

Walking the Thin Line: Combating Legalism in the Church - Carey Hardy

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INTRODUCTION

In any local church, there may be many different races and cultures represented, many different life situations and backgrounds, varying social positions and vocations that are being pursued, different levels of intellect, kinds of church backgrounds, and many different levels of spiritual maturity.

There's nothing wrong with that. In fact, the church was never meant to be a cozy club of likeminded people of one race or social position or intellectual caliber. Christians don't have to be clones of one another, identical in all respects.

But this is one of the challenges the body of Christ has always faced-that included in its membership universally, and sometimes locally, are the rich and the poor, those from every stratum of society, the old and the young, various races, and people of every expression of personality.

Many other types of groups are not like this. Many other groupings in society we know are more limited in their membership. But the church is not to be limited based upon the kinds of categories and characteristics mentioned-variety is a good thing.

But this variety can put a strain on us all. There can be tensions. So the obvious question at some point is: How are we to coexist within a local fellowship when we may be so different from one another?

We know from Scripture that we are to get along with one another. UNITY in the body is a serious issue to the Lord. In fact, many passages are devoted to this issue.

Eph. 4:2-3 ... relate to one another with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Phil. 4:2 ...live in harmony in the Lord.

2 Cor. 12:20 A warning to us ... Paul discusses some of the issues possibly going on in the Corinthian church and appeals to them to repent:

For I am afraid that perhaps when I come... there may be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances...

John MacArthur, when preaching on this passage, terms this list "Sins of Disunity." And these sins can be the reason for church discipline if someone is guilty of them and doesn't repent.

One of the greatest concerns elders should have, therefore, is that unity be maintained in the body. Disunity is destructive.

There is another aspect related to this issue of unity in the church ... another category of discussion concerning the ability of believers to get along with one another.

We may not be of the same race, or social status, or level of intellect, etc., and we shouldn't let those issues divide us. But the focus of this seminar is not on those categories of difference. Instead, we will look at the need for all Christians to properly relate to other Christians who don't share the same convictions on certain issues.

The habit of many in the church is to judge other believers based upon their own convictions and views of the Christian life. In addition, the tendency is to form these convictions based upon very rigid-and sometimes inaccurate-understandings of God's law. People develop these strong convictions and live by them. The problem, though, is that they do more than just live by these heartfelt guidelines themselves: they also expect everyone else to live by the same convictions. If someone doesn't hold the same view on a subject, then that individual is judged at least to be less

spiritual, or at worst to be in open rebellion against God.

The term commonly used to describe this judgmental tendency is LEGALISM.

DEFINITION

WHAT IT IS

Legalism, as it is being discussed in this seminar, can be defined as "the tendency to reduce Christianity to a set of rules rather than a personal relationship with Christ" (Truman Dollar).

This ends up being a system that judges an individual's relationship to God in terms of adherence to man-made rules. It is subtle and pervasive, and therefore deadly to the life of the church.

Legalism is very judgmental. It also eliminates the need for true biblical decisionmaking. Making personal moral decisions is not necessary when they are being made for you by another individual or by some spiritual hierarchy.

A legalistic system generally leads to frustration and misery. It tends to produce morally weak people who live with an unbiblical sense of guilt.

WHAT IT ISN'T

Legalism is not the same thing as having standards. God Himself surely has laws. He is a God of law, and His laws are absolute and unchanging. But man has not been content simply to apply these standards. So he amplifies them, interprets them, and often twists them. God's lofty moral laws end up being reduced to petty rules such as how long a man's hair should be over the ears. The Christian faith is thus cheapened.

So legalism is making these man-made standards a gauge of spirituality.

In other words, someone caught up in this stifling web says, "Keep the rules and you will be spiritual."

Again, rules and standards are not the problem. They have their place in the home, in schools, and in your personal life. It's fine to have personal convictions that you hold dearly.

The issue is insisting that compliance with rules makes one spiritual or right with God.

What kinds of issues do legalists adopt to gauge spirituality? There are many-more than you may think. In fact, we deal with these issues on a daily basis. We call them the "gray areas." By that we mean that the Bible doesn't explicitly say that various opinions in these categories are either right or wrong.

Here's a brief list of some of the categories involved:

- ENTERTAINMENT-movies, TV, cards, pool, paintball, computer games, places to go

- EXTERNAL PERSONAL APPEARANCE-clothes, makeup, jewelry, hair

- MUSIC-style, etc. (What is appropriate in church?)

- PARENTING

- DATING

- EDUCATION OF CHILDREN-home, private, public

- PATRONIZATION OF BUSINESSES-shopping, Disneyland, long distance providers, restaurants

- BIRTH CONTROL

- LANGUAGE

- BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

- GIVING

- POLITICS-parties, activism

- MEDICAL ISSUES-life support, transfusions, medications

- HALLOWEEN

- SANTA CLAUS

- OWNING MATERIAL GOODS

- FOOD

- SEPARATION

- SUNDAY ACTIVITIES

- "MIXED" SWIMMING

- ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES
- DEBT/CREDIT
- DRINKING WINE, DANCING, SMOKING

Some of these are issues in particular areas of the country, and not in others. In some areas the pastor and congregation come down heavily on "mixed" swimming, while people in other locales consider such a thing nonsense. Some of these are issues in certain parts of the world, and not in other cultures.

The point is: we have convictions on these and many other issues. Churches have experienced turmoil in the body due to the varying convictions held in these categories. Some churches have even split over them.

You could also call the legalistic system that develops over such topics Phariseeism.

HISTORY

The Scribes and the Pharisees were the original legalists.

Pharisee means "separated one." They prided themselves in their denunciation of impure and ungodly elements. Physical separation was of paramount importance. Functional holiness was considered evidence of personal piety, and Leviticus 11:44-45 was a central passage. They considered their priorities close to the heart of God.

The Pharisees had no greater task than to protect and propagate the laws of God. They had so much respect for the original set of scriptures and wanted to protect them so desperately that they started adding to them. After a while, it not only seemed helpful to make additions but absolutely essential. God's moral, ceremonial, and dietary laws were not enough for them. Even though the law was already burdensome, they developed another 365 rules (one for each day of the year). These rules, as part of the oral law, became even more important to them than God's commandments.

The counterpart to the Pharisees today is the people who are afraid to allow Christians to live only with God's Word. To biblical principles they add rules and regulations and standards, and then come to the point of believing they are part of the Scriptures themselves.

This is the way it is for legalists. God lays down a principle. Then, man reduces God's great principle to a set of rules that may be burdensome, but that certainly remove individual responsibility for making choices. Finally, man elevates rule-keeping to a mark of spirituality and judges himself and others by it.

Of all the degrading titles that Jesus used to describe the Pharisees, none was more devastating than referring to them as "yeast" or "leaven." He told his disciples, "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1).

Christ's concern over the Pharisees centered around the fact that their opinions, both casual and official, were becoming inseparable with the laws of Moses, and Jesus considered the confusion reprehensible.

It is just as easy for the modern believer to become blind to the gangrene of legalism that has spread throughout the church. Teachings and traditions of purely human origin can over the years become so ingrained that they appear to be of divine origin.

The problem is NOT with having traditional practices, or even with a church's local distinction. However, there is something desperately wrong with presenting these personal preferences as eternal truth.

MOTIVATION

Why do people tend toward this unfortunate and enslaving system?

Because people fear that if God's principles are not replaced with rigid rules, men will ignore what God said and run wildly into sin.

In other words, the rules are an attempt to force people to do what is right.

The key problem, then, is unbelief-legalists do not believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to direct men into right living.

"We must interpret God's principles for them and then force them to obey for their own good."

THE CENTRAL FOCUS

Legalism focuses NOT on the legitimate needs of an individual, but the institution. The rules and standards therefore exist to protect the institution and its image. That fact results in legalism being neither compassionate nor forgiving.

It must force compliance and conformity in order to protect the institution.

Some legalists think that if you make children or young people obey rules for many years, you have actually improved them morally-you have actually forced them into sanctification.

The reality is that you have only taught them to conform.

THE PROBLEM

Legalism is a system that has always failed-a system that always will fail. It cannot succeed if true biblical progressive sanctification is desired. Rules have never made anyone more spiritual.

Legalism doesn't work for a variety of reasons:

A system of rules does not provide decision-making opportunities and experiences.

In life, every day brings a new set of moral circumstances. Though God's principles do not change, life situations do.

Others must make decisions for you in your formative years. But as you grow, God wants you to mature to the place where you can examine God's principles and apply them to today's new and changing circumstances.

It's been my observation (and it has been the observation of many others) that those who live under a rigid set of rules easily fall into sin. When the peer group or spiritual leader isn't present to ensure compliance with the rules, the freedom to decide almost produces panic. Since no authority is there to make the decisions for you, you fall into sin.

A loving parent knows that as a child grows and moves toward maturity, he must be allowed to make some wrong choices. I say "some" to acknowledge that no caring parent would stand idly by while their child made some decision that would bring bodily or moral harm. You do not let a child make a wrong decision about drugs, pregnancy, etc. On issues such as these a parent will be as aggressive as possible in both warning their child against, and even stopping their child from, the kind of failure that would have devastating lifelong consequences.

In general, a caring parent knows that the younger a child is, the more decisions you must make for him. But that must gradually lessen and finally end as a child matures. Children must learn how to make decisions, even though it is painful at times. And it is best that the parent is allowing this opportunity for failure when the child is still young enough to live at home, so that the child can be encouraged and instructed.

Rules focus on the external.

That very focus often encourages believers to neglect the inner man. And unless a person experiences "heart-change"-unless the Christian faith and lifestyle are internalized the believer never truly changes.

God is not interested in mere appearances or superficial behavior modification (1 Sam. 16:7; Prov. 4:23; Matt. 12:34; Mark 7:14-23; John 2:23-25).

People are prone to feel very holy and safe with rules. And they then are judgmental toward those who break them.

Some pastors make the mistake of focusing on external issues in their preaching, thinking they can somehow manipulate their listeners into conformity through their attack on particular, visible expressions of sin. They preach against smoking, drinking, cursing, dancing, going to movies, certain forms of clothing, etc. "Worldliness" is characterized in terms of these habits and behaviors. Though they may do this thinking they are helping people be more godly, they are actually ignoring issues of the heart such as covetousness, hatred, strife, envying, idolatry, love of self, etc. They may also ignore any discussion of such inward qualities as love, joy, peace, longsuffering, and gentleness.

THE EXTENT

Whom does this "disease" affect?

Ultimately, any Christian if he's not careful and on guard can fall into the trap of legalism. And any church can be victimized by it. A church can have the wrong goal of trying to protect its image rather than glorifying God. When that happens, little is said about obeying Scripture for the proper reasons—because it is Light and pleasing to God.

Two groups within the body of Christ seem to suffer from legalism, possibly more than others:

Preacher's kids (PKs) are certainly expected by the church to act right, but what is right?

Frequently that means they are expected to keep a set of rules that will not offend the weakest person in the church.

The reality is that the rules are kept by PKs in order not to embarrass the pastorfather. Yet many times the children have no personal convictions about the rules. Their motives are wrong in keeping them.

That is why some children of legalistic pastors often become rebellious. As soon as they leave home they reject the system because the Christian faith has never been internalized.

Preachers' kids must also be allowed to make errors. They must be encouraged to live by godly principles and allowed to make personal choices.

The Christian school movement has also been victimized by legalism. This has brought frustration and disillusionment to many.

The attitude by some seems to be that the validity of the Christian school movement (possibly even its survival) depends upon the evidence that a school has produced a child that is moral. This moral result is so important to schools, their images, and their financing that many schools believe they cannot leave a child's behavior to chance.

If necessary, they must force their students to act right because bad behavior reflects on the whole system of Christian education. It is too risky to let students exercise their Christian responsibility to obey God—they might do wrong.

For a Christian school infected with legalism, high moral behavior is as important a product as Christian philosophy.

Once again, this is old-fashioned fear. Fear causes school administrators to resort to stringent and numerous rules about everything, for example, dress, hair length, language, talking in the hall or lunchroom, how they sit in their chairs, cars, ad infinitum.

Don't misunderstand the main point—it's not the idea of rules that is the problem. It's not that rules have no place in an institution. A Christian school is wise to have practical and reasonable rules for conduct and even appearance.

But rules without reason do NOT motivate students to right behavior, and they do not necessarily teach them how to make right moral decisions.

There is a basic flaw with all of this: it is presumed that under a system of law it does not really matter why you do right.

But God doesn't see it this way-it DOES matter why you do what you do. Right behavior because of fear of the system will end when the system has no more control.

On the other hand: RIGHT BEHAVIOR AS A RESULT OF VOLUNTARY DECISIONS BASED ON A KNOWLEDGE OF SCRIPTURE AND A RESPONSE TO THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL CONTINUE.

You have to wonder what the attraction to legalism is, especially when you consider its disastrous results in the lives of individual Christians, in Christian homes, and in local churches.

Partly, the answer is:

It's easy to measure the keeping of rules.

This attraction is based upon the faulty assumption that a person's faith can be quantified. You can look at a person's hair, his dress, and so forth and be able to determine his spirituality. In other words, these external criteria will always indicate what is going on inside.

But a person can look great on the outside, and yet be ungodly on the inside. IT'S THE HEART THAT REALLY MATTERS. Therefore, our focus in ministry must be on the inner man.

Legalism eliminates agonizing decisions.

To truly practice your faith, you must learn God's principles and apply them daily to life's changing circumstances. This is often painful. It definitely stretches your faith, but it is the only Christianity with substance.

As already stated, Christian leaders often confuse conformity with spirituality. Conformity is a social pressure and may not have anything to do with true Christianity at all.

Legalism is the easy way out.

This is especially true for insecure Christian leaders. It makes them feel safe, but it is harmful to believers.

There are no significantly fewer pregnancies, and no less experimentation with sex, alcohol, or cigarettes by young people reared under a strict system of rules than those who were not.

I have personally helped pick up the pieces of individuals who were part of a very legalistic Christian institution. Just as Colossians 2:23 says, all the man-made rules and standards were "of no value against fleshly indulgence." Others who have attended legalistic educational institutions have told me horrible stories of the rampant sin and immorality among students "behind the scenes."

Legalism is a cheap substitute for true spirituality (Steve Kreloff).

The system has obviously not worked well... it would be helpful if all evangelicals would admit that.

The essential difference between legalism and freedom in Christ is the believer's responsibility for choice. This doesn't mean, of course, freedom to indulge the flesh, ignore other believers, or ignore God's moral law.

Christian liberty is the freedom to choose to do right without a system of rules or an ever-present authority forcing you to do right.

Galatians 5:13 For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

THE RIGHT RESPONSE

If rules are not a guaranteed path to spirituality, what should we do? If legalism is a disastrous system that destroys people and churches, what should be our response?

Some general responses:

Teach that God makes it clear that some things are wrong.

Preach what the Bible says about adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, and so forth (Gal. 5:19-21).

Admit that we have questions about many issues.

Accept the fact that the Bible doesn't specifically address every issue. And on these topics, teach that it's okay for us to have differences of opinion. Be careful not to equate biblical directives with personal opinion.

At the same time, make it clear that license is not an alternative to legalism. In other words, in reaction to legalism we must not flaunt our freedom. Scripture teaches we must voluntarily restrict our liberties out of love for others (Rom. 14: 3-4).

Teach the principles of Scripture.

God wants us to honor Him, and to make the choices that promote the renewal of our inner man. Teach your people that they are responsible to God personally in these matters. Also teach them about the power of the Holy Spirit who affects change in us as we submit to God's Word.

Don't be issue-oriented in your preaching, constantly attacking vices from the pulpit. Teach the Word of God in its entirety and trust its power in peoples' lives.

Be honest with each other, and especially with our young people.

Make sure we are clearly saying "Rules won't make you spiritual." Let's help people understand that rules can sometimes be helpful, and that we may use them. But we must not make the keeping of rules a gauge of spirituality.

Challenge young people with honesty and the truth, and do it openly. This takes great courage and wisdom, but it needs to be done. Don't be afraid that the system of grace and the power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people will not really work. You'll be amazed to learn how believers respond to honesty and to compassion.

Some further dos and don'ts for the pastor:

Don't overestimate your importance.

Some men become authoritarian figures, hiding behind the statement, "Don't touch God's anointed." This is pride. Your authority ends where Scripture ends. Make sure your people see you living by this. Help your staff lead this way, too.

Don't micro-manage your people or your staff.

Allow some freedom for people to fail, and freedom to do things differently than you would yourself.

Don't be threatened by those who disagree. Model this to your congregation.

Don't make "mountains out of molehills." This is what legalists do.

Don't judge motives.

Love "believes all things, hopes all things."

Don't allow legalistic people to be in influential positions.

Their legalistic tendencies will spread like gangrene.

Do be patient with peoples' sanctification.

Your sanctification is progressive; so is theirs.

Do trust the power of God's Word as you faithfully and accurately preach it.

Don't resort to manipulation, guilt trips, etc. Don't succumb to fear.

Do "aim" your preaching at the heart.

People are changed by the renewing of their mind. As thinking changes, behavior will follow suit. Your primary task as a preacher is to destroy "speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God." Your part in this is the clear proclamation of Scripture. It's the Holy Spirit's job to illumine the mind and bring conviction of sin. Pulpit tirades against individual sins and pet peeves won't accomplish this in the lives of your sheep.

Do teach your people the process of biblical decision-making.

Get the tapes on this by Stuart Scott. You can contact him at The Master's College.

Do teach Romans 14 to your congregation.

This is probably the most significant passage on the subject of convictions, legalism, etc. I've attached some thoughts from this great chapter as an appendix at the end of these notes.

Do teach on the importance of unity in the body.

Periodically present God's perspective on unity to your people by teaching from one of the many passages that address it. They need to be reminded that unity among believers in a local assembly is important to the Lord.

Do watch out for disunity in your congregation over the issue of the education of children.

More than one church has split over the issue of home schooling vs. private schooling vs. public schooling.

My wife and I have homeschooled our four children at various grade levels, placed them in private Christian education, and had them in public education. For two consecutive years we had at least one child in each of these venues. So I have an understanding of the good and bad of each. Since I am experienced in each and have an appreciation of each, I am free to say this: most of the problems I am personally aware of in churches over the issue of education are caused by those who homeschool. Some, not all, homeschooling families tend to become crusaders and end up judging others in the church who choose something different. I've received reports of homeschooling families refusing to let their children play with other kids in the church who were not homeschooled. A pastor must graciously but firmly bring Romans 14 to bear on the thinking of his people if any disunity over this issue is surfacing.

Do be prepared to lose some people from your congregation.

As you are honest with your people about what the Bible does and doesn't say, you may very well lose some of your members. The odds are that it will be the legalists.

CONCLUSION

My goal in this seminar is NOT to persuade people to begin wearing their hair a certain way, or go to movies, begin drinking wine, or dress any way they want. My desire is that people not be afraid to think-and to be honest with God's Word. I don't want our youth to be confused because of our failure to deal with issues courageously and biblically.

As a pastor I want my sheep to examine legalism and recognize it for the dangerous, failing system that it is.. I want the people God has placed in my charge to understand and pursue true spirituality (internal change), not a superficial faith (mere external change).

We must teach people God's principles and how to make decisions based on Scripture and a relationship with God and His Holy Spirit. We must lead believers into a victorious Christian life.

Rules will not accomplish that.

Some church leaders, like the Pharisees, believe we must hedge Christians in with layers of rules or they will chase wildly after sin. We must recognize that this system of legalism denies the power and victory of the Christian faith.

Among many Christians, freedom and liberty have become dirty words, but to Paul they were symbols of unshackled hearts and lives.

Galatians 5:1 It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

Combat legalism in your church. Deal with it graciously, but firmly. Don't let it grow. And don't be afraid to teach people how to scripturally make moral decisions. Then show them there is divine power to live the Christian life the way God intended (Eph. 1:19).

Appendix

Getting Along When It's Gray

Rom. 14:1-12

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INTRODUCTION

The church in Rome was a cosmopolitan type of church. It experienced the strains that can come in a local church when there are differences. In this passage are three truths that, if understood and embraced, form a foundation for learning how to get along with people who do not see what you are doing as the ideal way of living out the Christian faith.

THE TRUTH ABOUT ISSUES & ACTIVITIES

It is a fact: The Bible does not DIRECTLY address every particular issue or activity in life.

And when we are discussing these issues not addressed in Scripture, we may well hold different opinions as to what is right and wrong.

I don't mean issues that are clearly laid out in Scripture. For example, we MUST share the same convictions about who Christ is. And certain activities are clearly described in the Bible as being sinful. So we can't sit around trying to decide what our personal conviction might be on (for example) adultery, drunkenness, or lying, murder, or homosexuality, etc.

There is no doubt as to the sinfulness of these activities.

But many issues are NOT clearly spelled out in the Word of God like these are as being sinful. There are principles that can guide us, but there's no particular verse to tell us whether the activity is right or wrong.

We call these the gray areas of life (not exactly black... sinful and forbidden; and not exactly white ... good and encouraged). We tend to form personal convictions about these issues, which is FINE. We ought to. And we ought to live by those convictions.

But regardless how our conscience is trained, no matter how we try to make black issues to be white or white issues to be black, the truth remains: THERE ARE MANY ISSUES THAT ARE GRAY.