



Legalism in the Book of Galatians

Legalism is a result of a process of turning away from the truth. Legalism is therefore volitional. Gal. 1:6.

“I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;” (Galatians 1:6, NASB)

The brand of legalism entered into usually will be directly related to some type of background exposure, practice, or principle. Galatians deals with religious legalism which was the basic feature of the religion of Judaism. Legalism always has a pseudo content or “another Gospel.” This is always set forth as good news. Gal. 1:7.

“which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.” (Galatians 1:7, NASB)

Legalism causes a person or persons to become very suspicious of the motives, methods, message, and person of someone else. Gal. 1:10-11.

“For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.” (Galatians 1:10-11, NASB)

Legalism can be spotted very easily by a communicator who has himself been in that type of set up. Paul formerly at the top of the Judaism syndrome could smell legalism a mile off. Legalism usually operates under the cloak of respectability and seeks to keep hidden its real processes of operation. This is the spying principle of Galatians 2.

Legalists usually follows the technique of infiltration to gather information and will bide their time as necessary until it best suits their purposes. When legalism is met with positive doctrinal content and procedure, it crumbles and is unable to fulfill its objectives. Paul refused them opportunity to get their campaign launched. Gal. 2.

When legalism loses its battle on one front, it will simply move to another base of operation and attempt the same thing. Legalism sometimes cannot get a grasp on a person when in the strength of the company of other strong believers, so it will concentrate on an individual when that one is standing alone.

Legalism is often seen in leadership in the congregation. This is fundamentalism today. When a leader gets involved in legalism, they influence others to go the same way with them. When a person gets involved with legalism as a principle of life, it distorts their whole approach to Bible doctrine. It affects the salvation principle, also that of spirituality, spiritual growth, and spiritual maturity.

The content of legalism is often something else that in itself had a bonafide function. Legalism in Galatians was a distortion of the Mosaic Law. The Law did have a real and bonafide function. Legalism takes a bonafide thing and distorts it. It takes the doctrine of separation and makes that the doctrine of spirituality. It takes baptism and makes that the doctrine of church membership.

In Galatians 3:1, the person in legalism has been “bewitched.” This term in the Greek means to have evil brought on you by vain praise. This is where the legalist appeals to the approbation lust of another and through this means sucks them into the legalism pipe. The person in legalism is described as “foolish.” Foolish means not understanding. Legalism is seen to be one of the greatest robbers of Christian benefits



by simply robbing the person from understanding the Word of God and all its benefits.

“You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?” (Galatians 3:1, NASB)

The legalist does not learn by experience. They have a peculiar tenacity and despite many failures, and vain strivings, they still can't see their error. Galatians 3:4 has the concept. Haven't you finally seen that your programs don't work, you have to go from one thing to the next, always looking for something better, never completely satisfied nor satisfying others.

“Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?” (Galatians 3:4, NASB)

The very thing that the legalist puts themselves under is that which rises up and smites them. A believer puts themselves under the taboos of others and can't measure up. So they put themselves under their own taboos and still can't measure up. So they put themselves under some church organization and still can't measure up. The very system that they embrace is that which proves to be deficient. Grace is the only system which does not maximize the believers deficiencies. 2 Cor. 3:4-5.

“Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God,” (2 Corinthians 3:4-5, NASB)

The believer in legalism has to be dealt with by an authoritative communication spiritual gift such as the Apostle Paul or a pastor-teacher with Bible doctrine content that is known to the believer in legalism. New content that a believer has not learned cannot be used to convict the person or straighten them out. The believer out of fellowship is in no position to respond to new truth given to correct them.

Legalism in the Church Age is in parallel to many other things of previous ages. It is seen in the Isaac and Ishmael issue, the Sarah and Hagar issue, and in the traditions concept attached to the Law. While in the Church Age, we see legalism in Galatians in salvation and circumcision, salvation and the Law, salvation and taboos, etc.

Legalism is set forth in the Book of Galatians as a bondage by legitimate things, taken from their proper contexts. The term bondage means the principles and ways of regular human living. This is not the degraded debauchery concept. The Law was a bonafide tool in God's plan. Circumcision was bonafide in God's plan. Legalism distorts bonafide things and turns them into the master of the person instead of simply a tool.

In dealing with the content of legalism, the communicator has to deal with the specific thing which comprises the legalism. Possibly it might be the legalism of language, then the communicator has to clarify language, or legalism of ritual, or legalism of policy. In all regards, the communicator must clarify that thing to remove it as a source of trouble. Paul clarified specific issues of law, grace, liberty, circumcision, works, taboos, etc.

Legalism has a pattern of expression. In Galatians, they came under the influence of Judaistic legalism. Then they took themselves out from under the grace principle volitionally and put themselves under the Law. This soon adopted an overt pattern of observing the days, months, times, and years. This then influenced their appreciation of their communicator and turned Paul into an enemy. It had stopped their spiritual growth process and Christ had not become formed in them. As a result of stymied spiritual growth and the absence of maturity, divine good production had been curtailed and had been replaced by pseudo production (human good) expressed as the lusts of the flesh.



Along with pseudo production of the legalist goes many other accompanying factors. These factors include the glory seeking of Galatians 5:26, the concept of straightening everyone else out in Galatians 6:1, and getting your eyes on people or ignoring them. Gal. 6:2-6.

“Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.” (Galatians 5:26, NASB)

“Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” (Galatians 6:1, NASB)

“Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one will bear his own load. The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him.” (Galatians 6:2-6, NASB)

For the legalist, Bible doctrine causes “weariness,” so they cannot stay around sound doctrine to pursue other things. The legalist tries to show off or impress others or their superiors or their subordinates. Many today are not interested in the lives of the people to whom they minister. The people in the congregation are just numbers in the ecclesiastical game of numbers and stats. Gal. 6:11-13.

“See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh.” (Galatians 6:11-13, NASB)

In legalism, man gets the glory and God is left out. This is the antithesis of grace. Gal. 6:14-15.

“But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” (Galatians 6:14-15, NASB)

Paul, in Galatians 6:16, makes it very clear that those who continue in legalism do not have his blessing or that of God. Peace and mercy are ascribed to those who follow the rule of grace and faith that he has set forth in Galatians. Likewise, divine discipline is administered by God to those in legalism.

“And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” (Galatians 6:16, NASB)