

Legalism

By Pastor James R. Hines

The foulest word in the vocabulary of many religionists today is that nasty noun, "legalism." The most scandalous doctrine afoot is "legalism." The harshest accusation that can come from some quarters is that of being labeled a "legalist." Humanists, liberals and neo-evangelicals gladly join forces and raise their voices in unison to chant intonations against the awful dangers and various ills of "legalism."

"Legalism": the very word conjures up pictures of Salem witches being burned at the stake and morbid puritans in black coats and stiff collars. It smacks of whipping posts and long sermons and rules against smiling. It is equated with pharisaism and old fashioned notions long since gone out of style.

Now who might be accused of being a legalist in these enlightened days? Who are these people that can be so mistaken in their doctrines? Why, it is the Baptists, the fundamentalists! It is those old-fashioned, Bible thumping preachers that still talk about sin and tell people what God says they should do and shouldn't do. It is us! We are the culprits who would rob Christians of their joy and force them to live under a yoke of bondage. We are the insidious teachers who would strip people of their freedom and place them under the restraining shackles of legalism. Outsiders visit fundamental Baptist services and hear preaching against gambling and drinking and movie-going and say, "My, such legalism." The neo-evangelical crowd looks at our Christian schools with rules and standards demanding that students dress decently, look decent and act decently and says, "My, aren't they legalistic." Broad-minded Christians hear us calling sin sin and labeling false doctrine as false doctrine and conclude that such attitudes stem from our narrow-minded legalism.

Now, pray tell, what really is a legalist? There is a false definition of legalism and a Biblical definition. In the thinking of most Christians, any presentation of Christianity which maintains standards, practices separation from the world and has a code of conduct is guilty of legalism. This notion is expressed in the liberal **Dictionary of Philosophy** which defines legalism as "The insistence on a strict literal or overt observance of certain rules of conduct, or the belief that there are rules which must be so obeyed." Christians who decry legalism invariably turn to the book of Galatians for a Scriptural indictment of legalism. Galatians is the book that speaks against legalism and warns believers not to let themselves be put under the law. But this "legalism" described and written against the Galatians is not the legalism spoken against today. The Biblical concept of legalism is far different.

Biblical "legalism" was the teaching advanced by some of the Jewish community which insisted that it was necessary to keep some of the law of Moses in order to gain salvation. To them salvation was gained by faith in Christ and observing the legal system of Moses. Webster properly defines legalism in this way as "the doctrine of salvation by good works." Paul wrote the Galatian epistle to counteract such legalism and make it plain that salvation was by faith alone, without the deeds of the law. "...a man is not justified by the works of the law" (2:16); "...if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain" (2:21); "...that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident..." (3:11); "...if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law" (3:21); "...the law as our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (3:24). Against this backdrop of maintaining that legal

observances have nothing to do with our salvation Paul exhorts, "*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage*" (5:1). Let us be clear. **The legalism which the apostle opposed was that thinking which made the observance of the law a condition of salvation.**

Certainly no Bible believing Baptist teaches that law-keeping is part of salvation. We are saved by faith alone. The works of the law do not and cannot either help us gain salvation or help us keep salvation. Salvation is all of grace; none of works. For anyone to accuse us of being legalists then is either to deliberately distort our position on salvation or else to abandon the Biblical concept of legalism and adopt the modern notion advanced by the moderns.

In spite of these facts, why is it that folk like to label us as legalists? There are two related reasons. First, the thinking of most people has been heavily influenced by the thinking of humanism. Humanism is diametrically opposed to all rules, standards, codes of conduct and moral absolutes of any kind. It believes that everyone should be free to do as he pleases. Those who disagree are labeled "Legalists." Secondly, most people want to use their liberty for an occasion to the flesh (5:13). They do not want anyone telling them that some of the things they enjoy may be wrong so they banish all such suggestions by labeling them "legalistic."

The real issue is this: should we teach do's and don'ts in Christian living? Should we preach that there are standards which ought to be maintained and deeds which should not be done? A large crowd would say "no - don't be negative - don't be legalistic." But what saith the Scriptures? Every page of Scripture lists things we are not to do. The first page of the Bible tells Adam "thou shalt not" and the last page of Scripture warns not to take away or add to the words of the Book. All of Scripture has rules of what to do and what not to do. Every page is replete with "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not." To say that rules of conduct are only found as part of the Mosaic law is certainly a misrepresentation of the truth.

The problem in Christianity today is the seeping scourge of humanism that has saturated the minds of Christians, Christian leaders, Christian authors and even preachers. Humanism maintains that the ultimate goal of man is to enjoy himself and develop his potential without the restriction of outmoded taboos and irrelevant rules. Humanism says that each one must decide for himself what is right and what is wrong; no one else should interfere. This is the thinking that causes Christians to throw off any restraints and label them as "legalism." In so doing they open the door to the inroads of all sorts of worldliness, questionable conduct and ungodly living. Christian standards have been discarded, Christian conduct has sunk to the level of the world and all is done to the theme of freedom from the law.

Christians are free from the specific ceremonies of the laws of Moses. Certainly Christians are free from the necessity of keeping the law in order to gain salvation. But that does not make Christians free to do as they will and live as they please. God has His directives for Christian living. He tells us what to do and what not to do. There are not 10 suggestions but rather 10 commandments. The Beatitudes promise blessing to those who do and do not do certain things. Every epistle in the New Testament is replete with injunctions, commandments, prohibitions and orders. The person who seeks to obey the Scriptures is a Biblicist, not a legalist.

Are we legalists? No, we are just people who believe the Bible and are simple enough to believe that if God says, "do it," we ought to do it, and if God says, "don't," we shouldn't. The accusation of legalism is a phony accusation trumped up to excuse those who prefer to ignore the directives of God's Word and live to satisfy themselves.