

# Law and Legalism

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Law is: "A general rule of action or conduct established or enforced by a sovereign authority; as, a law of Caesar; a law of God . . ." (Webster's Twentieth Century Dictionary, Unabridged). Webster says of legalism: "Close conformity to law." Law and legalism are not the same. "Law" (nomos) means ". . . anything established, anything received by usage, a custom, usage, law . . ." The New Testament uses the word of "a command, law; . . . of any law whatever" . . . "a law or rule producing a state approved of God." (Taken from Henry Thayer). It is a rule or principle established by authority.

The law of Christ is his word: the truth by which men are made free (John 8:32). It is that perfect law of liberty which will convert the soul (James 1:25; Psa. 19:7). It is the inspired scriptures that are sufficient to perfect a man unto all good works (2 Tim 3:16-17). The only way this law will make one perfect unto all good works is to obey it. How else could it be done?

## *Legalism*

"Legalism" is a term of many different opinions and views. The word is most often used by those of ultra liberal views against the need for obeying all the commandments of God. Some will deny this, but hundreds of quotations from books and magazines are available to prove it. These anti-legalists do not accept "law keeping" in connection to our salvation. Their writings and preaching bewails the idea of "keeping the letter of the law" to obtain the blessings of salvation promised by God upon obeying Him. The nature of law, the purpose of law, and the author of law makes no difference to those who shrink from the very idea of obeying divine law for the forgiveness of sins. Law keeping, they say, smacks of Phariseeism.

Those who hold to the idea that to be *free* we must resist and reject the shackles of "legalism" and reject that rigid code of law found in the New Testament to be free. They pervert everything Paul and other apostles said about law, obedience and salvation and replace it with "freedom," "love," and "tolerance of others." They are continually pointing to the prayer of Jesus for *unity* among his disciples and telling us that the rigid adherence to the New Testament will not accomplish unity. The "legalist" mind is without love and mercy and will never be in harmony with the mind of Christ. The unity for which Christ prayed in John 17 is blocked by the legalism preached and practiced by the divisive branch of churches of Christ, say the liberals among us. I know I am listed among those classified as "legalists" because I believe and preach that one must obey the word of God to be saved. That is enough to be classified as a "legalist."

I want to give what I believe is a fair definition of "legalism" from one who opposed obeying a code of rules for the remission of sins. Harold Key authored an article in *Mission Messenger* of February 1963, under the heading, "The Threat Of Legalism." "What, then, is legalism? Legalism is the attempt to reduce the will of God to a code--to a list of commandments---with the subsequent concentration upon the commandments rather than the God whose will the commandments attempt to express. Legalism is obviously an attempt to be related to God upon the basis of law. It is a legal rather than a personal relationship. It holds the position that

justification and eternal life are rewards of fully and correctly doing all that the law requires." (Volume 25, Number 2, page 17). He says further, "Legalism tears the very heart and soul out of the New Covenant." (ibid., page 20).

Robert Meyers edited a book entitled: **Voices Of Concern**, published by *Mission Messenger*, Saint Louis, Missouri, in 1966. In his Introduction he gave his motive for publishing several articles from men and women who left the church of the Lord. In part he said: "Thousands are restless and dissatisfied with the aridity of exclusivism and authoritarianism. Bright young minds are refusing to be put off with answers that have no more to commend them than the hoary beard of antiquity." (page 3). His goal is: "The book obviously means to urge no one way of religious expression, but to plead from such evidence as is here the need for **unity in diversity.**" (Page 5).

One of the writers in "Voices Of Concern," was J. P. Sanders. On pages 40 and 41 he says this of legalism: "We have seen that the priest seeks an exact system of faith which can be the basis for the sect, and he seeks it through the authority of the church or the authority of literal Biblical interpretations. This system is a code of requirements, or what is often called 'the plan of salvation.'"

"Legalism sees sin as a violation of the written code. The code may or may not have relevance to man's need; it may be simply arbitrary requirements revealed by God. Man's disobedience to these rules becomes an affront to God."

"Paul, under legalism, was wretched because he was honest enough with himself to know that he could not fulfill any law which God would give. The fault, he said, was not in the law but in his own fleshly weakness . . ."

"Some, for example, put great emphasis on baptism as 'essential to salvation.' They do not usually put the same emphasis on forgiving enemies as 'essential to salvation' ---though Jesus said more about this than about baptism . . ."

"Since legalism holds sin to be a legal violation, it holds salvation to be a legal payment. Man as a sinner must do certain things required of him for forgiveness . . ."

These statements bespeak one thing: Obedience to law is *unnecessary* to obtain the grace of God for remission of sins. It is even evil and the cause of division in the body of Christ, and a barrier against the grace of God. On the other hand, Love will answer the prayer of Christ for unity and make us acceptable to God without obedience to law. You read the works of the apostles of this rebellion against the law of Christ and see if this is not true. That is the crux of what I have read from the advocates of "freedom from legalism."

Let us understand the meaning of the words *legal*, *legalist* and *legalism*. *Legal* means that which is authorized or permitted by law. *Legalism* is that system which holds strict, literal adherence to law. *Legalist* is one who accepts the strict and literal obedience to law. If *legalism* is wrong and evil, all law ought to be rejected, and iniquity is a virtue. Whoever requires obedience to the law

of Christ promotes division and fosters callous hearts. That is the consequence of this plea for abandonment of the New Testament law as the revelation from God to save the obedient believer in Jesus Christ.

*If No Law, No Sin*

If there is no law, there is no sin. Sin is the transgression of the law. "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4). ". . . for where no law is, there is no transgression" (Rom. 4:15). ". . . for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). ". . . but sin is not imputed when there is no law" (Rom. 5:13). "But if ye have respect to persons, ye *commit* sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors. For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:9-10).

"O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23).

Law defines sin. "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet" (Rom. 7:7).

God is the great Law Giver. He gave a commandment to the first man whom He had created: "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:15-17).

Did God intend for Adam to be a "legalist" and strictly interpret and obey that commandment? The question is answered by the consequences that fell upon Adam and Eve when they transgressed that law. They were driven from the garden and "died" according to the promise of God for disobedience to His command. From the dawn of creation God intended for mankind to know and understand His attitude toward His law and disobedience to it. Every law and dispensation since Adam has required the same attitude of God toward them. Disobedience to the command of God brought death to the first man and woman. They were driven from the presence of God and were forbidden to return.

The law of Moses was given by God to the nation of Israel. The ten commandments were written upon two tables of stone and delivered by Moses to Israel to obey throughout their generations. Disobedience to these laws brought punishment and death. Obedience to these laws brought blessings from God. One who says it was not important to obey the laws of God under Moses is ignorant of the Old Testament. God severely punished those of His own people who transgressed His laws to them. Twenty three thousand died in one day for the sin of fornication (1 Cor. 10:8). Do not try to tell us that God does not rule by law; He does!

Isaiah spoke of the new law to begin in Jerusalem: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he

will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:2-3). The law was to go forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. That is the law of the last days, the present dispensation that shall continue until the Lord comes again.

Some people do not like rules to regulate their lives. They want "freedom" to do as they please. They usually like to have laws and rules to regulate others who oppose them, especially those who are in authority. The *Women Liberation Movement* is an attempt to "free" women, so they say. The name of this organization indicates that they are prisoners in some sense and want to be liberated. Liberated from what? If you look at their efforts and goals you will see that it is *womanhood*. They want to live like a man, dress like a man, rule over a man, and do all the things that men do. But they want to be regarded and personally treated like a woman. These who want to be "free" from the rigid shackles of the law of the New Testament, want to be regarded as children of God with all the blessing that accompany that relationship, but they despise the law of the New Testament. They do not want to obey the word of Christ, by which he said we show our love. "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). There is no true freedom without law. Law protects against anarchy as well as directs in righteousness.

To know God and be in Him, we must keep His commandments. "And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him" (1 John 2:3-5). By keeping the commandments of God we show our love for Him. "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous" (1 John 5:2-3).

I doubt that anyone who professes to be a Christian would deny the plain statements in these verses. However, it is another matter to believe and obey these statements from the heart. Some will say they love God while they do as they please. Love demands complete obedience to the word of God, and all who do not obey Him do not love Him, according to the statements of inspiration just read in this article.

#### *Works of Faith and Works of Merit.*

By faith Abraham obeyed God and it was accounted unto him for righteousness (Heb. 11:8). It was not by the works of the law to merit justification (Rom. 3). "For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scriptures? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:2-3). But his faith *obeyed* the word of God and he was justified by *works of obedience of faith* (James 2).

The truth is that the obedience to any part of the law of God does not merit salvation to any degree. What we do is not done to justify ourselves to any degree. But if we do not obey God we can not receive what He has promised upon the conditions of His commands. God blessed us freely with the rain and sunshine. We could never do any work to earn the rain and sunshine. But we can never benefit from the rain and sunshine unless we avail ourselves of His blessing by

receiving these gifts of blessings in the manner He has provided them. If I should lay in the darkness of my bedroom I would never receive the blessings of rain and sunshine because He has put them where they operate by His natural laws.

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