

Brothers and Sisters in the One Hope,

We would like to call to your attention the matter of what has come to be termed as “Legalism”. Briefly put, the issue of “Legalism” is tied to the matter of the Pharisees who, along with the writings of the Law delivered unto Moses, had added a myriad of man-made laws which they promoted to equal status with the laws of God. This issue of “legalism” continued on with the “Judaizers” – those baptized believers in the early days of the Ecclesia who were just not able to let go of certain practices that were commanded under the Law and demanded that such practices be continued. Both contained the philosophy of salvation through the works of the Law. These are facts of history that we do not dispute. What we do dispute is how the subject is now being grossly misapplied within our community.

We have no doubt that “legalism” **if it is properly defined** is something which we must avoid. Clearly we cannot gain salvation merely by works (though works and law play a pivotal role in acceptable service to God), nor can we place man-made rules on equal footing with Scripture, something that the Pharisees were guilty of and which was continued in one form or another by apostate religion. The Unamended community has for many years been charged with “legalism” due to our beliefs regarding atonement related subject matter. But now, the charge of “Legalism” has become a general term and has turned into somewhat of a straw-man argument, a club in the hands of those within our own community with ecumenical tendencies or with alternate (false) views of Bible teaching to strike at those with exclusive fellowship practices or who are seen as uncompromising in their doctrinal as well as prophetic views. Along with the charge of “legalism” one will also observe the term accompanied by the label of “Pharisee” or “Judaizer”. The subject is dealt with at great length in the Shofar (June 2004) in a new serial entitled “*The Judaizers: Another Gospel*” in a way that is of grave concern to us (also see June 2004 Advocate – Editorial). But instead of dealing with the specific points made in the article we wish to back up and deal with the roots of where we believe the misuse of the subject stems from.

The article provides very similar if not some paraphrased reasoning as well as a substantial quote from the book entitled “*Legalism vs. Faith*” by David Levin. The writer of the “Judaizers” article even refers to the book as a “must read” in comments made on the Williamsburg Foundation website. This was a book that began as a series in the *The Christadelphian Tidings* magazine (Amended). We have had the unfortunate experience of coming across this book and without beating around the bush we have to say that it is one of the most troubling, unscriptural, and threatening books to Bible Truth that we have read under the authorship of someone calling themselves a Christadelphian. Almost every line and phrase of the book is loaded with an erroneous statement or charge so all we can do in the present discourse is provide a general overview so that the spreading of such error can be recognized. Though the misuse of the subject has been around for some time, this book provides the “roots” of growing views on “Legalism” that we wish to draw to your attention.

The contrast to faith is “not disbelief, but legalism”?

The book, which we believe to be a spring board for others on the subject, basically is based on the premise that the enemy of faith is not unbelief but that it is the issue of “legalism”. It props up the issue of “legalism” – the dependence on law and rules – as the ultimate and great rival of faith that is contended against throughout all of scripture. Quoting under the heading of “Legalism opposite to faith”, “*To put the matter simply, the opposite of faith is not unbelief, nor is the opposite of the Son of*

God an atheistic sinner”... “It is from the base of legalism that the other failings of humanism – licentious, materialism and idolatry – derive.” (p.3). Quoting from “Key Points” (p.81), *“The main contrast to faith is not disbelief, but legalism”*. This would sound good merely as a theory of man but unfortunately for the author it is a premise upon which he builds an elaborate argument that is not supported by scriptures. Great effort is also exhibited by the author to use the Jews and their entire history under The Law as well as the writings of the Apostle Paul to support this so called “scriptural” principle.

Appealing to scripture we see that **the opposite of faith is in fact unbelief**. Unbelief – the lack or absence of faith - is the source of the great evils that the sin-flesh nature can produce. (The author clearly uses the word “unbelief” and “disbelief interchangeably.)

- ◆ Matt. 13:58 – Speaking of Jesus’ preaching effort in his “own country”, *“And He did not many works there **because of their unbelief.**”* Because of “legalism”? No, because of “unbelief”.
- ◆ Matt 17:20 – Christ himself contrasts unbelief and faith, not “legalism” – *“**Because of your unbelief:** for verily I say unto you, **if ye have faith** as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, ‘Remove hence to yonder place....’”*
- ◆ Mark 16:14 – *“Afterward He appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and **upbraided them with their unbelief** and hardness of heart, because they **believed not** them which had seen Him after He was risen.”* Christ did not condemn them for “legalism”, but due to the fact that in direct opposition to faith they “believed not”.
- ◆ Rom. 3:3 – Paul speaking of the Jews, *“For what if some did not believe? Shall their **unbelief** make the **faith** of God without effect?”* Does Paul contrast faith with the “legalism” of the Jews? No, but with their “unbelief”. Certainly “legalism” (properly defined) was a problem for them but not THE problem that the scriptures show as an opposite to faith.
- ◆ Rom. 4:20 – Speaking of Abraham, *“He staggered not at the promise of God through **unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God.**”*
- ◆ Rom. 11:20 – Speaking of the reasons why the Jewish branch was “broken off”, *“Well; **because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith, Be not highminded, but fear.**”* They were not broken off because of “legalism” it was because of “unbelief”. This principle of “unbelief” is continued in verses 23,30, & 32 of the same chapter.
- ◆ I Timothy 1:13 – Was “legalism” the sin of Paul before his conversion? Let him answer, *“Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious; but I obtained mercy, because **I did it ignorantly in unbelief.**”*
- ◆ Hebrews: 3:12 – *“Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of **unbelief**, in departing from the living God.”*
- ◆ Hebrews 3:19 – Why couldn’t the Jews enter the land after coming out of Egypt? Was it because of “legalism”? *“So we see that they could not enter in **because of unbelief.**”* See also Hebrews 4:6, and verse 11 that reads, *“Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.”*

As we can see here the scriptures bear out the exact opposite of what D.L. proposes in no uncertain terms. No doubt “legalism” (if properly defined) falls under the umbrella of unbelief but it does not replace unbelief as the overriding principle of scripture as D.L. would have us believe to carelessly promote his agenda. As an older brother used to commonly state, *“If you stumble over your premise you fall flat on your conclusion”*.

“Rules, Rituals, and Rewards”

In further defining “legalism”, the author of the book comes up with what he calls the “three Rs”: These are “*Rules, Rituals, and Rewards*”. He presents this in a negative light. Though these are matters that can be taken too far we have to ask the question; do not the elements of salvation contain these three things? Do we not have “Rules” to follow (e.g. the commandments of Christ)? Do we not have “Rituals” that we are to carry out (e.g., the memorial service, baptism)? Do we not gain “Rewards” for serving God acceptably (e.g. The Hope of Eternal Life)? The author states, “*Legalism wants rules so it can follow them and earn a reward. If we are legalists, we want to know the rules, follow them, and exclude those who don’t, so we can appear more righteous.*” (p.4) He comes to a horrible and false conclusion about those who seek after rules. The servant of God in fact seeks to know what God would have him to do. Self-righteousness (the pride of life) is something we all battle but it does not stand to reason that rules lead to this problem. Further on he states, “*We naturally want our religion to consist of rules and rituals and rewards instead of the life-transforming experience of true godliness.*” (p.5). First of all, “rules” and “true godliness” are not mutually exclusive principles as the author suggests but they go hand in hand. Also, in these days when the thinking of the flesh (humanism) commands the day we see just the opposite of the latter quotation to be true. The flesh doesn’t want rules, it wants “liberty”. Even Christianity so called has made great strides in breaking down rules and rituals to appeal to the growing free spirit that exists among society today. The flesh does not want rules; it does not want to be told what to do. The scriptures clearly teach, and the human experience bears out that the “lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye and the pride of life” wants free reign to do as it pleases (see Rom. 7) - Many still desire salvation, but without restrictions. The churches in increasing numbers are also doing away with “rituals” in exchange for a casual and unrestricted approach to “worship”. Are we not seeing the same influences permeating the Brotherhood?

It is strongly implied in the book as well as in the article in the Shofar that “legalism”, the idea that we can “*earn our way into the Kingdom by following law*” (Shofar p.19), is something that is pervading the brotherhood. We have **never, ever** heard or read it taught or implied by anyone at anytime that if we follow “Rules, and Rituals” that we somehow “earn” a right to eternal life. What we do know is that the scriptures do teach such things as necessary **aspects** of our service to Deity (more on that in a moment). There is here an attempt to “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” The “baby” being the principles of law (rules and rituals that we are commanded to follow), and the “bathwater” being the perceived attitude of those who may think they can “earn” the right to enter the kingdom based upon their own sense of righteousness.

More on “Rules”

Numerous references are made to the word “rules”, strongly emphasizing the concept of rules in a negative light. The word is used so much we considered counting how many times it appears, which would have been a waste of effort. A lot of time is spent on considering the Pharisees and their obsession with rules by the author in order to support his casting of “rules” in general in a negative light. The problem with the Pharisees, among other things, was not their adherence to “rules” but their propping up of “the traditions of men”, silly and meaningless rules and regulations which had no scriptural basis or value, or rules used as loopholes to avoid apparent difficulties.

Using the teachings of Paul from Colossians 2:20-23 the author of the book strangely claims that the Apostle came to the following conclusions regarding “rules” (p.10):

- ◆ “*Rules don’t work because they only deal with externals.*” ... “*A rule can declare something clean, but a rule can’t make us think clean.*” Though it is somewhat true that “a rule can’t make us think clean”, rules unquestionably teach us the difference between what is wrong and right. They do prompt us, one seeking God and His ways, to develop our minds to in fact “think clean”. How can we know what is right or wrong if we do not have Divine guidelines to know the difference? And if rules don’t work why do we have the “Sermon on the Mount” and a whole host of scriptural “rules” that help to guide us on the “straight and narrow path”? Why did Christ state that he who even looked upon a woman to lust after her was guilty of adultery, is this not a “rule” to make us “think clean”? Isn’t this a “rule” that deals with much more than just “externals”?
- ◆ “*Rules have an appearance of holiness. It might seem “holy” to abide by a long list of prohibitions. As noted above, however, true holiness can never come from following rules. This makes rules dangerous.*” ... “*Therefore, rules are worse than useless; they are deceptive and dangerous.*” It is true that people can give the appearance that they are following rules when their motivation may be all wrong, **but this is not the fault of “rules”** – it is a weakness of the flesh. The comments made by the author are so ludicrous we do not feel that we can add anything more to demonstrate the fallacy of what is being said in this quote.

We have to stop and comment here that in ecclesial life “rules” have been extremely necessary to uphold “*decency and order*” as well as to define, based upon scriptural terms, the standards of fellowship. [We have seen that when opposition to “rules” is made on the grounds of “legalism” it often has to do more with opposition to the Statement of Faith as a standard for exclusive fellowship.] There are also matters that do not find an explicit “thus saith the Lord” but based upon scriptural principles rules have been established to clearly represent our relationship to the world. There are no passages of scriptures that state, “Thou shalt not vote”, “Thou shalt not join military service”, “Do not hold political office”, etc. But we know, based upon scriptural principles that these are things that we are not to involve ourselves with.

Bible Schools/Gatherings have rules as far as conduct, clothing, etc. and though “man-made” they represent beliefs as to what is acceptable conduct for followers of Christ - Rules that probably but unfortunately had to be developed due to conduct or influences that were unbecoming to the Body of Christ in the first place. The “rules” are not such to offer salvation to those who follow them, but they do reflect badly on the spiritual attitude of those who choose to break them – representing a rebellious spirit. Rules may not provide salvation but they certainly can keep us out of the Kingdom if we break them with a defiant attitude – whether they be perceived as the rules of men (though based upon scriptural principle) and especially in relation to the direct commands of God.

Those who make the charge of “legalism” will sometimes do so by trying to undermine what they see as “man-made” rules or statements. In a very real sense they then are the ones who become the “legalist” in trying to find loopholes in standards or positions they do not respect – wresting scripture (as a lawyer twists the law) to obtain their goal.

The Law of Moses

In order to bolster this attack on the concept of “rules” and law every effort is made to destroy the credibility of the Law of Moses. The writer confuses the issue of “The

Law” with law in general and seems to argue that since we are now “under grace” and no longer under “The Law”, that law and rules are somehow contradictory to the issue of “grace”. The author of the book demonstrates a complete misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the purpose of the Law, stating that it was **not** an instructor to lead/teach people unto Christ, and that “*Certainly the Israelites could not discern the nature and mission of Messiah, whom they had never seen, from the various aspects of ritual law any more than we could know what a rabbit is like from a hand shadow on the wall.*” We beg to differ. If the Law was not there to instruct them of Christ, he who was found in almost all aspects of its design, then it was nothing more than a waste of time. The author continues, “*What they saw was the vanity of the law, not the reality of its shadows*” (p.18). Later on the author refers to The Law as “*1,500 years of futility*” (p.72). If they couldn’t see God’s plan in the sacrifices and other ordinances of the Law then where else would they be able to gain an understanding? - The poor faithful of old who lived under the Law if such a theory is true. Can you imagine being under a system of worship that was nothing more than “*vanity*” and “*futility*”? Now certainly there were many that did not have the eye of faith or desire to understand what the types and shadows in the law represented, but we also know that some did. What did the Psalmist state? – “*Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous thing out of thy law.*”(Ps. 119:18) The problem was not in the Law but in how some/many used and abused the Law. Though clearly it was a system that in and of itself could not provide salvation, this did not make it a vain and futile system.

The author further states, “*The law could only exist in the realm of the humanly observable and measurable; it could not deal with intangibles such as motivation, values, attitudes, and intentions.*” (p.87). - Actually it did or how else can we explain the answer that Jesus gave to the lawyer when asked what the great commandment in the law was? “*Jesus said unto him, “Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” and “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*” Are these not issues of “*motivation*”, “*values*”, “*attitudes*”, and “*intentions*”? Christ himself continued, “***on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.***”

The Law delivered unto Moses served its purpose. Christ came to fulfill the Law and to establish himself as the antitype of the Law. Again, the problem was not in the Law or law in general but in how it was used. When it was time to give it up there were many that had not the faith in what the Law was in fact teaching them to let it go. “*Christ is the end of the law*” (Rom. 10:4). Those with the eye of faith would and should have been able to see this in the Law; those steeped in unbelief would not.

The New Covenant

In regard to the New Covenant he reduces it to “*imponderables and ambiguities*”. (p.87). This sounds very familiar to the “Mystery” that makes up the religions of “orthodoxy” - the cry of Apostasy. He goes on to state that, “*The New Covenant abides in the realm of character, values, and attitudes, intangible to humans, but known perfectly by God.*”

Does this not make the hair on the back of our necks stand up? Error wants to confuse, not clarify. Error likes to propose shades of gray rather than to recognize the black and white issues of Truth. Error likes to dispose of law not to abide by it.

The author of the book makes the comment that “*We are not under law but grace*” (p.100). Though we are not under “The Law” of Moses, **we are under law**. Christ being “the end of **the law**” (Sinaitic Covenant) did not mean the end of law in general

under the New Covenant. We (those in covenant) are under “*the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus.*” Disobedience, unfaithfulness to its commands will result in rejection and death at the Coming of our Lord. But there is a **balance** involved here in how we understand the subject. We are to do what we are commanded but even if we do all that is required of us Christ tells us, “*when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.’*” This should keep our attitude in check and help us realize that though under duty to follow the commands given us we fall short of the glory of God and cannot save ourselves, but that we are dependent upon God for the extension of mercy and grace in obtaining Life Eternal.

Truth summarized

Much more could be said about this book and the subject in general but we have gone on longer than what we had intended. Clearly, as we know we now live under “grace”; we understand that we cannot “earn” our way to salvation - “By grace are ye saved”. But we also know along with “grace” that there are “rules”/“laws” that we are commanded to follow in order to serve God acceptably. “*If ye love me, keep my commandments.*” There is no contradiction here – both work together. We all are familiar with the passage, “Wherefore, my beloved, as **ye have always obeyed**, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation** with fear and trembling.”

In 2nd Peter 3 we are reminded of the duties and responsibilities that we have accepted as ours “in the Lord”. At the end of the chapter we are told, “*But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*” In other places the word “favor” is used for the same word translated grace (Luke 2:52) – So we are to grow in “favor”. **The way to find favor with Jesus, or with God, is to do as He commands.** Noah found “grace” (favor) in the eyes of God (Gen. 6:8). The reason for this is found in Genesis 7:1 & 5 – “*Thee have I seen righteous before me, in this generation*” and “*Noah did according unto all that the Lord commanded him.*” We know that Jesus grew “in favor (grace)” with God and man. How? - “The Father hath not left me alone; for **I do always those things that please him.**” (John 8:9). Clearly, if we hope to “grow in favor” we must obey (in mind and action) the commands of God.

A Warning

We hope that it can be seen how the issue of “Legalism” is being misapplied, not only within the pages of an Amended book but within our community (the Unamended). The book that we have just reviewed we believe is largely responsible. Take away “rules”, “law”, or at least cast them in a questionable light then what are we left with? - Nothing better than what we can find down the street at the local church, or what we find in the moral and intellectual soup of the world. Just as you cannot take away the vital principles of Faith or Grace there is a balance that has to be understood with the principle of “rules”/law.

The label of “Legalism” as it is being used/misused by some is an issue that the Unamended community has to face. There clearly is the motive to undermine any ability whatsoever to call into question any views or activities that are out of line with long held Christadelphian standards by throwing out the charge of “legalism” at those who are holding fast to such standards. This can involve the issue of fellowship, doctrinal and prophetic belief, as well as moral conduct. It is imperative that we recognize the straw-man issue of “Legalism” and how it is being used to undermine

the “old paths” of our community. There are shades and elements of truth to the issue but error always contains some elements of truth so as to shelter its true color. Be not fooled by this misapplied principle that is disguised in sheep’s clothing. The matter of “Legalism” as it is promulgated by the book “Legalism vs. Faith” as well as its use by others (e.g., the Shofar article previously referenced) is an insidious principle that is being used to blur the lines between Truth and error. Though the “Legalism” book takes more of a look at the Pharisees and the Shofar article concentrates more on the “Judaizers”, both are built on the same premise. For those who are “babes” in the truth these teachings are especially dangerous. The flesh does not like “rules” and for those inexperienced in the Word or for those who have more of an ecumenical frame of mind the issue of “legalism” holds a very attractive appearance in order to tear down standards they do not appreciate or understand. Those leading the charge of “Legalism” will hope to break down fellowship standards (and anything else) by trying to cast it as being “man-made”. They will accuse those of us standing in their way as “legalist”; they will call us “Pharisees”, “Judaizers”, “zealots”, etc. Do we have the spiritual fortitude to withstand such charges and attacks or do we fold because we love the praise of men more than the praise of God? Such teachings **HAVE NO PLACE** within the Household. We either make a stand now or anything and everything we hold dear as being part of “The One Faith” will be compromised because of our fear of being accused of “Legalism”.

This issue as well as a host of other difficulties comprises the trial that we must endure in these last days. Do we have the strength of our convictions? Isaiah 51:7 – *“Hearken unto Me, ye that know righteousness, the People in whose heart is My law; fear ye not the reproach of men, neither be ye afraid of their revilings.”* And Acts 14:22, *“continue in the faith, and...we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”*

Yours in the Master’s Service,

A. Thomas