

DOCTRINE OF LEGALISM

I. Introduction:

- A. Legalism is a present day term coined to define the concept of adding to the Word of God.
- B. It was instrumental in the downfall of man in the Garden. Gen.3:3 (Eve's addition to "not touch" the fruit).
- C. The Bible makes it clear that God's word as recorded in the canon of Scripture is God-breathed (2Tim.3:16), hence perfect and therefore all sufficient as it stands unaltered, in providing man with insight and knowledge as to the POG. Psalms 19:7; James 1:25
- D. God warned the Jews in the giving of the Law not to stray to the right nor to the left of His words. Deuteronomy 5:32; 17:11,20; 28:14; Joshua 1:7; 23:6
- E. Using modern day orientation, to stray or turn aside to the right is equivalent to adding to the Word of God (legalism), while going left is synonymous to omission of His words (liberalism). Deuteronomy 4:2
- F. God's word is sovereign and to add to or take away from it is tantamount to usurping His authority and destroys the integrity and intent of BD.
- G. God's warning to the Jews points to the two fallacious approaches of legalism and liberalism in the teaching, understanding and application of BD.
- H. To enter into either fallacious realm destroys the balance of perfection that God has so passed on to mankind through His Word.
- I. It is the responsibility of all communicators to seek the entire council of BD (Acts 20:27), under God's designed system for communication, and avoid any tendencies to avoid teaching something that is not Biblically substantiated or omitting any increments of truth.
- J. The only security for a pastor-teacher (P-T) to fulfill His obligation in this regard is to teach verses by verse, utilizing the ICE (isagogical, categorical and exegetical) hermeneutics maintaining the integrity of context immediate and remote and avoid consistent digressions from the context for whatever reasons.
- K. In so doing, the communicator ensures that God's word, as it is so intended via context of the particular book being taught, maintains its integrity of balance for the exhortation and edification of those allotted to his charge.
- L. This approach helps protect the P-T from overreacting to pressures found common in the ministry and engaging in the energy of the flesh to correct problems perceived or real.
- M. It allows the power of BD coupled with the +V of the sheep to have its desired affect without infringing upon the freedom of volition and the saints to work out their own salvation. Philippians 2:12
- N. It allows God and the POG under grace to retain rightful authority over men in support of the authority given to the P-T to oversee his flock.

- II.** Legalism and religiosity.
- A.** To approach the Bible either from a legalistic or liberal standpoint is to destroy the true concept of Christianity and in effect produces a man made religious approach to God.
 - B.** True Christianity seeks to develop a relationship with God based on His terms and conditions, while religion incorporates man's own terms and conditions to whatever degree.
 - C.** The Jews provide a Biblical observation as to those that historically have strayed both to the right and left of BD.
 - D.** Israel corporately has undergone two dispersions from the land.
 - E.** The first dispersion of a two-fold part (721 and 586 BC) was due to their failure to maintain their moral integrity of the Law.
 - F.** A simple perusal and observations found in the OT reveals that God kicked them out of the land due predominately to forms of immorality (idolatry) to include phallic reversionism, murder, etc. Jeremiah; note the call for reversion recovery Jer.25:5-6
 - G.** The Jews became liberal in their approach to the Law and dismissed the necessity of commandments that called for refraining from corporate STA immorality and separation from cults that promoted such.
 - H.** The consequence was a dispersion of Israel from the land for 70 years.
 - I.** By the time of the Gospel era and incarnation, Israel had developed a whole different approach to God's Word.
 - J.** Under the mainline system of Judaism, they had taken the Law and added to it a "hedge" of additional manmade laws as a reaction to their previous moral failings.
 - K.** This legalistic approach resulted in a system of religion that produced an extreme example of legalism and its consequences.
 - L.** By the time of the arrival of their Messiah, Israel under its current legalistic system of belief, promoted a system of works by man (circumcision, keeping the Law, being a Jew, etc) as the means of having a relationship with God and getting to heaven.
 - M.** The end result was that they did not look to Christ through faith as their means of salvation, but rather to themselves.
 - N.** Because Christ did not fit their "mold" of legalistic religiosity, which obviously distorted what they were looking for in a Messiah, they murdered Jesus.
 - O.** In Jesus warning to His disciples of the hostility and hatred of –V that they would face in their own ministries, He points to the Jews that adhered to mainline Judaism as a prime example of types from whom persecution can be expected. Joh.15:18-25; note that "*they*" in vss.20-25 = "the Jews".
 - P.** Due to an adherence to this type of religious reversionism they became a people totally antagonistic to the spiritual truths of the Word, and God once again kicked Israel out of the land in the dispersion of 70AD.
 - Q.** The irony that can't be missed, contrary to how most Christians regard the consequences of sin, that it was under this system of legalism that

produced the gravest condemnation upon Israel as they were kicked out of the land for some 1878 years (until 1948 AD).

- R.** While straying to the left, Israel brought condemnation upon herself for immorality, but when they strayed to the right, they became a religious idol to themselves bringing an unprecedented wrath from God as a nation.
- III.** Observations of legalism during the ministry of Christ.
- A.** The Gospels make clear that the Pharisaic sect of Judaism was the dominate influence and enforcers of this legalistic religion.
 - B.** They are seen as the main contributors to the persecution and harassment of Jesus during His ministry.
 - C.** They were consistently at odds with Jesus in His conduct and teaching.
 - D.** Jesus made it clear to His disciples to beware of this insidious tact to BD. Mat.16:6-12
 - E.** The principle is that a little leaven ruins the whole lump of dough. Gal.5:9
 - F.** While the Sadducees were “in bed” with the Pharisees in the plot to kill Jesus, they were more of the “liberal” bent as they rejected portions of BD, such as resurrection. Mat.22:23
 - G.** However, both sects were enmeshed in the system of legalism.
 - H.** Under this system of religiosity, the Jews developed a compatible partner to legalism called “the traditions of men”. Mar.7:1-13
 - I.** As the passage in Mark makes clear, when legalism is introduced into one’s approach to God, the man made laws are elevated to the same level as BD. Mar.7:7
 - J.** Legalism produces a form of self-righteousness, vanity before God. Mar.7:6-7 cp. Mat.5:20
 - K.** When one seeks to enforce these man made traditions, the consequence always results in disobedience to true principles of BD. Mar.7:9
 - L.** It in effect destroys the very intent of the principle of BD that their legalism is directly attached to.
 - M.** The irony of legalism is that it forces the individual to stray to the left regarding other doctrine such as justice (impartiality/fairness), mercy (compassion/grace) and faithfulness (integrity of intent). Mat.23:23
 - N.** The Pharisees reflect certain characteristics that can be seen with those that have legalistic trends and operate accordingly:
 - 1.** They think better of themselves reflecting a condescending and arrogant attitude towards others. Joh.7:45-49
 - 2.** This is a form of building one’s righteousness upon the perceived unrighteousness of others.
 - 3.** In turn, they take issue with any type of association with others that do not meet their arrogant standards of self-righteousness. Mat.9:11-13
 - 4.** This points to a legalistic approach to the Doctrine of Separation and in essence kills the intended impact of the witness of the life towards potential +V.

5. They try to weave nets of suspicion upon others that engage in the liberties of the Law, without Biblical substantiation. Ex. Jesus' observance of the Sabbath. Mat.12:1-8; Joh.5-18
 6. In other words, they call things "sin" when it is not or they insinuate sin upon others that they have no collaborating evidence Biblically or factually.
 7. They step outside their limits of authority in intrusion upon other's rights. Ex. The excommunication of the man born blind from the synagogue without any Biblical mandate to do so. Joh.9:34
 8. Legalism is often a result of power lust.
 9. In thinking more highly of themselves, they self-exalt themselves over the common layman. Mat.23:2,6-7
 10. In reality they are hypocritical in that their approach to the POG stymies spiritual advancement. Mat.23:13
 11. They feed on others with legalistic trends and weak in grace seeking to conform them into their own mold of legalism. Mat.23:15
 12. They are idiots blind as to their own failings. Mat.23:16-23 cp. Mat.15:14
 13. They are hypercritical of others that do not conform to their legalistic standards of righteousness. Mat.23:24
 14. On the other hand, they overlook failures of those that have their own STA weaknesses. *This can be a hazard for all believers.*
 15. They tend to meddle in other's private affairs, which is STA activity. 1Pet.4:15
 16. They scrutinize the conduct of others waiting for a chance to make accusation implicitly or explicitly as to one's liberties in God's plan. Luk.6:7
 17. They instill fear of the man rather than a true fear of God. Joh.9:22
 18. They use heavy-handed tactics and seek to "bully" people into line.
 19. They place unreasonable expectations upon others for obedience when they themselves won't deal with their own sin in the life. Mat.23:4
- O.** It was the religious leaders under the system of legalism that both Jesus and John the Baptism showed the least tolerance towards during their ministries. Mat.3:7; Mat.23:33

IV. Legalism and grace.

- A.** Legalism is totally incompatible with grace and is anti-grace orientation.
- B.** Grace is the underwriter of God's plan. Col.1:3-6
- C.** Salvation Ph₁ is a grace provision provided by God. Tit.2:11; 1Pet.1:10
- D.** Grace denotes that salvation is a non-meritorious proposition and is not dependent upon man, but God. Rom.5:15-16; 6:23
- E.** Therefore, the SAJG is a faith proposition minus works. Eph.2:8-9
- F.** Legalism adds to Ph₁ saving faith a form of works.

- G.** Paul constantly had to battle the Judaizers, a term coined to define Jewish legalists that were believers of the Pharisaic sect that promoted a Ph₁ salvation package of faith plus works. Act.15:1-12 cp. vs.5
 - H.** The epistle to the Galatians evolves around the infiltration of these types of legalists in the Galatian church. Gal.1:6
 - I.** There is a place for works in the Christian life, that being the application of BD in their Ph₂. Cf. the book of James
 - J.** However, even one's Ph₂ remains a grace proposition. 2Pet.3:18
 - K.** 2Pet.3:18 is a mandate for the tandem application of both grace and knowledge of BD in the believer's spiritual growth.
 - L.** It is grace that is the antidote for the infiltration of legalism and knowledge that is the antidote for any omission of BD.
 - M.** It is by grace that one can have experiential fellowship with God (1Joh.1:9); it is by grace that God communicates BD to us (Eph.4:7,11-13); it is by grace that we have all of the other Divine operating assets to apply BD (Eph.3:7).
 - N.** With the knowledge of BD we learn the POG and what constitutes sin versus the freedoms we are to be allowed under the POG.
 - O.** While grace does not condone sin, it accepts sin as a reality in the Christian's life (cf.Ecc.7:20) and has made all the provision necessary for one to overcome their sin in the life to make the MAJG.
 - P.** Legalism supplants the grace of God in the Christian life with its own brand of self-righteousness and seeks to destroy the very liberties of God's plan bestowed upon believers. Gal.2:4
 - Q.** Legalism attacks the power of R_B, the freedom of volition, dares to read the intent of one's heart and seeks to impose another's righteousness in the place of true righteousness that comes from application of BD in FHS based upon one's freedom of choice.
- V.** Concluding observations.
- A.** Legalism usurps the Sovereign authority of BD.
 - B.** It transplants the authority of God with the authority of men.
 - C.** The truth of BD provides true freedom in the Christian life (Joh.8:31-32), while legalism robs believers of their freedoms.
 - D.** Legalism is rampant in the church today.
 - E.** Denominationalism steeped in the traditions of men is the primary evidence of this fact.
 - F.** Due to the consequence of legalism and its resultant affect of a liberal approach to the spiritual realities of BD, the Church is in a "lukewarm" state primed to be vomited from the mouth of God. Rev.3:16
 - G.** Legalism can attache itself to any doctrine or principle of doctrine and it is incumbent upon the P-T to ensure this leaven does not creep in, in their own teaching.
 - H.** There are many misnomers attached as to that which constitutes legalism vs. operation grace and liberty:

1. Some think that legalism is the absence of engaging in the freedoms of Christ.
2. An example is there are those that say if one does not drink, they are a legalist.
3. This may or may not be true.
4. Drinking is a freedom of Christ and true freedom is a freedom to drink or not according to preference.
5. Those that do not drink with the notion or attitude that it is sinful or it makes them a better Christian than someone that does drink, they are legalists.
6. On the other side of the coin, there are those that might think that simply by drinking they cannot be considered legalists.
7. This is only true in the area of drinking, but in reality they can still be legalistic in other areas of life.
8. Another misnomer is that one that may abuse certain freedoms in Christ are candidates for those that do not engage in such abuse to play STA police.
9. The Bible makes very clear that the antidote for abuse of liberties and other STA activity is DD administered by God. Heb.12:5ff; Rev.3:19
10. Parallel to DD, the church members and its authorities only have the right to administer discipline according to Biblical guidelines, such as:
 - a. Corporate separation from those engaged in consistent, unrepentant, gross immoral STA conduct that is proven with 2 or more eyewitnesses and corroborating evidence. Ex., the incestuous Corinthian; 1Cor.5ff cp. Mat.18:15-17
 - b. Individual aloofness (not corporate separation) from those that create dissension or otherwise fail to adhere to basic marching orders of BD, such as not willing to work when able and meddlers. Rom.16:17 cp. 2The.3:6,10-11
 - c. The right of Pastoral, familial and other designated authority to incorporate discipline for those **only** under their authority in accordance with Biblical standards.
11. To step outside of the Biblically mandated requirements for disciplinary actions verbally or otherwise is to assume a legalistic approach to authority and promotes abuse of authority and potential controversy and dissension that we are to stay away from.
12. Another misnomer promoted today is that those that come from legalistic backgrounds predominately have the tendency to overreact to liberty and engage in the abuse of their freedoms in Christ.
 - a. This is simply speculation without Biblical corroboration.
 - b. Biblical observation denotes that those that came from legalistic backgrounds predominately carry the traits of their legalism with them. Ex. The Judaizers.

- c. Those that came from “liberal” backgrounds carry the traits of their liberalism with them. Ex. The Corinthians
 - d. The principle is that whatever “religious” baggage or STA trend(s) that one brings with them to doctrine, those are the inward enemies that have the predominate influence over believers seeking to make adjustments to sound teaching.
 - e. Abuse of liberties are predominately due to weakness of the flesh (Rom.6:15-22), **not** to the proclamation and teaching of the freedoms of Christ in reaction to a previous embracing of legalism.
 - f. Any abuse of grace is simply due to STA weakness and distortion of using grace as a license to sin.
 - g. The dominate tendency is therefore to distort God’s word via the weakness of the flesh.
- I. Legalism and the pulpit.
- 1. It is the P-T’s responsibility to ensure that legalism does not crop into the teaching to those allotted to their charge.
 - 2. Due to the influence of denominationalism and fundyism, legalism is a constant pressure placed upon the adjusted pastor to conform to their standards of self-righteousness.
 - 3. As noted, legalism can be attached to any principle of BD.
 - 4. To ensure that legalism does not creep in, the P-T must of necessity maintain a rigid approach to their teaching of BD:
 - a. Be aware of any legalistic tendencies they possess, as well as other STA trends soliciting them to water down or omit teaching that may go against them.
 - b. To teach verse by verse maintaining continuity of context.
 - c. To stick with teaching doctrines that directly apply to the text of teaching or necessary as a frame of reference for the teaching.
 - d. To avoid frustration and overreaction to the sheep’s failure to apply.
 - e. Areas of exception might include consistent miss-applications of decorum or gross failures of the church corporately, which would be obvious.
 - f. A P-T has authority **only** over their sheep and in their own church. 1Pet.5:3 cp. Joh.10:1-5
 - g. For a pastor to try and indoctrinate another pastor’s sheep or influence them counter to their right pastor’s teaching is a legalistic exercise of authority.
 - h. This includes pigeon holing visiting sheep except when other sheep or pastors do something to disrupt decorum or are actively and adversely impacting the congregation as to the teaching of the local church being visited. Ex. Paul and Peter at Antioch, Gal.2:11ff

- i. Another area that pastors must be extremely careful in to avoid legalism is in their exhortations and examples they may give with their teaching.
 - j. The P-T must avoid at all costs insinuating implicitly or explicitly that something is a sin or wrong when there is no Biblical documentation or factual observation of sin activity.
 - k. Just as he must make clear that which is clearly documented as sin or address known sin activity.
- J. Legalism and specific doctrines.**
- 1. Again, as noted, legalism can be attached to any doctrine or principle of doctrine.
 - 2. While all doctrines are presented with the letter of the law, the law itself has a spiritual intent and purpose.
 - 3. While one can read or teach the specifics of a doctrine correctly Biblically, the intent of the doctrine can be destroyed through a legalistic approach in its application.
 - 4. A few examples that are pertinent to our own local assembly are as follows:
 - a. Legalism and the Doctrine of Separation.
 - 1) Separation from those in our own local assembly has been clearly articulated in pt. V, H, 10, a and b above.
 - 2) Separation from –V can be condensed under one concept, “friendship”. Jam.4:4
 - 3) The intent of separation from –V is to refrain from embracing those outside of an adjusted local church in a realm of socializing, yoking together or fraternizing for the basis of fellowship or close companionship. *See the Doctrine of Separation*
 - 4) Legalism would be to say that we cannot have any type of relationship on a personal level at all with these types.
 - 5) Legalism insinuates that because we may extend our company to –V outside of the workplace or school periodically, we are in violation of separation.
 - 6) This may or may not be true.
 - 7) If the company is indeed designed to establish or maintain a friendship with –V, then it is true.
 - 8) However, if the company is for the opportunity to communicate BD to others or as a logistical witness (applying Dv. good towards your neighbor), then the application is indeed between the individual and God.

- 9) Separation is not designed to kill the witness of the life, but to instill lupe upon those that reject it.
 - 10) It is designed to protect the adjusted +V believer from evil influence. 1Cor.15:33
 - 11) Even Paul said it is OK to have dinner with even an unbeliever, for the purpose of witnessing. 1Cor.10:27
 - 12) Those that the Bible makes clear that we are to have no association with at all are other believers in immoral reversionism and/or have left sound BD. 1Cor.5:11; 2Joh.1:9-11
- b. Legalism and the Doctrine of Holidays.**
- 1) The NT makes clear that we are free from observing any special holidays in the Church Age dispensation. Rom.14:1ff; Gal.4:10ff
 - 2) The admonition of Gal.4:10ff is contextually based on the Galatians reverting back to observing Judaistic holidays after Paul had declared them free from having to do so.
 - 3) In other words, they succumbed to the legalism of the Judaizers that they must observe special times in order to maintain their relationship with God.
 - 4) The admonition regarding holidays is specific in the Rom.14:1ff.
 - 5) There is no imperative “not” to observe holidays.
 - 6) There is only the imperatives as to how we are to consider those that have not been taught this freedom principle vs. those that have and how we are to relate to one another under these circumstances.
 - 7) The “weak” believer contextually is the one minus BD in this regard and therefore implicitly the stronger has heard and adheres to this freedom.
 - 8) While the stronger believer enjoys his freedom, there still is not an injunction that they cannot observe a holiday, it is still left to the choice of the individual and is between them and God. Rom.14:5-6
 - 9) In fact, the stronger believer that holds in contempt a weaker believer that has not attained to the level of faith regarding this doctrine, rejects the admonition towards them and though stronger doctrinally, is weaker in application.
 - 10) Legalism would say that it is a sin to enjoy or observe a holiday, but the Bible says that without

faith to accompany our freedom, that is the true sin.
Rom.14:23

11) In short, the issue of holidays is moot individually and only regulated by the local church corporately.

c. Legalism and MPR.

- 1) There is no question as to the importance to assemble one's self for Bible class as highest priority in their MPR. Heb.10:25
- 2) There are yet those that infer that missing any Bible class for any reason other than an incapacitating illness or being on a deathbed, those individuals are out of God's will on that occasion.
- 3) Again, that may be true or not true.
- 4) The key to whether one is out of line or not is dependent upon whether their missing is due to "forsaking" Bible class in a pursuit of the cosmos, out of God's directive will (Jam.4:13-14) and whether their forsaking is "habitual".
- 5) To say that God will not or has not caused people to miss Bible class on occasion as a matter of testing is blindness to the reality of God working in believer's lives.
- 6) Unless habitual forsaking is evident in one's attendance, we should avoid judging.
- 7) Another twist to this principle is those that say that people that visit another place that has an adjusted local church and do not attend that church, they are somehow spiritually remiss.
- 8) As sheep, you have one shepherd, and your only obligation for the hearing of BD is under his authority in your own local church.
- 9) While it is nice and courteous to attend another adjusted local church while there geographically and fellowship in this regard may be desired, it is legalistic to even infer that you must attend and that decision is between you and God.

K. Legalism and liberalism is a constant danger in our thinking and applications of BD.

L. Legalism sets the stage for unjust evaluations and criticisms of others based on appearance and violates Christ's mandate on how we are to judge. Joh.7:24

M. We must all strive to maintain the proper balance of grace and knowledge.

N. While there are those that will have legalistic trends, those that have the balance of grace are to apply grace, even towards those legalistic.

O. However, in the ministry and as a pastoral authority, we must fight abuses on both sides of the coin on behalf of our own sheep.

- P.** And as the Jews and history has taught us, the leaven of legalism has the potential of producing maximum damage spiritually and experientially.
- Q.** It oppresses the very freedom for those adjusted to BD that God has so designed to impart.
- R.** True freedom is not lasciviousness or legalism, but is the exact application of grace and BD designed to overcome the destruction that our flesh consistently seeks to accomplish.
- S.** Grace and knowledge are the direct products of God, while legalism is the product of men.
- T.** An adjusted P-T seeks to protect the believer's freedoms in Christ, even at personal cost of derision by legalists.
- U.** Anti-legalism is not anti-grace anymore than anti-immorality is legalism.
- V.** Grace is the prescription for immorality (1Joh.1:9), while legalism is the venom for grace.
- W.** Legalism is Satan's counterfeit for righteousness.
- X.** The more legalism is introduced in our thinking and applications, the more we become blind to the real issues needing addressed in our Christian lives.
- Y.** *The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. Rom.14:22*
- Z.** Beware of the legalist that will condemn what you approve with a clear and good conscience.

*"You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"
Mat.23:24*