

CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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<i>FOREWORD</i>	4
<i>ARTICLES</i>	
DELIGHTING IN THE LAW R. Mark Shipp	5
THE SERVANT-CHRIST: MATTHEW'S ANSWER TO LEGALISM Allan J. McNicol	15
"AND THEY WERE SILENT": REFLECTIONS ON LEGALISM Michael R. Weed	29
A RESPONSE TO "AND THEY WERE SILENT" Charles Siburt	41
NOT THE ONLY CHRISTIANS: CAMPBELL ON EXCLUSIVISM AND LEGALISM Gary Holloway	46
<i>BOOK REVIEWS</i>	
<i>Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology</i> by Neil Postman Reviewed by William W. Stewart	55
<i>The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology For Today</i> by Everett Ferguson Reviewed by Allan J. McNicol	58
<i>OBITER DICTA</i>	60
<i>CONTRIBUTORS</i>	66

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A Response To “And They Were Silent”

Charles A. Siburt

Carlyle Marney was a one-of-a-kind minister who ran a place called Interpreter's House in North Carolina, a place where disillusioned, struggling ministers from all over the country would come for help. A minister asked him one time what his experience had shown to be the most important principles for a minister to learn in order to keep his emotional and spiritual balance. He said, “There are two: (1) A minister must learn how to say “I”--he must know his own self-worth before God so that he will have the ego-strength to do his job; and (2) he must learn the real difference between saints and sinners.” The second one is essential, he said, because sincere Christians become hypocrites the moment they begin to think of themselves as a separate human species superior to all other humans.¹

One specific contributor to the mindset which does not understand the real difference between saints and sinners is legalism. Legalism is misplaced confidence. It is the enshrinement of confidence in our certainty that we know what God wants most, in our ability to give God what he wants better than most other people, and in our self-justifying condemnation of those who do not give that to God as well as we do. Legalism is a short-cut security blanket for the insecure, an illegitimate advantage for the dishonest, a tragic wedge of defensive denial which stands between self-deceiving sinners and the grace which they so desperately need but cannot afford to

¹ Taken from a live sermon delivered in Tyler, Texas in 1976.

accept because it would require them to face and confess the truth--“ . . . Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst” (I Tim 1:15).

Michael Weed's reflections have skillfully analyzed the dynamics involved in the sick religion we know as legalism. With precise and insightful analysis he has excavated the sources and elements of legalism, both ancient and current, and has accurately described its consequences in faith and practice. Weed has rightly labeled legalism as a pathology because it is a sickness which is especially common among the neurotically (nervously) religious. It plagues those who are most diligent in their search to “get it right.” One such person is described in Luke's Gospel.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” He answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ ; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.” “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:25- 29, NIV).

The interesting thing about this expert in the law, i. e., legalist, is that he cannot follow Jesus because he is too enmeshed in his fixation on correct study of scripture to discern and do the will of God. What he cannot do is to love his neighbor like the Samaritan, an outsider, loved a total stranger who needed compassion. This legalistic student of scripture is too busy trying to justify himself--“getting it right”--to be a good, loving person. This constant obsession with self-justification leads religious persons to employ their own fleshly efforts to make themselves right, to make themselves self-righteous in ways that distinguish them from other lesser souls so that they can say, “Lord, I thank you that I am not like others, e. g., you know, sinners, publicans, and other people like them . . .” (Luke 18:9-14).

Weed's observation that legalists inescapably employ blaming as a favorite tool is profoundly true. It does undermine honest self-assessment; it does bolster the blamer's sense of superiority; it does reinforce the correctness of the criteria for measurement of others. Besides, the sick habit of blaming causes the blamer to take delight in picking at the flaws of the sinner, to feel justified in dispensing immoral and inhumane treatment upon the sinner, and to derive a false sense of “having done

the right thing” merely for blaming other imperfect people. And blaming can take a variety of forms of correctness criticism.

One form may be called Spiritual Correctness with its meticulous competitive monitoring of the frequency and duration of prayer times, or its dutiful submission to spiritual disciplines (both classic and contemporary), or its constant, insistent use of pious sounding but wearisome, escapist phrases attributing everything to the working and will of God and virtually nothing of significance to the will and trusting of the believer. Or it may come in the form of Worship Correctness with its intolerant prejudice that only certain traditional or contemporary formats, styles, music forms, and leadership roles are kosher. And it may appear in the form of Moral Political Issue Correctness with its rigid certitude that only certain positions on such issues as abortion, prayer in schools, creationism, sex education, or homosexuality are truly Christian.

A common phrase from the field of Conflict Management says, “Remember. Never wrestle with a pig. You both get dirty, and the pig likes it.” The problem is that legalists are not good (moral, ethical) people; they are not people with whom it is possible or feasible to attempt to work in good faith because they do not know how to work in faith at all. They are not about faith; they are about reassuring themselves that they are right and, therefore, have no need to be honest, to repent, and to change their behavior to bring it into compliance with the will of God. They are not about God’s will; they are about their own will. Legalists are not concerned with being good people; they are only concerned with being safe, secure, and superior people.

Legalism is a tragic disorder, a spiritual disease whose carriers are its worst victims. More than depriving others of God’s favor, it deprives its perpetrators of the love God waits to shower upon them. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son the elder brother hears the music and dancing of the celebration his father is throwing for the rebellious little brother, hears the explanation for what is going on, and then gets furious.

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for

him!’ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours’ ” (Lk 15:27-31, NIV).

The problem is not that the father will not celebrate his older son’s obedient compliance to the household rules and give him due affirmation for being a good son. The problem is that the son has been working so hard to be a perfect rule keeper that he has never felt any need or inclination to let his father enjoy him; he has never needed his father’s gracious, merciful, forgiving, renewing love. His father and everything his father can provide have always been there for him, but he has never felt the need or the confidence to ask for it. “All you had to do was ask,” the father says to the irate son. But the asking is the hardest part for him. He can’t grant grace to his brother (the “sinner who sins”) who needs it, and he can’t need it for himself (the “sinner who doesn’t sin”), much less ask for it. That is the ultimate tragedy of legalism--the legalists’ inability and unwillingness to allow God’s love to gush out on themselves or on others who really need it.

Two caveats are in order. One is the reality that legalists do not set out to be legalists; they set out to be faithful and loyal servants of God and his truth, totally devoted to what they understand to be his purpose for their lives. The problem, initially at least, is not the absence of good intentions or the presence of perverted motives hidden away in ungodly hearts. The problem is the unwitting distortion and calcification of very good motives and zealous intentions. Somewhere between earlier, purer surrender to God’s will and the blind, venomous hostility that finds them participating in the stoning of some of some designated “heretic” the eyes of faith have been clouded with cataracts of fear and suspicious anxiety; the hands of ministry have been paralyzed by the arthritic rigidity of jealousy and even hate. What may start out to be a mission for God’s sake can end up as a misdirected frenzy for the legalist’s sake. But this is not what they intended to happen.

As well-intentioned but now pitiful victims of their own distorted perspectives, legalists may often deserve or actually need firm accountability for their own sake and for the sake of their targets. More than anything, however, legalists need the grace of God ministered to them through those who see beyond the ugly exterior of their offensive behavior to the sad longings and fatigued spirits that languish inside their burdened hearts. They are every bit as victimized by their disease as any alcoholic or eating disordered person, perhaps more.

If we can readily muster up patient compassion for other victims of brokenness, can we not find some compassion within our hearts for victims of twisted faith? And if we cannot, then could our inability to be vessels of God's saving grace to them be rooted in being legalistic toward legalists? Even on his cross, Jesus was moved to beseech the Father in behalf of his persecutors, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing."

And the second caution is that there may be no legalists as legalistic as anti-legalists. Those who serve as mediators to churches afflicted by various conflicts and maladies know that wherever there are legalistic hardliners on the more traditional side of things there are equally legalistic hardliners on the non-traditional side. The main difference is just that the legalism of the traditionalists is obvious to the non-traditionalists; their own legalism is still hidden from their insight. The most dangerous legalists are those who do not know that they are legalists and those who defiantly protest that they are totally incapable of being legalistic. The only church members who are more legalistic than those who resist any and every vestige of change away from the security and familiarity of the past are those who with red face and clenched teeth stridently stand as gladiators of freedom in defense of the new traditions they would establish in place of the old traditions. This is especially true of those who espouse the tradition of being non-traditional in theology, worship, format, style, or methodology. When they demand that anything done in the past is unacceptable while anything wearing a "new" or "different" label is superior, they are eligible for the patient compassion that all legalists, traditional and non-traditional, require.

What makes legalism so slippery is that any belief or value we believe in strongly is thereby susceptible to becoming a statute within our personal legal code. Ultimately, the only solution for our proclivity toward legalism is an unwavering, non-negotiable, self-surrendering grasp of "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge" (Eph 3:18,19, NIV).

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