

## On Legalism

- I. legalism: *Theol.* Applied reproachfully to the principles of those who are accused of adhering to the Law as opposed to the Gospel; the doctrine of justification by works, or teaching which savours of that doctrine.
  - A. Confusing law/works and gospel/grace is one thing (**JOH 1:17; ROM 11:6**) but “teaching which savours of that doctrine” is a highly subjective thing based on presuppositions.
  - B. One is handicapped to define sin without Law. **1JO 3:4; ROM 4:15.**
  - C. We under law to Christ. **1CO 9:21; 1TH 4:1-2.**
  
- II. It is not uncommon for Christians who are striving to regulate their lives and service to God according to Scripture to be inaccurately accused of legalism.
  - A. Sometimes this charge is levelled out of self-justification in response to another’s doctrine or practice which logically condemn’s one’s own. *Example:* Church A rejects the idea of women deacons or pastors based upon Scripture but Church B has them and so defends its position by charging Church A with legalism.
  - B. Sometimes this charge is levelled out of ignorance. For lack of Biblical knowledge, one concludes that obedience to Scripture is equal to legalism.
  - C. Sometimes this charge is levelled out of a faulty understanding of Christian liberty. The person or church which adheres to Scripture’s commands and principles is deemed to be at odds with “the spirit of the law” and therefore is guilty of legalism.
  - D. Sometimes this charge excuses one’s holding that the commands and principles of Scripture are subordinate to assumed higher values of inclusion, charity, attraction, etc.
  - E. Legalism is not a Biblical term but neither is Sovereignty nor Trinity. The concepts represented by these words, though, are Biblical.
    1. God is sovereign: nothing escapes nor frustrates His government. **2CH 20:8.**
    2. God is a Trinity. **1JO 5:7.**
    3. Law is good if used lawfully (**1TI 1:8**), which implies that law may be used unlawfully: a form of legalism.
  
- III. God’s laws are meant to be kept as delivered. **DEU 4:2; MAT 28:20; 1CO 11:2.**
  - A. Where God has declared what is good and evil, we should affirm the same. **PSA 119:128.**
  - B. Where God has declared what is to be done, that should be done without alteration. Moses learned this the hard way. **NUM 20:7-12.**
  - C. Where God has declared how He is to be worshipped, His declarations should be adhered to without addition or diminution. **JOH 4:23-24.**
  - D. Liberty is for areas where God has not declared His will.
    1. Liberty is not a justification for disobedience. **1PE 2:16.**
    2. Liberty means that Noah could use hammer, saw, plane, etc. (which God didn’t command) but couldn’t alter the dimensions, material or processing of the ark. **GEN 6:14-16.**
    3. Liberty means a N.T. church in its worship service may use a hymnal (which God did neither command nor forbid) but not musical instruments since God only ordained singing in the church service. **EPH 5:19; HEB 2:12.**
    4. Liberty means inventive sexual intercourse in marriage only. **HEB 13:4.**
  
- IV. There are four major areas where law is used unlawfully.
  - A. Teaching that justification of sinners requires their works is completely antithetical to the gospel message of justification by Jesus Christ and salvation by grace. **ROM 3:20-24.**

1. God's work of grace upon us fits us for good works. **EPH 2:10; PHIL 2:13.**
  2. These good works are the evidence, not the cause of God's grace towards us.
- B. Teaching that eternal life depends upon the sinner's faithfulness is an unlawful use of law.
1. Moses did not faithfully persevere but is in glory. **MAT 17:3-4.**
  2. Perseverance in faith gives best evidence of eternal life. **COL 1:21-23; REV 2:10.**
  3. The hope is in God's preservation of His saints, not their perseverance. **PSA 37:28; JOH 10:27-29; JUDE 1:1.**
- C. Teaching that aspects of Moses's Law which are not repeated in the N.T. are binding upon Christians is an unlawful use of law.
1. The O.T. is abolished by the N.T. **2CO 3:13; HEB 9:16-17.**
  2. O.T. ceremonies, holy days, dietary law, fleshly circumcision were all to distinguish Israel from the nations and no longer apply. The nations are accepted according to their new birth and faith. **COL 2:14-17; GAL 6:15; 5:6.**
    - a. A 1st. C. Jewish Christian was at liberty to observe ongoing Jewish ordinances that did not detract from Christ's finishing sacrifice but nowhere was a Jew at liberty to adopt pagan worship unto the Lord. **DEU 12:30-31.**
    - b. Gentile Christians must also not assimilate pagan elements unto the Lord. **1CO 10:7, 21.**
  3. Nine out of the Ten Commandments still apply under the N.T. Only the sabbath law has been set aside.
- D. Making human traditions binding upon saints is an unlawful use of law.
1. The Pharisees were noted for this. **MAT 15:1-3, 9.**
  2. Adding law to God's law implies it is faulty. **JAM 4:11-12.**
- V. Charity may accommodate weakness but not disobedience. **ROM 14:1-3.**
- A. One may esteem one day above another in indifferent matters. **ROM 14:5-6.**
  - B. But one may not make such a choice a test of fellowship. **JAM 4:11-12.**
  - C. One may not set aside a day to the disregard of declared law.
    1. It would be wrong to esteem a personal day of private prayer and fasting (an option) to have precedence over the ordained day of church communion (a duty).
    2. It would be wrong to esteem a personal day unto God to err in any fashion, including the keeping of abolished O.T. Jewish ceremonies (especially sacrifices), or the assimilation of paganism.
- VI. The notion of "the spirit of the law" is an unbiblical fantasy. Scripture never speaks of such.
- A. This idea assumes that the words of Scripture are not binding and that God's rules have to be bent for expediency. At what point does the bending stop? Who decides the bending?
  - B. This is another form of judging God's law. **JAM 4:11-12.**
  - C. A better approach is by recognizing the heirarchical nature of God's laws. **MAT 5:19; 23:23.**
    1. Life is more important than ceremony and obedience more important than sacrifice. **LUK 13:15-16; 1SAM 15:22.**
    2. When two laws come into conflict, opt for the higher law. Don't trash law or make up new laws.
- VII. Inclusion, charity or attraction are not substitutes for obedience.
- A. Love keeps law. **1JO 5:2-3.**
  - B. It is wrong to conform to the world for the sake of inclusion. **ROM 12:2; 8:5.**