

California Letter

The *isms* of Legalism

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It wasn't until I was in my twenties that I heard the term *legalism* used and that legalism is wrong for many reasons. Prior to that time I had heard many a sermon "preached" extolling the virtues of what essentially constitutes legalism. I was raised being taught that the new testament is the 27 books of the Bible – Matthew through Revelation – and they were written to comprise a written code for the people of God from Pentecost on, much as the Law of Moses was a written code for the people of Israel. I thought that grace was extended to man on the basis of his meticulous law-keeping. If we wanted to be saved, we had better work, which included working a lot and working right. It seemed that the most important works had some connection with our assemblies, especially the Sunday morning assemblies.

It was a number of years before I fully realized that the letter to the Galatians was written primarily to expose legalism. The apostle Paul told the Galatians that legalism is a *yoke of bondage* that not only will profit nothing, but it causes us to fall from grace.

When I began to ask questions relative to legalism, I got answers like, "Don't you think you should be obedient to the commandments of God?" Being obedient to one's understanding of the commandments of God is not legalism. Being obedient to one's understanding of the commandments of God with the idea that correct implementation of his commandments will earn or merit a person justification and an eternal home in heaven is legalism. It is an effort on the part of man to relate to God upon the basis of a legal code rather than through faith.

Legalism is insidious. It causes man to reverse his priorities and values while at the same time it has him thinking he is growing in grace and righteousness. It is much as the scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus accused of emphasizing the external, less-important things and neglecting the internal more important matters (Matt. 23).

Legalism is a philosophy that has given birth to a number of other *isms* that help perpetuate and reinforce the concept. They are *isms* that have negative connotations and we like to accuse other parties in the Christian religion of being guilty of practicing the *isms*, but we have defined them and apply them so as to support our own prejudices and exclude our traditional practices. An objective and sincere examination of these *isms* and a comparison of them to our practices in the Churches of Christ will show that we have been throwing rocks while living in glass houses, so to speak. Let's notice a few. Creedism.

There are about two dozen factions in the non-instrumental Churches of Christ. Each one basically thinks it constitutes the one faithful, loyal and true body of Christ. The others are all in error one way or another. To be in the fellowship of each of these factions is not merely a matter of faith and expressing that faith in repentance, confession, and baptism,

followed by a sincere manifestation to be obedient to God in response to His love, but fellowship in each faction is further conditioned upon following the legalistic creed of the faction.

Brethren are encouraged to read their Bibles, and are handed the line that the sacred scriptures require no interpretation. But when they come up with an interpretation that is different from that of the party's, it is quickly pointed out that theirs is a wrong interpretation and *ours* is what the word of God says.

Each faction of the Churches of Christ insists that we can all understand the Bible alike, but what they mean is that we should all subscribe to their unwritten creed. If we don't, we can't be a part of their faction and we won't go to heaven.

Every faction of the Churches of Christ overlooks a great man difference within its own ranks, but it insists upon unanimity of opinion on the issues that they have exalted to form their unwritten creed which in turn gives them their factional status. Almost every division in the Churches of Christ has occurred when some men placed their interpretation or interpretations above brotherhood and sought to bind it upon others as the will of God and a condition or conditions of fellowship. This is creedism and as one of our spiritual forefathers pointed out, unwritten creeds are more dangerous than written ones.

Denominationalism

Every person on the face of this earth who has been motivated by faith in Jesus as the Son of God and has been "born again" is a member of the body of Christ and my brother or sister in Christ. No faction of the Churches of Christ or all of the Churches of Christ constitute the church of God in its fulness.

When most people associated or identified with the Church of Christ use the term *Church of Christ*, they don't use it to include all of God's children. They use it to refer to an exclusive segment of believers who agree with the factional creed relative to the issues that identify the faction.

They have seized upon a term to designate their church and use it for all intents and purposes to the exclusion of all other terms used by the Holy Spirit. A while back I attended an assembly of a nearby Church of Christ where I don't normally attend. A person was there who recognized me from my profession as an educator and as he greeted me he said, "Jim, I didn't realize you were Church of Christ." These kind of statements reveal our denominationalism.

To *denominate* simply means to *name*. We wear a specific name, and that is denominationalism in the truest meaning of the term. In turn, denominationalism fits right in with legalism because we stress that wearing the right name is a part of the "package" that merits us favor with God and helps to insure us of a home in heaven. We use a scriptural name unscripturally, but worse than that, it does not cover for our party spirit and the resultant divisions.

Isolationism

It is interesting to note that the letter which was written to the Galatians to expose legalism tells us that even an apostle was affected by the pressure of those imbued with the philosophy and as a result he resorted to hypocritical isolationism. The apostle Peter had been associating with some Gentiles who had become Christians until some Judaizers came on the scene. The Judaizers were Jews who said that Christians also had to obey the Law of Moses because man is “justified by works of the law.” They separated themselves from the Gentile Christians unless they would conform. The apostle Paul “withstood” Peter “to his face” and reminded him that we are not saved by obedience to law, but “by faith in Jesus Christ.”

The Churches of Christ do the same thing today as did those Judaizers. They regard their interpretations of certain teachings of the new covenant scriptures as the law of Christ and if you do not conform they withdraw from you in one form or another. At the most, they refer to you as one of the “brothers-in-error.” According to what the apostle Paul told the Galatians, those who do such withdrawing are guilty of an even greater error than those not “fit” to be a part of their fellowship.

The party leaders work at keeping the rank-and-file from associating with and communicating with those in the other parties of the Churches of Christ. They discouraged attendance at any of their assemblies or being involved in any forums or studies that cut across party lines. In the past, I have seen brethren go “by night” to listen to Carl Ketcherside because they feared the party leaders. Quite a few years back I began attending the Hartford, Illinois forums which were the forerunner of the present-day Restoration Forum. One time an older brother in “my” party told me, “You shouldn’t go. You’ll get to liking those people and it will create problems for you.” It surely did! Not only with brethren who attended the forums whom I found to be as concerned, sincere, and spiritual as any Christians I knew, but with brethren of “my own” party who couldn’t tolerate me “crawling over the wall” to see what brethren were like. Association with “brethren-in-error” other than to “shoot at them” from the pulpit or party paper, or to meet them in combat (debate) meant you endorsed their “error.”

Legalism encourages isolationism. Legalists don’t want us to know that our so-called “brethren-in-error” love God as much as we do and that they generally have as much respect for the authority of God’s written word as we do. The job of the brotherhood mafia is easier if they keep us isolated.

Judgmentalism.

Jesus said, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt. 7:1). The apostle Paul told the Romans, “Who are you to judge another’s servant? (Rom. 14:4). Further, he told them “But why do you judge your brother? (Romans 14:10). The same apostle told the Corinthians, “Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes” (1 Cor. 4:5). The apostle James said, “For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy” (James 2:13).

Obviously no thinking person would say that any of the above passages were meant to keep Christians from being discerning person and at times exercising judgment. But the Churches of Christ have violated the spirit of these passages. These passages were meant to prevent the very thing we do. We pronounce judgment upon our brethren because they disagree with us. Many times negative judgment stems from a disagreement about something of which the Bible is silent.

Who are we to say that we know it all as it is to be known? Are we the official and perfect interpreters of the sacred scriptures? Who has declared our hermeneutic the correct one? Are our so-called “erring” brethren to put their faith in us or to study the Bible themselves and determine what is, in their opinion, true and false?

How merciless we can get in our judgment of our “bretheren-in-error” is epitomized by our use of 2 Corinthians 6:14-17). When I was growing up on the Church of Christ, I used to hear this passage quoted frequently to maintain the divisions between our party and those who differed with us on issues relating to the setting of the Lord’s Table (use of cups) and teaching (the Sunday School). We classed them as unbelievers because that’s who the verses are warning about. We wouldn’t even call them brethren. We called them by *Mister*. How shameful and how judgmental! Legalism rationalizes such a crass attitude.

Pharisaism

The Pharisees were dedicated legalists. They thought they could earn their way to heaven by complying with meticulous rules and regulations based upon their interpretation of a law, the Law of Moses. We have understood the Law of Christ to be a similar law and to think we can earn our way to heaven by strict adherence to our interpretations. Jesus said that the Pharisees made religion a burden. We have done the same when our religion would be a joy and help in our lives. The religion of the Pharisees tended to build false pride in their hearts because of their apparent meticulous observance of the the law. We pride ourselves upon our loyalty to the unwritten word. Each segment of the Church of Christ claims to be the only ones who respect the authority of God’s written word and abide by its teachings. The emphasis of the Pharisees was upon externals. So is our, particularly our methods of corporate worship. The Pharisees told others to either conform to our rules and regulations or we will have nothing to do with you. We do the same to our brethren in Christ. The Pharisees were more interested in proselyting people to their sect than they were in leading them to worship God. We are more interested in converting people to our church and our way of corporate worship than we are in converting them to Jesus Christ. The Pharisees rationalized the evasion of weightier matters of the law and made it of no effect. We do the same with plain teachings of the new covenant scriptures, especially in regard to brotherhood and love. And on and on!

Sectarianism

Sectarianism is a work of the flesh, yet we have become so twisted in our thinking and practice we have made the attitude that defines it a virtue. A sectarian is a person who forces you to believe something other than the conditions of salvation to be in his or her fellowship. A sectarian lays another foundation other than Jesus Christ. A sectarian divides God’s children by saying that if you are not right with me you are not right with

God. A sectarian substitutes assent to knowledge of propositions for faith in Jesus Christ. A sectarian confuses his party with the Church of Christ in toto. This article might just as well have been entitled "The *isms* of Sectarianism" with legalism being a subtitle because the two go hand-in-hand. They thrive on each other and are so contrary to walking in the Spirit.

There was a song popular in the 1960's which went, "I am a rock, I am an island... and a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries." Until we see legalism and its concomitants for what they are, we will continue to be like a rock and an island. Our divisions will cause us no real pain and we will never cry because of our separation from brethren. Instead we will take pride in what we mistakenly see as maintaining purity for ourselves by separating from brethren who are no more in error than we are. Until we truly agonize over our shameful situation and truly crucify self to serve others, we will continue to quench the Spirit of God in our lives and we won't know the joy of God's children being of "one heart and one soul" upon this earth. (P.O. Box 811, Corcoran, CA 93212)