1. Old Testament
    - Isa. 29:13 - "people honor Me with their lip service, but remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote." (Quoted in...)
  - 2. New Testament
    - Matt. 5:20-28
    - Matt. 23:1-28
    - Gal. 2:11-21
    - Gal. 3:1-3
    - Col. 2:16-23

### II. Defining some terms

- A. Nomism - the concept of law being a means of attempting to thwart or restrain the satanically inspired character of selfishness and sinfulness in (natural) man, by controlling external human behavior through the imposition of rules and regulations, enforced by penalty and reward.  
Attributing to the law by personification, deification or undue priority the ability to establish and maintain rightness in human behavior.  
(society, parental, ecclesiastical, -- keep the natural man in line - otherwise anarchy, rebellion, chaos, lawlessness. I Tim. 1:8-11;
- B. Moralism - establishing particular rules, regulations, principles or precepts as the standard ethical values of a social grouping. Legislated morality and ethics.
- C. Legalism - the attitude and choice of attempting to control one's own external behavior and the behavior of others by means of accepting or imposing rules and regulations, which are regarded to be the basis of effecting righteousness or expressing the character of God. Any orientation toward a law-based standard or criteria that posits or attributes any purpose of such law, or benefit from practicing such law, in reference to Christian regeneration or sanctification.
  - 1. ...based on humanistic premise of self-origination of character, by self-effort and "works." Legal, judicial concept of "obedience."
  - 2. Nomism, moralism, legalism are the natural tendency of man apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It is the natural tendency of man to revert to law-based standards of rightness, approached in legalism. ..to accept something other than the character of God behaviorally derived from God's grace by faith in Jesus Christ. (too risky!) Epistemological and moralistic basis of rightness, rather than a divine ontological basis of Righteousness.
  - 3. Both Catholic and Protestant theologies have been inordinately law-based, resulting in an endemic nomism and legalism throughout the history of the Christian religion.
  - 4. Narrow, inadequate definition often employed - "attempting to use the keeping of the law as a means or method of justification, regeneration or salvation." This is definition of self-justification by "works," rather than legalism. (When such is employed as a def. of legalism, then it can be relegated to the Arminians or Catholics, allowing for the retention and continued application of the law and

- performance standards for Christian living. (Too narrow def. of "salvation.")
- D. Gospel of grace - the good news of the availability of a spiritual exchange whereby the presence of the Spirit of God indwells the spirit of a man, allowing for the character of God to be expressed in the behavior of a man by the dynamic empowering and enabling of the Spirit of the risen Lord Jesus .
- III. Underlying causes of legalism**
- A. humanistic concept of self-control - "I'm in control of how things go."
  - B. humanistic concept of self-effort, "works" - trying, striving, "I can do it"; self-reliance
    - 1. "You must do it, keep it, practice it, perform it."
    - 2. Meritorious benefits therefrom; achieve the goal
  - C. false security needs for defined parameters, limitations, borders
  - D. work-ethic concept of strict reciprocity - "get what you work for"
  - E. punitive concept of getting what one deserves
  - F. traditionalism of maintaining status quo
  - G. simplism of dividing life into compartments with instant solutions; fundamentalism. Got a handle on it - all figured out. Instant solutions - don't have to think or trust.
  - H. fear of freedom, of decision-making responsibility (Rom. 8:15)
  - I. security need for something that is fixed and static, concrete and tangible. Inordinate need to be safe and right
  - J. a favorite of sadomasochistic personalities; perfectionists, Pharisees
- IV. Features of legalism**
- A. Law-based codes of conduct; rules and regulations, dos and donts.
  - B. Performance orientation. Expectations, obligations, duties, observances, routines, procedures, formulas, how-tos, shoulds, oughts, "thou-shalts"
  - C. Negativism, abstinence, "Thou shalt not..."
  - D. Legal sense of obedience, rather than Lordship sense of obedience. Obey rules rather than God.
  - E. Externalization; outward conformity to standards (Matt. 23:5-7; 25:28); physicality
  - F. Inflexible, rigid. Principle precedes people.
  - G. Oppressive, demanding. Burdensome (Lk. 11:46; Matt. 23:1-5)
  - H. Authoritarian, manipulative.
  - I. Intolerant, violent. Fighting, feuding, hostility, accusations of heresy.
  - J. Competitive, comparisons, resentments
  - K. Exclusivism, elitism, bigotry,
  - L. Pride, arrogance, self-righteousness, ego-centricity. Bade of honor, status, orthodoxy
  - M. Ostentation, show-off. "How do we look?" (Lk. 15:1,2); approval of men
  - N. Critical, judgmental (Jn. 7:24; Rom. 2:1), suspicious
  - O. Insensitive, unloving, lack of compassion
- V. Consequences of legalism**
- A. Keeps people distanced and alienated from God; fenced off, separated concept. Afraid of God, the taskmaster. Afraid of God's rejection. No assurance or security.
  - B. Guilt, condemnation (Rom. 8:1), accusation, disapproval (both objective and subjective)
  - C. Defeat, despair, frustration, futility. "It's a losing battle. I can never do enough, be good enough, do it right and perfect as expected." Burned out!

- D. Self-destructive behavior; self-belittling, sense of worthlessness, low personal concept of oneself
  - E. Hypocrisy, playing religious games of unreality. Phony, fake. Play-acting; role-playing; lip-service (Matt. 15:8,9). Contrived piety, perfunctory performance, pretence, ostentation.
  - F. Minimalization. What do I have to do to get by, to get around, to side-step the rules? What are the loopholes?
  - G. Impersonalization; shallow personal relationships because they relate to law rather than to Person of Jesus Christ and other persons.
- VI. The Christian gospel vs. legalism
- A. Contrariety of legalism to Christian gospel
    - 1. Legalism is contrary to the Grace dynamic of God in Jesus Christ
      - a. Grace is God's activity expressive of His character Righteousness)
      - b. Grace is what God does, not what man does (II Pet. 3:18)
      - c. God is the dynamic of His own demands, which are simply consistency with His character, which only He can express by His ability and power (grace).
    - 2. Legalism is contrary to faith, our receptivity of God's activity.
    - 3. Legalism is a satanic substitutes that supplants faith.
    - 4. Legalism is contrary to the Lordship of Christ, wherein He directs and guides our lives.
    - 5. Legalism is contrary to Christian obedience, which is "listening under" the direction of the living Lord Jesus Christ.
    - 6. Legalism is contrary to the Spirit-led Christian life, wherein the Spirit of Christ enables and empowers. (Eph. 5:18;
    - 7. Legalism is contrary to freedom in Christ, and the liberty that is to be realized in present kingdom living. (John 8:31,32,36; II Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5:1,17)
  - B. Reaction and response to legalism by Christians
    - 1. Christianity is not a legal, judicial, law-based religion
    - 2. Must not assume that legalism is the only alternative to antinomianism, license or libertarianism. (II Tim. 3:5)
    - 3. Must not assume that legalism is just another innocuous approach to Christian living.
      - a. Legalism is the basis of religion that binds people up, and ties them back, to rules, regulations and rituals, thus enslaving them to the sin of self-effort.
      - b. Legalism is a radically opposite counterfeit of Christianity
      - c. Legalism is a house divided against itself - trying to deal with self-orientation by self-effort. (Col. 2:23)
    - 4. Legalism is sin. (Gal. 3:3; 5:4)
    - 5. Legalism is idolatrous, setting up an independent standard of law as the basis of rightness, rather than God's righteousness.
    - 6. Legalism is not to be tolerated or condoned, but to be exposed and eschewed. (Gal. 1:6-9)