

Faith Pulpit

Let the Church Be the Church!

If the church is not the church as God intends her to be, no amount of success or popularity will fill the hungry soul. It is time to let the church be the church. So writes Dr. Rick Shrader, pastor of Metro Baptist Church in Kansas City, Missouri. In this article Dr. Shrader helps us answer our critics and challenges us to maintain purity and holiness in our churches.

Fundamentalists have often been called legalists. The problem today is that the word “legalist” has been used so often to mean anyone who has rules of conduct that this has become its accepted meaning.¹ But just because someone has said something repeatedly does not make it truthful.

What Is Legalism?

A legalist, by any New Testament definition, would be a Judaizer, a keeper of the Mosaic law. In the Gospels the legalists were the Pharisees who insisted that the Jews must keep the law (and remain Jewish) to be saved. In the book of Acts and in the time of the Epistles, legalists were the Jews who persecuted the apostles, realizing that the gospel of grace alone was the enemy of salvation by the works of the law. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) was called because “certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1).

Legalism, then, would be the attempt to be saved or remain saved by the keeping of the Mosaic law. Even if we broaden that definition to be the keeping of the moral law, I do not believe we have such legalism in our conservative, fundamental churches today.² Dr. Myron Houghton comments,

A distinction must 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.³

The Problem of Liberty

Not only do the critics misuse the word “legalist,” but they also misuse the word “liberty.” Rather than understanding liberty in Christ to be the freedom from sin and the ability to serve God in newness of spirit, many churches today are defining this word as the right to do as one wishes. Charles Ryrie recognized this danger when he wrote, “To introduce any laws becomes to them legalism. Unfortunately, too, this doctrinal confusion sometimes becomes the basis for a loose kind of living which is justified in the name of practicing Christian liberty.”⁴

Charles Spurgeon, in the midst of the Down-Grade controversy, wrote,

Many good men lament the fact that liberty is, in certain instances, degenerating into license, but they solace themselves with the belief that on the whole it is a sign of health and vigour: the bough is so fruitful that it runs over the wall. . . . It is a pity that such loyalty to liberty could not be associated with an equally warm expression of resolve to be loyal to Christ and his gospel. It would be a grievous fault if the sons of the Puritans did not maintain the freedom of their consciences; but it will be no less a crime if they withdraw those consciences from under the yoke of Christ.⁵

I am convinced that because legalism and liberty have been redefined, the contemporary church has lost its way in the matter of holiness and godliness.

A Matter of Conscience

One problem that accompanies these disagreements is that of conscience. It is much more difficult to feel you are in a compromising situation than merely to think that someone doesn’t like what you’re doing. A conscientious Christian who understands liberty and license knows he is in a compromising situation when his church has become contemporary and worldly. But the worldly Christian often looks condescendingly on the conservative brother and thinks his point of view is just old-fashioned.

Pleasing Men More than Pleasing Christ

The Evangelical movement of the twentieth century sought to please men more than Christ and withdrew from their more conservative, fundamentalist brethren toward the world in hopes of winning the world. Many conservative churches are now moving toward their position, leaving their conservative roots to join a movement that is broader in its local church philosophy. They asked the world what it wanted the church to be and then changed to meet that expectation. Of course, they have tried desperately to argue that this was good change, but the praise of the world hardly qualifies as a proper evaluation of the church.

The conservative church must remain what it is convinced it should be. No one is saying that this is an easy day to be conservative and traditional. It brings little recognition or success. But these things cannot be gauged by such standards, not even by the number of converts or the size of our churches! Our success can only be determined by our allegiance to the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. God's people have to turn from the broader way, even if it seems costly.

The Blessing of Holiness

Holy living is the proper outcome of the gospel. Throughout the Epistles we find such statements as, "As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him" (Col. 2:6). Though there are three aspects to sanctification (past, present, future), the great majority of its application is to the present Christian walk.

When a sinner is under the condemnation of the law of God but is still yoked to the bondage of his fleshly nature, he is not living in liberty. Neither is a Christian exercising true liberty who allows his old nature to control him through the flesh. From the moment of salvation, old things ought to begin changing and new things ought to appear. I have written often that it is the older generation who understood and practiced this truth when they first came to Christ. They went through this proper Christian transformation and have never gone back. Many in the younger generation today accuse the older saints of not changing, but the fact is they have changed! Now they are waiting for the younger generation to take the same step and venture out into the true liberty in Christ.

The Church as the Church

The local church is God's house made up of God's people. Within this wonderful group of God's saints, meeting in such privileged positions, is the command of the Head to be separate from the world. We don't need to be reminded that this separation is not monasticism nor cultic compounds, but we do need to be reminded that we must "come out" from among the things of this world (2 Cor. 6:17, 18). In the space of two chapters Paul told young Timothy to "shun," "depart," "cleanse," "flee," "avoid," and "turn away" from the world (2 Tim. 2, 3).

The purity of the church is so vital to its stewardship that it must purge the old leaven from among it (1 Cor. 5:7) lest the sin spread throughout the whole body. If the sin so spreads that it cannot be purged, the believer must separate. Paul removed the believers from those places where they could not remain pure (Acts 18:7; 19:9). This concept is not a defeatist or "holy huddle" attitude, but rather it is an inner zeal for the Lord's house and a desire to enjoy freedom and fellowship with the brethren. We want lost people to attend our churches, but we do not help them if we mimic their way of life, culture, and practices.

The Church Must Be Effective

The great debate of the last century was what makes the church most effective for the gospel's sake. Fundamentalists have insisted that a compromising church cannot be as effective for God as an obedient church. Even when the so-called standards of success (usually nickels and noses) are applied by observers, the church abides by the standard of the Word of God alone. The true work of God is not by might nor by power but by the Spirit of God (Zech. 4:6). The world's preferences are not the church's mandates.

This principle has been the understanding of dissenters throughout the church age. Even persecution is better than compromise because the power of God can still rest upon a church that is obedient and holy. "If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified" (1 Pet. 4:14). The contemporary church is not more powerful because it has larger crowds. It is only large and flabby if it has compromised God's commands for holiness in His house.

The Love of the Brethren

The love of the brethren is greater than the love of the world. Though we love any believer simply because he or she is part of the Body of Christ, there is no greater joy than to be around those saints who have grown into maturity with Christ. Even the struggle of their older years (which is met with gracious acceptance, courage, and even humor) becomes the greatest example of all as their conversation is more and more in Heaven where they look for their Savior and the changing of the corruptible into incorruptible (of whom the world is not worthy!).

And So

I wonder if we are afraid we will lose something here on earth. Will we lose our church buildings if we do not grow? Will we lose our schools if this generation doesn't choose our campuses? Will we lose our support base for missionaries if our giving doesn't remain high? Will our children not like us and not walk in our same path? Will we (perhaps most feared of all) lose our popularity and platforms and applause, the ability to measure ourselves by ourselves and compare ourselves among ourselves? If this is so, brethren, then we have our reward!

If we have but two or three gathered in His name who are seeking favor only with the Lord Jesus Christ, then we should be happy in church, in witness, and in fellowship.

If this is our desire, then the Lord may give us "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think," not as our motive for service but as a result of His blessing. Then we could truly say, "To Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (Eph. 3:21). Let the church be the church!

Condensed and reprinted by permission from Aletheia (vol. 16, nos. 2 and 3, February and March 2009).

Works Cited

1. This practice is like googling “MySpace” as a source for research: common usage becomes an “original source.”
2. Only Orthodox Jews are trying to keep the Mosaic law for salvation. Some denominations teach salvation by works (e.g., Romanism, Arminianism), but I do not count them as part of our fundamental churches that preach salvation by grace.
3. Myron J. Houghton, “What Is Legalism?” Faith Pulpit, October 1993. Charles Ryrie adds, “The existence of a code of law cannot be legalism. The fact that there are regulations, be it those of the Mosaic law or the law of Christ, is not legalism. Law is not legalism.” (The Grace of God, Chicago: Moody Press, 1975) 74.
4. Charles C. Ryrie, Balancing the Christian Life (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994) 160.
5. Charles H. Spurgeon, “A Fragment upon the Down-Grade Controversy” (November 1887) at http://www.spurgeon.org/s_and_t/dg06.htm (accessed February 2, 2010).

Dr. Rick Shrader

Pastor at [Faith Baptist Church, Smithville, MO](#) | [Other Articles](#)

Rick Shrader is the senior pastor of Faith Baptist Church in Smithville, Missouri, the editor of the Aletheia newsletter, and the president and founder of Aletheia Baptist Ministries. Aletheia Baptist Ministries provides resources and helps for fundamental Baptists, including offering Baptist and church history tours to England and Scotland. He and his wife, Ann, live in Gladstone, Missouri.