

Seeing Black and White

(Guest Editorial)

(The writer of this letter to me in 1998 approves my printing it but he wishes to receive no credit for it. It is written in response to a letter he had received. It may add clarity to some of my recent essays. – Cecil Hook)

I once read a quote that made me stop and think about legalism and just what it is. It said: “Both read the Bible day and night, but he reads black where I read white.”

I attended some church services of other congregations in my small town just to see what is was they did differently. I knew many of the people in these various congregations personally. They were people who love God and are convinced they are doing exactly what they should to please Him. When comparing their beliefs to those my own congregation espoused, they were reading black where I was reading white. I had valid arguments based on scripture for every difference I saw. I soon found out that they could argue just as convincingly on their side of every difference also using scripture to back themselves up. It was a matter of interpretation in every case. I came to the conclusion that, while the basics of salvation are absolute and very plainly spelled out, there are many gray areas that we want desperately to make into black or white. The problem is that I sometimes read black while someone else reads white. I believe that the Holy Spirit has in the last few years allowed me to see these areas as they really are — gray.

To answer your question, I believe that legalists not only want to, but need to, make black and white lists — lists by which they can justify themselves or condemn others.

I had grown up in a congregation where the list was well defined. I had learned every response for every argument against any item in the list. When I saw other people who were Christian people in every sense of the word doing things differently and defending their actions with scripture, I began to question my own list. I decided that, if I was going to live by such a list, I had better be sure that it was 100% right, because if it wasn't, then I would be totally at the mercy of God's grace for my misinterpretations. And if I was going to rely on God's grace to cover my misinterpretations of the scriptures, then I had to allow God's grace to cover the misinterpretations of others whose lists were different from mine. It was at this point that I realized that this was precisely what Christ had liberated me from — all these lists. I am saved, not by keeping a list, but by God's free gift of grace.

When I say that I am fighting legalism, what I am really doing is trying to minimize the importance that some people put on these lists. When Jesus was asked what the most

important commandment was, He said that it was to love God with all your heart. He said that the second most important was to love everyone else as much as you love yourself. If we follow these two commandments then all of the others will fall neatly into place.

Over the last few years the attitude in my congregation has become much less legalistic, not necessarily because of my efforts, but because the Holy Spirit has led others to begin to see the same things I have. It no longer matters if people say “Amen” or clap after a musical special. It did at one time. It no longer matters if a woman speaks an introduction to a song before she sings it. It did at one time. People feel free to raise their hands to the Lord during a song of praise now. It was once frowned upon. These are items on lists made by people, not God.

This answer may have been a bit of overkill, but I’m afraid that the freedom that Christ died to give His people is only partially being realized. You may disagree with me on every point I have made but, in my opinion, that would affect neither your salvation nor mine. The legalist would never say such a thing. []

(Cecil Hook; April 2007, reprinted from November 1998)

NOTE: Due to my loss of energy and the distractions of the various medical tests that I am undergoing to determine and remedy the cause, I intend to reproduce some essays of the past which you may find even more enlightening in a second reading as they add to more recent thoughts I have presented. If they prove to be too repetitious for you, just delete them and please anticipate newer ones. Thank you.