

Jesus Christ

The Image
of the
Invisible God

An Exegesis of the Epistle to the Colossians

Study 6 Not Legalism but Christ (Colossians 2.11-23)

Legalism in the First Century Church

The term "legalism" commonly denotes preoccupation with form at the expense of substance. While it is now used metaphorically in all areas of human life, it appears to have had a theological origin in the seventeenth century, when Edward Fisher used it to designate "one who bringeth the Law into the case of Justification" (The Marrow of Modern Divinity, 1645). No equivalent term existed in the biblical languages. However, the idea is found in both Testaments.

Legalism and the Teaching of Jesus. The center of Jesus' message was that, in an important measure, the kingdom of God and its power had come in himself (Matt 12:28 ; Mark 1:14-15). This posed a challenge to the most distinctive features of Jewish religion: the identity of the chosen people, the temple, and the life of piety, all of which found their focus in the law. Jesus both affirmed and critiqued the law. While attending the synagogue regularly (Luke 4:16) he did not hesitate to break the purity laws (Mark 3:13-17) or rigid interpretations of Sabbath law (Mark 3:1-6). Refusal to do so he denounced as nullification of God's will in the interests of external conformity (Mark 7:1-23). His interpretation of the law exhibited an incisiveness that pierced to the law's intent beyond its surface meaning (Matt 5:21-48). Still more, he implied that this intent was both revealed and fulfilled in himself, so that legalistic conformity stood exposed and condemned.

Legalism and the Earliest Church. The problem of legalism arose in sharp form when the gospel crossed the boundaries of Judaism and penetrated the Gentile world. The forms were much the same as in Jesus' day: association with sinners, observance of the ceremonial law, and, above all, acceptance of the ritual mark of the people of God—circumcision. However, the issue was more acute: Was salvation possible for Gentiles apart from law observance (Acts 11:3 ; 15:1)? The Jerusalem Council affirmed that it was (Acts 15:11 Acts 15:13-14) and sought to resolve the practical difficulties arising from this decision (Acts 15:28-29), though with what success is not clear.

Legalism and the Teaching of Paul. While Paul can speak positively of the law (Romans 7:7 Romans 7:12 Romans 7:14), including circumcision (Rom 3:1-2 ; 4:10-12), he also speaks of it negatively. It is powerless to deliver from sin (Rom 8:3 ; Gal 3:21b-22) and was a temporary measure until the coming of Christ (Gal 3:19). Moreover, continued attachment to it is not only fruitless, but dangerous since the law demands total obedience of which none is capable (Gal 3:10-12). Law observance is thus both futile and fatal. As a substitute for or supplement to faith in Christ it ministers to legalism. Acceptance by God is possible only through faith in Christ crucified (Rom 8:3 ; Gal 2:16 ; 3:13-14).

Deasley ARG. 2018

www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/legalism/

Legalism in the modern church

While they teach salvation by grace and grace alone, legalistic churches impose rigid external standards like dress code and possession restrictions as a means of pleasing God. They teach Pastoral lordship. The church leadership will have an expressed version of the Bible that is contended as the only acceptable one. The legalistic church will separate or divide on questionable or debatable issues. They generally exhibit a prideful and condescending attitude toward other churches and denominations who have different persuasions. Much harm is done to the cause of Christ, to individual Christians and Christian families by modern legalism.

Look again at Colossians 2.9-10

"For" introduces another reason for abandoning the false teaching. What his readers had *in Christ* was completely adequate. He is the very essence of "Deity"—in whom this "fullness" permanently resides (cf. 1:19). The Greek word translated "Deity" (*theotetos*) refers to the unique essence of God (cf. John 1:1). This "fullness of Deity (the Godhead, KJV)" was present in Christ's bodily form during His earthly ministry. He did not give up His Deity when He became a man. It continues in His resurrected bodily form. He did not surrender His deity at His incarnation, and He did not give up His humanity at His resurrection. As those in Christ we, too, partake of His "fullness," having "been made complete," but not His Deity. We have no essential need that He does not supply.

(Constable TL. *Notes on Colossians*)

(Johnson op cit)

(Gromacki RG. 1984 *Stand Perfect in Wisdom*)

(Hendriksen op cit)

"..... And you are complete in Him" - What Paul means is that in Christ they find the satisfaction of every spiritual need. In the mystery cults which flourished in the apostolic age the great promise which was held out was salvation through enlightenment. For example:

Arianism taught that Christ was of a different essence than the Father

Docetism taught that matter is inherently evil, so Christ's incarnation was not real; He only appeared to be human.

Gnostics taught that Jesus left no footprints where He walked because His body only appeared to be real

Paul's teaching that you are complete in him countermands all the mystery cults and their false teaching.

Look at Colossians 2.10b-12

This circumcision Paul now refers to is the removal of the flesh and was first experienced by Christ on the cross and what happened to you when you surrendered your life to Christ then is realized through union with Him now.

Our spiritual "circumcision made without hands" took place when God regenerated us (cf. Gal. 5:24). It involved Christ cutting off the domination of our sinful nature (flesh), the slavery to sin that characterizes the unregenerate person (cf. Rom. 7:24-25). The baptism referred to in verse 12 is, of course, Spirit baptism, or baptism of the repentant sinner into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Having dealt with the theological errors of the false teachers, Paul now turns to their practical errors—from 'Gnosticism' to legalism.

Look at Colossians 2.13-14

Unbelievers are sinners by nature ("uncircumcision of your flesh," i.e. sinful nature), and practice ("transgressions," i.e., violations of God's standards). Nevertheless, God has forgiven believers. He has cancelled our "bill (certificate) of debt." This is true if as Jews we violated the Law of Moses

(special revelation) and it is also true if as Gentiles we violated the law of God written on our hearts (general revelation, Rom. 2:14-15). The reference to the readers' "uncircumcision" indicates that they were mainly Gentiles.

The Greek term translated "canceled out" (v.14, Gk *exaleipsas*) suggests the smearing of letters written on wax. Our "certificate of debt" was "hostile to us," in that it hounded us through a guilty conscience and scriptural warnings. Christ *erased* the "debt," and *removed* the "certificate." God crucified this certificate with Christ on the cross ("nailed it to the cross"). **It died when he died**

(Constable TL. *Notes on Colossians*)

"Christ was so nailed to the cross, and in him the law was nailed to it; Christ, when he was nailed up, died; so did the law. Christ rose again, but *not* the law; Christ rose because his death killed the law forever. If the law had not died in the blood of the cross, Christ could not have arisen. Since the law is dead and gone, spiritual quickening and resurrection are now ours."

(Lanski, RCH. 1964 *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*)

Look at Colossians 2.15

The disarming of the angelic "rulers and authorities" probably refers to Christ's defeat of Satan and his evil angelic (demonic) powers by His death and resurrection. Christ divested Himself at the cross of the evil powers which had struggled with Him so strongly throughout His ministry in attempts to force Him to abandon the pathway of the cross (cf. Luke 4:1-13; Matt. 16:22-23; Luke 22:53, et al.)

The "public display" probably refers to Jesus' disgracing of the powers of evil when He died on the cross, by bearing the sin that was *their* claim and hold on human beings. Christ "triumphed over" Satan's hosts ("them") at the cross (cf. 2 Cor. 2:14). "It," that is, "the Cross" or "His public, yet victorious death," is a better translation than "Him," in "triumphed over them through *Him*." It is more natural to view the principalities and powers here as the defeated foes, driven in front of the triumphal chariot as involuntary and impotent witnesses to their conqueror's superior might. "The picture, quite familiar in the Roman world, is that of a triumphant general leading a parade of victory. . . . To the casual observer the cross appears to be only an instrument of death, the symbol of Christ's defeat; Paul represents it as Christ's chariot of victory. See his crown of thorns turned into a crown of laurels. The truth expressed is that there has been complete and irretrievable subjugation.

(Constable TL. *Notes on Colossians*)

Summary Statement

1. The domination of our flesh has been broken. (2:11)
2. Our former manner of life has ended. (2:12a)
3. We have been raised from spiritual death. (2:12b)
4. We have been given new life. (2:13a)
5. Our transgressions have been forgiven. (2:13b)
6. Our debt to God has been paid. (2:14)
7. Our spiritual enemy has been defeated. (2:15)

Look at Colossians 2.16-17

Having revealed what believers have in Christ, Paul next pointed out the errors of the false teachers more specifically, to help his readers identify and reject their instruction. The first error was Judaistic legalism, the addition of Jewish observances to the gospel.

The false teachers were encouraging the Colossians to place their Christian freedom under their control. They wanted to limit it by prohibiting certain perfectly legitimate activities (eating certain foods, special meals, or freedom to refrain from attending religious festivals).

The five items mentioned in verse 16 were all part of Judaism, and they involved yearly, monthly, and daily observances. Therefore, it is very probable that the legalistic false teachers were to some extent Jewish (i.e., advocating obedience to the Law of Moses for justification and sanctification). Their legalism seems to have involved *asceticism*.

Definition of Asceticism

This word has its roots in the Greek: ἄσκησις *áskesis*, which means to exercise or train for something. It is a lifestyle characterized by abstinence from sensual pleasures, often for the purpose of pursuing spiritual goals. Ascetics may withdraw from the world for their practices or continue to be part of their society, but typically adopt a frugal lifestyle, characterized by the renunciation of material possessions and physical pleasures, and time spent fasting while concentrating on the practice of religion or reflection upon spiritual matters.

Finn R. 2009 Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World

The dietary and festival observances were like "shadows" of Christ. They were a dim outline, a sketch of an object in contrast with the object itself. The offerings were reflections of the one genuine saving offering at the cross, the priesthood was a foreshadowing of the priestly ministry of Christ, and the kings of Israel faintly suggested the coming King of kings and Lord of lords. The new age, then, is not the extension of Judaism but the fulfilment of the types and shadows of the Old Testament.

When Christ came, He explained that the Mosaic Law was no longer binding (e.g., Mark 7:18-19; Luke 16:16; cf. John 1:17; Acts 10:12; Rom. 7:6; 10:4; 14:17; 1 Cor. 8:8; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Gal. 3:19, 23; 4:9-11; 5:1; Heb. 7:12; 9:10). This failure of the false teachers really amounted to a failure to appreciate Christ.

(Constable TL. Notes on Colossians)

The new religion [Christianity] is too free and exuberant to be trained down to 'times and seasons' like its tame and rudimental predecessor [Judaism]. Its feast is daily, for every day is holy; its moon never wanes, and its serene tranquillity is an unbroken Sabbath.

(Eadie, J. 1957 Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians)

Look at Colossians 2.18-19

The second error was *mysticism*. The mysticism being promoted amongst the Colossian believers was essentially Gnostic and pagan and involved "self-abasement" which is the practice of denying oneself, with the idea that this will gain merit with God. Fasting, specifically, is in view. The false

teachers also advocated "the worship of (the) angels," probably with the notion that angels are the proper mediators of prayer and worship to God.

"Precedent for this approach to spirituality in Judaism [that Paul was countering in this epistle] is seen in a movement that came to be known as 'Merkabah mysticism.' The Merkabah refers to Ezekiel 1 and the throne chariot of God that Ezekiel saw. This teaching spoke of days of fasting to prepare for a journey to the heavens to see God and have a vision of Him and His angelic host in worship

One could withdraw and eventually go directly into God's presence. Thus this false teaching emphasized the humility of ascetic practice, visions, the rigors of devotion, treating the body harshly, and rules about what should not be eaten or what days should be observed (2:16-23). All this activity was aimed to help prepare individuals for the experience that took them beyond what Jesus had already provided, so they could see God and His angels in heaven."

(Bock, DL. "A Theology of Paul's Prison Epistles," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*)

Look at Colossians 2.20-23

The third error was *asceticism* (the basic or elementary principles of the world) The ascetic practices ("elementary principles," Gk: *stoicheai*) he referred to seem to have been connected to, or were extensions of, Mosaic Law. "If" (v. 20) could read "Since." It is a first class condition in Greek that, in this case, is a true-to-reality condition. Christians "died" to merely human ordinances of Judaism and Gnosticism at conversion (cf. Rom. 6:1-4; 7:1-6; 2 Cor. 5:14; Gal. 2:19). Nevertheless, it is possible to put oneself under these "decrees" *postmortem*, and again live like unbelievers in the world.

(Constable TL. *Notes on Colossians*)

Fasting was practiced to some extent in the early church, particularly on solemn occasions or in critical circumstances (Ac 13:2-3; 14:23); but it does not appear in the exhortations of the epistles. It was strictly a matter of individual choice or mutual agreement rather than something legislated. The emphasis in the New Testament falls rather on self-discipline as the key to dedicated usefulness in the kingdom of God (1 Co 9:24-27).

(Harless, H. 2003 *The Cessation of the Mosaic Covenant. Bibliotheca Sacra*)

The false teachers were in effect forcing the Colossians to live by the world system, by placing various ascetic requirements on them. The specific "decrees" cited as examples (v. 21) have to do with food, but these are only representative of many such laws. These laws are inadequate for three reasons: The things prohibited were "destined to perish" through normal usage; food and drink are consumed in the body. Furthermore, the laws referred to were of human origin ("commandments and teachings of men"); and they do not solve the real problem, namely, the desires of the flesh ("are of no value against fleshly indulgence").

(Constable TL. *Notes on Colossians*)

"Man's way of safeguard is by placing various restraints and negations of evil . . . God's way is by 'stripping off the body of the flesh' through death and resurrection with Christ, giving us a new life, a new nature, and a continual flow of nourishment for that new life direct from the Risen Head in Heaven."

(Lincoln, William. *Lectures on the Epistles to the Colossians*)

Summary Statement

The body of Christ, the church, will grow stronger in the faith only as it draws its nourishment from its head, Christ. The only increase is from God