



Faith Pulpit

What is Legalism?

Introduction

This article is not really a book review. But it is a response to a very important issue raised by Charles Swindoll in his book *Grace Awakening*. While there are many helpful truths in the book, there are also several problems – one of which is his understanding of legalism. Because it is wrong and colors his thinking, it affects many of the other things on which he comments.

A Definition of “Legalism”

Swindoll’s book is a sustained attack on “legalism,” yet the term is not defined until page 81. Nevertheless, a basic idea of what legalism is can be found throughout the book. This basic idea I will call the author’s “working definition” of legalism, while his statement on page 81 I will call his “formal definition.” Let’s look at both.

Formal definition

Swindoll says, “Now is a good time to become better acquainted with the staunch enemy of liberty. Legalism is an attitude, a mentality based on pride. It is an obsessive conformity to an artificial standard for the purpose of exalting oneself” (*Grace Awakening*, page 81). The major problems with this definition are that it is both insufficient and imprecise.

Swindoll is correct when he says that ‘legalism is an attitude, a mentality...,’ but it is insufficient to say that legalism is “based on pride.” Who determines whether or not a person’s actions are based on pride? The person himself? Dr. Swindoll? The same questions apply to the words “obsessive” and “artificial.” How many people would respond to Swindoll’s formal definition of legalism by confessing, “you’re right! I’m a legalist! All of my standards are artificial, my obedience to them is

obsessive and pride is the real reason for them!” But if Swindoll is the one who determines these matters, then surely he has not become “more tolerant and less judgmental” (page 13).

Working definition

Swindoll says, “Be warned, there are grace killers on the loose! To make matters worse, they are a well-organized, intimidating body of people who stop at nothing to keep you and me from enjoying the freedom that is rightfully ours to claim. I know where of I speak; I was once numbered among them. Legalism was my security, and making certain that others marched to my cadence was a major part of my daily agenda” (page xiv).

Throughout the book one finds expressions like, ‘legalists’ lists of do’s and don’ts” (xiv), “who will give us lists... These are grace killers ...” (62). So Swindoll’s working definition of legalism seems to center on lists. At one point in the book he says, “What in the world is this all about? Let me give it to you straight. Don’t give me your personal list of do’s and don’ts to live by! And you can count on this: I will never give you my personal list of do’s and don’ts to follow! Being free means you have no reason whatsoever to agree with my personal list; nor should you slander me because it isn’t exactly like yours. That is one of the ways Christians can live in harmony. It is called living by grace ... and it is the only way to fly. Now you say, ‘well, what if we find a list in Scripture?’ That is a very different issue! Any specified list in Scripture is to be obeyed without hesitation or question. That’s an inspired list for all of us to follow, not someone’s personal list” (132). According to this lengthy quote, Swindoll seems to believe that the difference between legalism and grace is determined by whether one’s list of “do’s and don’ts” can be found in Scripture.

Correction definition

Millard Erickson defines legalism as “A keeping of the law, particularly in a formal sense, and a regarding of obedience as meritorious.” (Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology, page 95). Notice that the motive is to gain favor with God. Charles Ryrie says, “Legalism may be defined as ‘a fleshly attitude which conforms to a code for the purpose of exalting self.’ The code is whatever objective standard is applicable to the time; the motive is to exalt self and gain merit rather than to glorify God because of what He has done; and the power is the flesh, not the Holy Spirit” (The Grace of God, page 117).

Conclusion

A distinction should be made between lists and legalism. It is certainly true that believers differ on their lists, and we must evaluate each item on a list in light of relevant Scriptural teaching. But disagreeing with fellow believers over whether or not Scripture supports their lists has nothing to do with legalism! Legalism is related to why one should obey a list rather than to the rightness or

wrongness of the list. If people think they gain merit with God by keeping a list [any list!!], they are legalistic!

True freedom is living obediently to Scriptural guidelines in the knowledge that all of our sins have been forgiven because Jesus Christ died and now lives for us: “For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Romans 5:10). And true liberty does not use itself as an excuse for sinful living (see Galatians 5:13), but rather, recognizes that the grace of God teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world (Titus 2:11–15).

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Dr. Houghton was promoted to Heaven on July 13, 2020, leaving a legacy of service and faithfulness to the thousands of men and women who he impacted during his ministry.