

Faith Pulpit

The Handy Slogan-Word Legalism

If ye love me, keep my commandments (John 14:15).

If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him (1 John 2:15).

But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless (Matt. 12:7).

It may be a common observation that it is easier to corrupt a congregation than it is to edify it. To build it up in faith and conviction seems to be the result of years of instruction and agony. On the other hand, to tear down its standards may require only a low level of instruction, so that even a brief mediocre ministry can persuade a congregation to relax its grip on spiritual riches.

A friend has given sad testimony of a fairly brief ministry but one which majored on the theme of legalism. In this case the preacher was careless in explaining what he meant, but he used the word “legalism” to denounce any practice that involved obedience to biblical commands. He used it against any manner of separation from the world or from apostasy. He used it to cover any spiritual demands implied by the cross that Jesus bore and told us to bear. Any such restraints on Christian liberty he wrote off as legalism, a burden not to be tolerated by believers of this generation.

One would suppose that an educated, middle-class church taught in biblical separation might see through such slogan-thinking and hold fast to the things they had previously been taught. My friend assured me that it was not so. When the pastor left, the church found it psychologically impossible to call any sort of separatist in his place. They had now developed a taste for pulpit junk food. The gospel of self-indulgence had displaced the Lord’s message that if any man would come after Him, he must deny himself and take up his cross.

Legalism

What, then, does this common term “legalism” really mean? It means trying to get salvation by keeping the law, by obeying a series of prohibitions and thus fulfilling the supposed demands of God. Or if not salvation, at least it means the attempt of a believer to try to merit God’s favor by observing ceremonies and external demands. Not even in the Old Testament does the Bible actually teach such a plan of salvation. There are people who hold such notions, but among believers who thirst for God, their number would seem to be small.

Devotion

As against such an idea of salvation, there is such a thing as devotion to God. Numbers of New Testament believers did acts of sacrifice that the Lord commended, acts that cannot be written off as legalism. The widow put her two mites in the offering, but hardly did the Lord commend her for obeying a rule. Mary of Bethany broke the alabaster box of ointment, an act of devotion. Stephen testified before the angry Council, accepting death, because Jesus meant so much to him. Paul listed his apostolic credentials in 2 Corinthians 10–12, but nowhere did he suggest that his sufferings were to gain him brownie points with God. I cannot think of a missionary or pastor in my acquaintance who seems to be motivated by either fear or gain, as though by keeping some divine laws he assures his salvation or his place near the eternal throne.

In John 14:21 Jesus said that if a believer loves God he will treasure and obey what He asks. In no way can we call that legalism. It is a matter of love, or purposing God’s satisfaction. Then Jesus promised that God would in turn love the obedient and reward him with a deeper acquaintance with both Father and Son. He thereby moved the matter to wholly different ground from that on which the modern Christian libertine might be comfortable.

In 1 John 2:15–17 the Apostle invites us to stop our devotion to the world and to the things in it. Again the ground is love and devotion, not rules and prohibitions. While some professed Christians may pride themselves on their liberty and tolerance, John views that mind-set as a chilling of the love for God. Two generations ago many of the saints showed their love for the Lord by certain practices and abstentions understood as avoiding worldliness. Some have now come to call much of that devotion by another name: legalism. We have since then filled our minds with images and ideas wholly foreign to Scripture, and —can it be a coincidence?—we notice that our supply of missionary candidates is drying up. We have become rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing; we also now welcome what means we can find to justify the tastes and desires we once avoided. Professed believers now offer us their slogan ‘legalism’ to provide us those means; they can belittle devotion, obedience, and separation by giving them all a bad name.

There is such a thing as legalism, and we do well to guard ourselves against it. On the other hand, there is such a thing as antinomianism, the label for the libertine, the religious scofflaw. The Bible does not offer such a person any ground on which to stand. Against both those positions, there is such a thing as

devotion to Christ. Granted, we may wonder how many pulpits are known for preaching that devotion. As with Mary of Bethany, that devotion may lead to sacrifices that other disciples may question; but it is devotion all the same, and a devotion that we do well to commend and emulate.

Let us not pass off slogans as substitutes for biblical thinking. We have little hope that those slogans will impress God in that day when we must give account.

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Dr. Robert Delnay (Th.D., Grace Theological Seminary) was a distinguished theologian, educator, and author whose ministry spanned over seven decades. A graduate of Wheaton College, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Grace Theological Seminary, Dr. Delnay served in numerous leadership and teaching roles, including at Faith Baptist Bible College, where he was a beloved professor known for his commitment to expository preaching and biblical scholarship.

A prolific author, he wrote several books and articles, leaving a lasting legacy of theological insight and pastoral wisdom. Dr. Delnay's deep love for God's Word and his dedication to training the next generation of Christian leaders impacted countless students and ministries worldwide. He went home to be with Christ in 2023.