

Critique

Deepening Discipleship  Developing Discernment

Legalism in a Decaying Culture

FOURTH IN A SERIES ON BEING IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF IT.

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Resources
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Legalism in a Decaying Culture

A few years ago a friend sent me a paper he had written, with a note expressing the hope we would distribute it as part of Ransom's ministry. He is a committed believer, a pastor deeply concerned with nurturing godliness in Christian families. The paper opened with a study of the biblical texts which address the importance of educating children in the things of God; it concluded with a detailed description of the specific type of Christian school every parent had a biblical obligation to send their children to—and if such a school did not exist in their community, they had a biblical obligation to help establish one. He issued warnings of what would transpire if parents failed to rise to the challenge, and the sort of righteousness that could be expected in the next generation if their education was fully Christian. The paper contained a host of good ideas (usually with Bible references attached), and was written with a passion which swept the reader from basic principles (which were impossible to disagree with) to practice (which was hard to disagree with). Yet, by the time I reached the final page, I was not only uninterested in distributing it, I thought it sadly dishonoring to Christ. Like so many resources and teachings making the rounds in evangelical circles, my friend's paper was a case study in legalism.

Calling something "legalistic," however, does not necessarily make it so. Sometimes the term is thrown around rather loosely among Christians (particularly among evangelicals), used simply as a label to dismiss some teaching we happen to dislike. What exactly is legalism? Why is it so appealing? What danger does it pose? And what are its defining characteristics so we can learn to identify it? Those are questions

a discerning Christian should reflect on, and thankfully, the Scriptures address the error of legalism in such a way as to provide some answers.

Legalism Defined

"In the New Testament we meet both Pharisaic and Judaizing legalism," J. I. Packer writes. "Jesus attacked the Pharisees; Paul the Judaizers."

The first century Pharisees were a minority party in Jewish religion, culture, and politics, but they apparently wielded

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considerable influence—enough influence, at any rate, to warrant some of the most severe criticism voiced by Christ. Known as "the separate ones," they believed the Babylonian exile had been caused by Israel's failure to obey the Torah, and so stressed careful fulfillment of every aspect of God's word. Not only was Israel as a whole to obey the law, each individual was responsible to fulfill the law's commands. The Pharisees studied the law carefully in order to apply it to changing cultural circumstances, and were convinced their careful study had unveiled practices that were authoritative for all.

The "Judaizers," on the other hand, were teachers in early Christian circles who sought to make obedience to the Mosaic law a requirement for salvation. They taught that Gentile converts to Christianity must be circumcised, and must follow

Jewish ceremonial law to find favor with God. The first New Testament mention of Judaizers dates to around A.D. 49, when Luke records that "men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1).

The legalism of the Pharisees was obviously different from that of the Judaizers in significant ways, but at the most basic level their error was identical. Both groups confused works and grace, teaching that we must do certain things in order to merit the grace of God. And that brings us to a definition of the term: Legalism is anything which suggests we can earn salvation, achieve or add to our own righteousness, or by accomplishing something gain increased favor with God.

According to the Scriptures there is nothing we can do which will merit God's favor; we are all unworthy sinners, and undeserving of grace. Whatever we do should be done to God's glory, as service to him alone, and whatever we receive should be accepted gratefully, as from grace alone. "In Galatians," J. I. Packer writes, the apostle

Paul condemns the Judaizers' 'Christ-plus' message as obscuring and indeed denying the all-sufficiency of grace revealed in Jesus (Galatians 3:1-3; 4:21; 5:2-6). In Colossians, he conducts a similar polemic against a similar 'Christ-plus' formula for 'fullness' (i.e., spiritual completion: Colossians 2:8-23). Any 'plus' that requires us to take action in order to add to what Christ has given us is a reversion to legalism and, in truth, an insult to Christ.

The paper by my friend described a wonderful school, but that does not mean that parents who choose another option for the education of their children are necessarily being unfaithful. Nor does the mere possibility of such a school mean that every parent's calling necessarily includes helping to begin one. And most basic of all, though enrolling one's children in such a school may be a prudent choice, it does not guarantee they will grow in righteousness.

"Often," Louis Tarsitano writes in an article on Christian "self-help" books,

we are told by famous evangelical pastors to embrace a works righteousness that would make a Roman Catholic parochial school teacher of the 1950s blush. What goes unexplained is why God should owe us anything at all for doing the "good works" we were created to do, let alone the "good works" we have defined and chosen for ourselves. It is not, after all, what we do that saves us, but what Jesus Christ has done for us, to the glory of his Father.

Discernment is required, of course, because teachings do not arrive with large banners heralding the fact that THIS IS LEGALISM. Disclaimers might even be issued. That is what Edward Gross does in his book *Will My Children Go To Heaven?*, for example, as he teaches that parents, through their obedience (particularly in child rearing), can guarantee their children's conversion. "I will show from Scripture," he writes, "that parents can be sure that their children will be saved and go to heaven." Throughout the book Gross repeats that salvation is a matter of grace, not works, but his entire argument is precisely the opposite, namely, that if parents fulfill the responsibilities he lists in his book, their children's righteousness is certain. He even includes a chapter addressed to parents whose grown children are unbelievers, in order to help them see where they failed, and how their obedience now may be used of God to bring their children to faith. His repeated disclaimers about salvation by grace may appear to be reassuring at first glance, but if his message was truly one of grace, they would be unnecessary. The faithfulness of Christian parents is important, but it cannot earn or guarantee the salvation of either parents or children. We are called to obedience as the children of God, but our works do not merit favor

with God—all we receive is given us by grace. (For a book which maintains a proper biblical balance on this topic, I would recommend Susan Hunt's *Heir's of the Covenant: Leaving a Legacy of Faith for the Next Generation*.)

The Appeal of Legalism

On the most basic level, legalism is appealing today for the same reason it has always been appealing: as fallen human beings we feel we deserve whatever grace comes our way. We may be sinners, but surely our good works as Christians produce a net increase in righteousness. If you think about it, legalism is appealing because it appeals to our pride. That being the case, we should expect that the need to be discerning about it will remain as long as pride remains a problem—which will be until Christ consummates his kingdom.

Though as Christians we claim to believe that all is by grace, we develop formulas, "steps of action," and techniques on how to do it "God's way."

Though legalism has always been appealing to fallen people, we live in an age which is particularly prone to it, especially where modernity is strongest. At the heart of the modern mindset is the conviction that problems can be solved rationally, and the advance of technology has been so impressive that it is tempting to believe techniques can be found for every sphere of life. "Americans are attracted by the idea of 'self-help,'" Tarsitano notes, "even when we are dealing with God. We like to think we can do well by doing good, which is a concept that would come as a surprise to" those who were martyred for their faith. And so, though as Christians we claim to believe that all is by grace, we develop formulas, "steps of action," and techniques on how to do it "God's way." From how to parent, how to grow a church, or how to survive Y2K, we have it covered. We may prefer to call them "teachings" rather than "techniques," of course, but that is just a facade. As Tarsitano points out, the "how-to" books and seminars of the Christian community are simply "the religious equivalent of the 'self-help' books sold in competing secular establishments."

It is not that these teachings never contain good ideas, for they do. And often the

techniques seem to work. After all, if they contained only non-truth and if the techniques consistently backfired, they would fade away pretty quickly. The problem is not that legalistic systems never contain truth, but rather that legalism undercuts grace—and is therefore opposed to the gospel. Legalism gives the appearance of unpacking the hidden things of God, but in the end it reduces the richness of the walk of faith to technique, and distorts grace with human effort. It produces what the late theologian Klaus Bockmuehl called "practical atheism." We still believe in God, of course, but with so many things figured out, he is not really needed very much, except in the background. If we follow the techniques, the outcome is guaranteed—after all, God's promises are certain. The walk of faith turns out to require far less faith than we had imagined. And when fellow believers face failure, we are in a position to diagnose where they went wrong, and can bless them with steps of action to reverse at least some of the difficulties their failure has wrought.

One further point: living in a decaying culture makes legalism even more attractive to those who would take the Scriptures seriously. In a relativistic and secular society, people increasingly discount God's law as judgmental and implausible, by and large irrelevant for everyday life. Such societal decay occurs slowly and incrementally, but eventually a reaction is provoked in those who cherish holiness. Believers who find themselves living in an increasingly alien culture—like exiles in Babylon—awaken to discover themselves, in Walter Brueggemann's words, "in a context where their most treasured and trusted symbols of faith [are] mocked, trivialized, or dismissed." It is hard not to react under such circumstances, especially when our fellow Christians start acting like they believe in Law Lite. In contrast to this flaccid antinomianism (anti-law), both in the church and outside it, legalism feels like a bracing corrective, rigorous yet simple.

For all its appeal, however, legalism remains a deadly error. "Legalism is a distortion of obedience that can never produce truly good works," J. I. Packer writes.

Its first fault is that it skews motive and purpose, seeing good works as essentially ways to earn more of God's favor than one has at the moment. Its second fault is arrogance. Belief that one's labor earns

God's favor begets contempt for those who do not labor in the same way. Its third fault is lovelessness in that its self-advancing purpose squeezes humble kindness and creative compassion out of the heart.

Identifying Marks of Legalism

Discerning Christians need to be able to recognize legalism. For that we can turn to the Gospels, because in his interactions with the Pharisees, Jesus distinguished at least four defining marks or characteristics of legalism by which it can be identified.

1. Legalism tends to cause people to major on minors.

In Matthew 23:23 Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for missing the weightier matters of God's law because they had become consumed with details that, though legitimate, were in fact far less significant. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!" Jesus said, "You give a 10th of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former." They had majored on things they could accomplish and could measure, while ignoring virtues essential to covenant community and love. It is not that the Pharisees necessarily thought justice, mercy, and faithfulness of little importance, rather, they were so content with their own version of obedience that they were blind to their own shortcomings. "We have a tendency to exalt to the supreme level of godliness whatever virtues we possess and downplay our vices as insignificant points," R. C. Sproul says. "I may view my refraining from dancing as a great spiritual strength while considering my covetousness a minor matter."

Jesus did not tell the Pharisees that the less weighty details they were emphasizing were unimportant or untrue; instead, he confronted them because their *imbalance* was so deadly. Francis Schaeffer, in his booklet *The New Super-Spirituality*, explains how the imbalanced teaching of the truth can produce heresy—his explanation is worth quoting at length:

It is interesting to see how heresies function and how the Devil wins out. Let us say the complete body of Christian teaching consists of points 1-100. Now, then, we must realize that this Christian teach-

ing is not just dogmatic, but meets the needs of man as God has made him and as man now is since the Fall. So, in order for the whole man to find fulfillment, he must have teaching from points 1-100. If you study church history, I think you will find that heresies arise like this: the church begins to fail to preach, or preaches very weakly, say, points 40-50.

Let us say, therefore, that points 40-50 are unstressed. Two things follow. First, the situation is unbiblical. True Christianity is a balanced whole. Second, Satan takes points 40-50 out of the total Christian framework and encourages someone to overemphasize them. And this becomes heresy. In other words, points 40-50, instead of being kept in line and in relationship to the rest of Christian doctrine, are moved out and away from the whole system. Being out of place, they somehow become inverted or reversed. But why does Satan win? He wins because

Imbalance in teaching must be countered with the full counsel of God, not with a counter-imbalanced teaching, which is what legalism does.

there is a longing, a need in the human heart and mind; points 40-50 are needed because the whole of Christian teaching is needed, not only to give one the right Christian system, but to meet the needs of total man as he is in the fallen world. Satan wins because when people recognize the lack of points 40-50 in their church and suddenly see someone stressing them, they go to that group not realizing that the points are being overstressed, and they are caught in a net.

One group is stressing points 40-50, but in an overemphasized way, out of relationship to the whole of Christian doctrine. Another group, on the other hand, sees this overemphasis on points 40-50 as a heresy, and so they retreat in the opposite direction. They preach points 40-50 even less than they did before in order to be safe, in order to be seen clearly as not being a part of a heresy or wrong teaching. Satan fishes equally on both sides, and he wins on both sides.

In other words, legalism develops out of an honest desire on the part of Christians to be faithful to every detail of God's

word. Their mistake is not that they have impure motives nor are they necessarily teaching blatant falsehoods (especially at first). Their mistake is that in their zeal to provide correction to a weakness they perceive in the church, they major in the minors which address the weakness, thus meeting an imbalance with a further imbalance. And this imbalance easily leads to even greater error. Imbalance in teaching must be countered with the full counsel of God, not with a counter-imbalanced teaching—which is what legalism does. One characteristic or defining mark of legalism, then, is a tendency to emphasize details, and to major in minors.

When the Scriptures are taught in a balanced way, on the other hand, our vision is broadened, not narrowed. We are confronted with God's undeserved grace, and invited, as the beloved of God, to wonder at and enjoy the presence and glory of the infinite personal God, to be faithful to Christ as Lord across all of life and culture.

2. Legalism causes people to promote themselves as righteous.

This is what Jesus confronted the Pharisees about in Luke 20:45-47; Matthew 6:1-8; and 23:2-7. And if you think about it for a moment, it is relatively easy to see why this sort of thing occurs with legalism. Legalism, because it tends to reduce righteousness to systems, techniques, steps of action, or formulas that can be followed, immediately divides the people of God into those who are following the program, and those who are not. Once such a system is promulgated, the division is irrevocable, no matter how much the teacher professes otherwise. Even those wanting simply to "share" what they have learned will tend to speak and act in a we/they manner. They have adopted a technique which brings them favor with God—favor you will not have unless you too, buy into the program. Though they may not recognize it, they will tend, in the words of Jesus to "parade their righteousness before men," simply because the system demands it. They are following the system, you are not, and try as they might, there is no way around that fact. This is why Dr. Packer warns that legalism produces "arrogance," a "contempt for those who do not labor in the same way," and a lack of love which "squeezes humble kindness and creative

compassion out of the heart.”

It should be noted that those caught in the spell of legalism rarely see their lovelessness, and may, in fact, imagine that their eagerness to share the “steps of action” which identify “God’s way” to be proof of their compassion. Still, ideas have consequences, and anything which suggests we can achieve righteousness by our efforts will bear bitter fruit. By contrast, the good news of Christianity is a story of grace. It is the righteousness of Christ which is imputed to us, and there is nothing we can possibly add to it. Through Christ, we are brought into a covenantal relationship with our heavenly Father, who makes us part of the community of his people. Teaching the gospel of grace nurtures mercy and humility, an ever-deepening realization not of *your* lack of obedience, but of my *own*, and an ever-increasing conviction that it is *all* of grace and *not* of myself.

Think, for example, about one of the formulas for success our culture assumes to be true:

education + hard work = prosperity

Now, as a general principle, of course, there is truth in that. Even in a fallen world, the skilled person who is disciplined and energetic will tend, on average, to gain at least sufficient income, if not a fair degree of wealth. From a Christian perspective, however, this formula leaves much to be desired. For one thing, it simply is not always true. There are, no doubt, numerous hard working and skilled farmers in the world today who are watching their children starve because of famine, war, or, in the case of Christians in the Sudan, the horrors of persecution. What is more, the formula is devoid of grace; it leaves God out of the picture. I must be faithful to work hard, seeking to gain and use all the knowledge and skill I can, not because these things bring prosperity, but in order to bring glory to God. As I do so, I acknowledge I am an unworthy servant, whose best efforts are still shot through with sinfulness. The wonder of it is that God is gracious, and because he has adopted me into his family, I can pursue my work as unto him, seeking his pleasure alone. And when any income or measure of prosperity comes my way, I can bow before

him in thanks, being grateful that I have not been treated as I deserve, but with grace. From a Christian perspective, then, the left side of the formula is what I give to God, for his glory, expecting nothing in return. The right side of the formula, to the extent it is granted, is received as a gift. Thus, from a Christian perspective, we need to rewrite the formula, dividing it into two:

education + hard work = to God’s glory
prosperity = received as a gift by grace

“Far from enriching our relationship with God, legalism puts that relationship in jeopardy and, by stopping us focusing on Christ, it starves our souls while feeding our pride.”

Now, think of all the techniques and formulas being promulgated within the Christian community, and apply the same reasoning. The same principles apply, whether the formula involves child-rearing, growing a church, strengthening a marriage, earning an income, or anything else. The perspective of the Scriptures is a covenant of grace.

3. Legalism tends to cause believers to adhere to the letter of the law while missing its spirit.

Christ makes this point when he addressed the Pharisees in Matthew 15:3-9 and 23:16-24. In their desire to be righteous before God, the Pharisees had increasingly produced a system which they were able, with hard work, to follow. In an effort to unpack and apply the law, they had reduced God’s word to a set of requirements, missing the fact that God had given the law primarily to reveal his glorious holiness and our desperate need of his righteousness. They had also reduced life and reality to a manageable set of duties and responsibilities, missing the wonderful richness of life in the world God had created.

Whenever I think of adhering to the letter while missing the spirit of a thing, I remember the family vacation we took when our oldest daughter was a senior in high school. A friend had suggested a wonderful route through southern Minnesota so we could camp at a series of State Parks while learning something of the history of the area. We visited Pipestone, a site long

held as sacred by Native Americans, and Bishop Whipple’s wonderful stone church where he ministered so faithfully at the time of the Sioux Indian Uprising. However, when we broke the good news of our plans to our three children, they responded with their usual grace. Our son said the camping was OK, but it was summer and he wouldn’t learn anything. Our youngest daughter said the learning was OK, but camping was too much work. And our oldest daughter reminded me that I had been encouraging her to earn money for college,

but was now asking her to take an entire week off to sit in the backseat of a car between two brats. I thanked them for sharing, and said we were going. It was actually a great time, and in our family photo album

there are a couple of pages of pictures marking our progress in a big loop through southern Minnesota. We have looked at them as a family, now that so much time has passed, and laughed together. For in each picture our oldest daughter is dutifully in her place, posing as required, but in not a single photo did she smile. Obedient to the letter, she missed the spirit entirely.

The danger of legalism comes primarily because the teaching is a distortion of the meaning of obedience. Concentrating on minutiae, it misses Christ; outlining “God’s way” to do something which will result in increased righteousness, it knows little of grace. “So far, then, from enriching our relationship with God,” Dr. Packer says,

legalism in all its forms does the opposite. It puts that relationship in jeopardy and, by stopping us focusing on Christ, it starves our souls while feeding our pride. Legalistic religion in all its forms should be avoided like the plague.

4. Legalism tends to cause people to treat their traditions or system as part of God’s authoritative law, thus binding consciences where God had left them free.

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees sharply about this in Mark 2 16-3:6 and 7:1-8, but it would be wise to realize that we can easily make the same error. It is sobering to remember that the Pharisees believed the Scriptures to be God’s word, they had a passion for purity, they desired to be separate from the world’s pollution, and they sought to be faithful to God’s law. By using

a bit of imagination we can begin to see how we can be tempted to make the same mistake they did.

In all the essentials of the faith—what is covered, for example, in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds—there is great clarity in Scripture, and these central doctrines of the faith are revealed in rich detail. There are many other areas, however (such as raising children), which are mentioned in Scripture, but with remarkable simplicity and brevity. In these areas God has granted us great freedom as his people, providing basic principles while leaving much room within those broad limits for creativity and diversity. In these areas of life we must grant one another increasing freedom in how we choose to put the principles mentioned in Scripture into practice. As we move in our thinking and instruction from the text of Scripture, to its meaning, to a teaching we would give, to formulating policy based on it, and finally to actual practice, we must grant freedom to one another for the simple reason that God's word grants this freedom to us.

Now, imagine being a first-century Pharisee who took God's law as divinely inspired, and who desired to teach others to be faithful to it in every detail. And let's say the law under discussion is quite clear: work is forbidden on the Sabbath. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work," the text says, "but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work" (Exodus 20:9-10). Thus, you point out, harvesting crops is forbidden on the Sabbath. Not too difficult, it would seem—except that questions come up when you try to teach it to people who, truth be told, are rather slipshod in their approach to faithfulness. First someone asks whether pulling up one carrot in the garden for a salad is really "harvesting." Then someone wonders if God would object to an emergency harvest to store up some food in the face of an impending siege by the Assyrian army. And so it goes. As questions arise, and as teachers unpack the meaning of the basic biblical principles, spelling out practices based on those principles, surely we can understand the temptation to identify our "practice" as "God's way." After all, our practice is based on God's word, isn't it?

What must be remembered, however, is this: there is an important distinction

between seeking to be faithful in applying the truth to life, and of going *beyond* the Scriptures to produce a system which binds the conscience where God's word has left it free. My practice may be prudent and wise, but there might be other ways to faithfully apply the same text to life. The text says parents are to be faithful in raising their children in the Lord; different parents may obey that text by using very different options in the education of their children. It is important to think through the choice we are making and know why we think it wise. It is another thing altogether, however, to suggest ours is "God's way," and that those who choose other options are less faithful than we, and will face consequences as a result. The relationship of husband and wife, child rearing, dating and courtship,

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both spouses working outside the home, engaging the culture—in all these areas (and more) teachings—are circulating which may be well intentioned, but are, in fact, case studies in legalism.

Those who promulgate such systems probably do not intend to add their "tradition" to the word of God, nor did they start out with the desire to improperly bind the consciences of their fellow believers. Nevertheless, in their zeal to unpack the meaning of faithfulness, they often do several things which end up doing precisely that.

The first thing worth mentioning in this regard is the improper use of proof-texts. Now, it can be helpful when teachers note passages of Scripture which either clarify what they are saying or from which they have derived the idea they are explaining. If I mention, for example, that the Lord ordained that the Israelites be made exiles in Babylon because they failed to rest, it might be helpful if I include a reference so you can check out that assertion (2 Chronicles 36:15-21). However, when meaning, teaching, policy, and practice are all marked with texts, the impression can be given that they are all *equally* the word of God, when that is not the case. The text is God's word; the practice is simply one possible idea derived from one possible policy implied by

one interpretation of the text. Thus to use proof-texts like this is to imply that the practice being suggested bears the same authority as the text itself, which is, of course, not the case. Used properly, proof-texts are helpful; used improperly, they can imply an authority which is not the case and bind the conscience of believers over something about which God's word actually grants freedom. One thing is certain: the only thing proof-texts prove absolutely is that the teacher has access to a concordance.

Another technique which is used—intentionally or not—to bind the conscience of believers where God's word grants freedom is the use of forceful logic and dogmatic rhetoric which fails to distinguish between biblical principle and mere opinion. When teachers forcefully move step-by-step from text to meaning to teaching to policy to practice, they can give the impression of a seamless whole, when in fact they have moved from God's word to their own opinion. Sometimes the problem lies in the

tone of the teaching or resource: so dogmatic, so final, so forceful that the Christian reader trembles to do anything but instantly buy into it. It seems heretical to wonder whether other options are possible, especially if the testimonials included in the teaching are so poignant that it seems only a heartless pagan would hesitate to adopt whatever is being taught. Add to that a few warnings of dismal failure, and before long even the very idea of withholding judgment until further study can occur seems like dereliction of duty.

Another variation of this technique is to outline a proposal which may, in fact, be a good idea, but then imply it is the *only* possible option available to faithful Christians. Sometimes this is done by adding terms such as "biblical" or "God's way" in a manner that suggests that believers who seek to apply the text in other ways are less than fully faithful. In a booklet entitled *A Critique of Modern Youth Ministry*, for example, author Christopher Schlect argues that much contemporary youth ministry is destructive of the family and segregates young people from older Christians who could mentor them in the things of God. "These divisions breed immaturity," Schlect writes, "because they hinder younger people from associating with and learn-

ing from their elders.” He urges that youth ministry be cross-generational, and designed primarily to instruct “parents to raise their children biblically.” He is imbalanced here. “Educating covenant children is a family affair *and* a community affair,” Susan Hunt says correctly (emphasis added). “It does take a village to raise a child. It takes a village of faith, the church of the Lord Jesus.” Still, Schlect has some good ideas. Convinced, however, that he has discovered practices that when followed brings God’s favor, he implies that if we implement his proposals, each succeeding generation will be increasingly godly. All he wants, he says is “that youth ministry grow and flourish—the way God designed it to.” The problem, of course, is that his dogmatic presentation seems to suggest that “God’s way” is the way Schlect just outlined—case closed, discussion over. Now, although I

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have no reason to doubt his sincerity in any of this, like so much, unfortunately, of what is coming from Canon Press, Schlect’s booklet contains good ideas but in a dogmatic format that is deeply problematic.

This is not to suggest that teachers should give weak instruction, but rather that their ministry be marked with humility and an openness that invites questions, further study, reflection, and time for unhurried prayer. Dogmatism is often nothing more than the bluster of arrogance.

Throwing Baby Out With The Bath Water?

Legalism is, sadly, relatively easy to find in the evangelical community. Given that these teachings, resources, and systems often contain very good ideas, the question arises as to what to do with them. Should they still be used? After all, if we do not use them, will we not be guilty of keeping the good ideas they contain from folk who need them? To mention a specific example, for all the problems associated with the

Ezzo’s “Growing Families International,” many people insist the instruction is so helpful in “Growing Kids God’s Way” that the good outweighs all the problems. But is this an acceptable response? For one thing, it may take the danger of legalism far too lightly. Dr. Packer’s warning is worth repeating:

So far, then, from enriching our relationship with God, legalism in all its forms does the opposite. It puts that relationship in jeopardy and, by stopping us focusing on Christ, it starves our souls while feeding our pride. Legalistic religion in all its forms should be avoided like the plague.

Consider: “These resources or teachings are so profound, so vital, and so unique,” we are told, “that they must be used even if they do partake of legalism.” But why can not all these good and helpful ideas be reformulated and taught within the context of the covenant of grace?

Especially in an age when we are virtually overwhelmed with resources, why do we need to use ones which are problematic? The problem of legalism is not simply that some people take some teachings the wrong way. The problem of legalism resides in the teaching itself. The mistake is not merely on the part of the listeners, rather the system or teaching itself is flawed—and if it contains truth, that truth can be taught in such a way as to lead the students into a celebration of the freedom and grace that is theirs in Christ. Why should the truth be taught in any other way?

Our role as believers is not to issue forth as moral police, sniffing out legalism wherever it is to be found. Our calling is to be discerning, distinguishing truth from error in a decaying culture. None of us will be able to stop all the legalism that is circulating, but we can seek to live in such a way that, by God’s grace, we celebrate the freedom that is ours in Christ.

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