

The Problem of Christian Liberty
“A Biblical Perspective on Legalism”
(Galatians)
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Introduction:

One of the greatest challenges facing modern Fundamentalism has to do with the issue of Christian liberty. Many believers justify innumerable behavioral “abnormalities” in the name of Christian liberty. In short, worldliness is rampant in the church. The church that was left on earth to impact the world has allowed the world to impact her. Those given the responsibility of spiritual leadership who stand against the rising tide of worldliness in the Church are frequently accused of being modern day legalists – the likes of which Paul rebuked and rejected in his NT writings, particularly to the church at Galatia.

It is interesting that those who make this charge frequently argue that believers should not be bound by the letter of the law but by the spirit (the letter killeth but the Spirit giveth life). However, as soon as pressure is placed upon them to stop a behavior that is obviously contrary to the spirit of the NT writings, they immediately demand to be shown the letter of the law (chapter and verse). If one truly wishes to live in the spirit of the NT, much of what passes as acceptable Christian conduct must be rejected as worldliness.

In this discussion, two things must be considered. First, what is legalism as seen in the Bible? Second, what is worldliness? It would be very helpful for the modern church to do some serious study and application of the Biblical teaching on worldliness. (We are going to focus on the first of these issues today)

In this brief session, it is our intention to examine what Paul has to say about legalism in the particular portion of scripture that is commonly utilized by those who accuse Fundamentalist leaders of legalism (Galatians 5:1 – “Stand fast therefore in the freedom wherewith Christ has made you free.)

I. Adopting a Biblical Approach

- The problem/question must be handled from a theological/exegetical perspective rather than from an experiential or applicational perspective.
- Often a person will take an application and then go to the Bible in order to defend it (both sides are guilty of this in this discussion).
- We must be committed to letting the Bible speak and then deriving our application from what the Bible really states/teaches.

Revelation
(Act of God)

Religion
(Act/Response of Man)

Scripture
(Exegesis/Interp.)

Application

II. Obtaining a Biblical Overview:

Two key passages are:

Acts 10 - 11 : Introduction of the concept of Biblical liberty in Paul's day.
Acts 15: Helping understand the reason for that liberty.

Point: *Christian liberty in the NT was the freedom God declared from certain aspects of the ceremonial and dietary law given in the NT for the purpose of reaching the Gentiles.*

This was not given for personal pleasure or for enjoyment but for a strategic purpose – reaching the Gentile world and fulfilling the great commission (Acts 1:8).

As believers began to practice this new freedom, excesses and misuse arose. Problems surfaced. To help direct this new freedom, there are three main passages that give instruction on the matter.

- B. Galatians/Colossians: Defending Christian Liberty by protecting the Nature of the Gospel.
- C. I Corinthians 8-10: Purpose and Proper Practice of Liberty – protecting the work/results of the Gospel.
- D. Romans 14-15: Preserving harmony while enjoying liberty – protecting the peace or harmony of the gospel.

III. Defining the Biblical Concept: What exactly is legalism?

Not an easy concept to define – basic approach will be to look at characteristics that will describe key elements in order to help us identify and understand legalism as presented in the Bible.

There are two things that we can see from an analysis of the material in Galatians:

- E. It is an error taught by lost men
 - Paul identifies the teachers of this doctrine as distinct from the Galatian believers. (He uses 2nd/3rd person)
 - Paul addresses them in the strongest possible terms in the NT – he never addresses believers in this way even those who are in blatant sin or those who were against him (Alexander the Coppersmith / Sinning brother in I Cor 5)

- Paul consigns these teachers to eternal condemnation
- B. It is an error that attacks the very nature/essence of the Gospel
- It is another Gospel that is not a gospel at all (another of a completely different kind!)

IV. Understanding the Background Issues:

- A. *Who were the Judaizers?* Lost Men
- B. *What was their error?* Legalism – another Gospel of a different kind
- C. What was Paul’s response?
1. Reject and Cast out – note the whole allegory in chapter 4 of son of bondwoman and son of the free.
 2. Stand firm in your freedom! (Don’t go back to this kind of bondage)

V. Examining the Underlying Structure:

The structure we are looking for occurs in three themes that are mentioned in the prologue and postlude of Galatians.

- B. Authority of Paul’s Apostleship – these Judaizer’s attacked the credibility of Paul’s message by undermining his authority and credibility as an apostle. This same attack is utilized today. Paul’s defense can be found in chapters 1 - 2.
- My message is identical
 - My message is independent
 - My message is just as influential
- A. Fatherhood of God – how can a person get to the place where he can call God “Father”? (Abba father) Judaizer’s answer was by coming under the law and circumcision. Paul’s answer was only through Christ apart from the Law! Whole point to chapter 3 - 4
- C. Present Evil World – How is a man to survive in this present evil world? Judaizer’s answer – through the law and ceremonies. Without them Paul has set you adrift in the moral sea of life with no compass and no direction. Paul’s answer – Holy Spirit and not the Law. Whole point to chapters 5-6.

VI. Discovering the Timeless Principles (there are five key truths)

- A. Mere submission to external regulation is of no benefit to an individual's standing before God. (Gal 5:6; 6:15; Col. 2:8)

However, this does not negate the fact that there is a place for external regulation and most of the external regulations in the NT came from the pen of the same man who is here stating their uselessness in attaining merit before God.

Our standing before God is not gained by any action or thing we do – our standing before God is the righteousness (perfect) of another – Christ!

- B. External Regulation is powerless to quench the desires of the flesh!

Note: Paul's argument in Galatian's 5 seems to indicate that the works of the flesh (here paralleled with what the Judaizer's are teaching) will produce wickedness.

Note: Regulation was never designed to quench the flesh but to restrict sin and control our desires. Only the Holy Spirit can quench the desires of the flesh!

- C. Any teaching that undermines the nature of the Gospel much be rejected.

Illustration: Paul's refusal to circumcise Titus. However, note that he did circumcise Timothy. In one case the Gospel was at stake – so he refused. In the other case, the opportunity to preach the Gospel was being hindered – he insisted that Timothy give up his right and be circumcised!

Illustration: Ironside's story about the son and the ham

- D. The careless application of liberty will often lead to fleshly or worldly behaviors (5:13)

Note: Paul gives a very strong warning – don't allow your freedom to be an opportunity for the flesh to gain a beachhead against you!

- E. Christian Freedom is designed to be used in service to others and not for personal enjoyment or pleasure (it is a tool – not a right): Galatians 5:13

VII. Detecting the Errors to Avoid:

- A. Error/Misconception #1: Leaders who emphasize behavioral standards or external regulations are guilty of the legalism that Paul preached against. (Swindoll/Miller)
- B. Error/Misconception #2: Behavioral Restriction that is not expressly stated in the Bible that is placed on a believer by an authority is a form of legalism.

If this is so, then Paul is a legalist and so is Christ.

Paul expected believers to make application of general principles within their life situations and contexts – flee youthful lusts (a general imperative that must be specifically applied within the contexts of one's life circumstances and society)

Illust: In light of this, would we be legalists in requiring certain regulations on TV and internet for our students?

VIII. Developing Life Applications

- A. Understand (and help others to understand) the paradoxical relationship between restriction/restraint and freedom. (No such thing in our world as absolute freedom)
- B. Understand the nature and role of regulation (3 kinds with different purposes)
 - 1. Moral Regulations: Timeless and true in every environment and in every culture. God has not left us guessing as to what these are.
 - 2. Functional Regs: Depending on the size and function of the organization or community. Church has a very different set of functional regulations than does a company or a school.
 - 3. Missional Regs: Regulations designed to help protect, ensure, and enhance the purpose or mission of the organization or community. These are generally established by the leadership. (Example: Denim rules at BJU)

Note: Problems occur when believers arbitrarily apply functional or missional regulations to every institution without discretion.

Note: Problems also occur when believers give functional or missional regulations the same weight as moral regulations.

C. Follow Christ's example: Matthew 17:24-27 (paying taxes)

Point: I can make a theological argument that would not only show that I should not pay taxes, but that really, taxes belong to me! As a member of the royal house of David, I am exempt! However, "lest we give them offence . . . take that and give it to them for you and me!"