

Voices: Legalism and liberty of conscience

October 3, 2022

One of the great threats that constantly has faced the church of Jesus Christ, even from New Testament times, has been the danger often called “legalism.” I assume most Christians reading this are at least somewhat familiar with the term.

There are multiple forms of legalism. One form also is called “works-righteousness.” This form of legalism teaches we are saved, at least in part, by our good works. Good works are not simply the necessary result and evidence of genuine saving faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8-10, James 2:14-26), but are a necessary supplement to the righteousness of Christ we receive by faith (contra Romans 4 and Philippians 3:9).

But works-righteousness is not the form of legalism I want to talk about here. Rather, I want to focus on the other major form of legalism. This form does not necessarily compromise or reject the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, but instead adds human commands to God’s word and seeks to bind the conscience with human tradition.

Jesus vs. scribes and Pharisees

Matthew 15:1-9 and Mark 7:1-13 record a confrontation Jesus has with scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem. These opponents of Jesus approach him and critically question him about why his disciples do not wash their hands before they eat.

These scribes and Pharisees are not talking about hygiene. They are talking about ceremonial handwashing that’s meant to preserve ritual purity.

There are numerous rules about ceremonial washings and ritual purity found in the Old Testament. However, none of these rules include ritual handwashing before meals.

The scribes and Pharisees condemn Jesus and his disciples not for violating commands of Scripture, but for violating “the tradition of the elders” (Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:3-5). Lest we judge the scribes and Pharisees too harshly, we probably can resonate with their reasoning. They developed and embraced these traditions to safeguard biblical commands about purity.

The scribes and Pharisees did not see themselves as rejecting or overriding Scripture. They saw themselves as being extra careful to honor what Scripture requires. A modern analogy might be installing special computer software to guard oneself against viewing internet pornography.

But the scribes and Pharisees took it too far. Jesus, quoting Isaiah 29:13, blasts his opponents as “hypocrites” who are “teaching as doctrines human commands” (Matthew 15:7-9; Mark 7:6-7). Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees for elevating human commands and traditions to the level of divine authority. Jesus also condemns his opponents for using human traditions to circumvent biblical commands (Matthew 15:3-6; Mark 7:9-13).

Paul and Christian liberty

Like Jesus, Paul is firmly opposed to “human commands and doctrines” being elevated to the level of God’s authority (Colossians 2:20-23). But what about debatable issues the Bible does not address and in which people’s consciences are conflicted? Paul touches on situations like these in Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8 and 1 Corinthians 10.

Space and time constraints forbid a full treatment of these passages, but here are some brief summary remarks.

First, Paul emphasizes unity and love (Romans 14:1, 10, 15, 19; 1 Corinthians 8:1, 10:24). Paul does not want the church to tear itself apart over disagreements regarding subjects on which Scripture does not give a decisive word. Paul wants a believer to prioritize the wellbeing and needs of others over his or her own.

Second, Paul urges a respectful “agree-to-disagree” attitude. For example, when it comes to eating meat sold in the market—which might or might not have been offered to idols, causing some Christians concern—Paul says: “One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him” (Romans 14:3 CSB).

Third, Paul warns against causing others to “stumble.” Paul says we shouldn’t cause other believers to violate their consciences. If Scripture doesn’t forbid something and you can do it with a clear conscience, go ahead. But don’t cause a believer with an uneasy conscience to do something they aren’t comfortable doing (Romans 14:21; 1 Corinthians 8:7-13).

Fourth, Paul emphasizes the role of the conscience. In areas which Scripture does not address, Christians are to be guided by our consciences without trying to bind the consciences of other believers. Paul fittingly concludes his remarks in Romans 14 by saying, “Everything that is not from faith is sin” (14:23).

Liberty of conscience

The Second London Baptist Confession of 1689 states: “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word, or not contained in it. ... To believe such doctrines, or obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience” (21.2).

Baptists historically have prized the liberty of conscience more than many other Christian traditions, and for good reason. The second type of “legalism” described in the introduction to this article is a very serious problem. It places undue burden on Christians, causes division in churches, and—most importantly—subverts the authority of God in Scripture.

I once knew a youth pastor in a Baptist church who taught it was a sin to listen to rock or rap music. Even Christian rock and Christian rap were forbidden. He went so far as to suggest churchgoers who listen to rock or rap music—even Christian rock or rap—might not actually be saved.

Now, of course, this man may have felt morally uncomfortable listening to certain kinds of music, and I do not judge him for that. Christians should take care what kind of music we listen to, what kind of movies and TV we watch, and what other media we consume. Not everything is beneficial, even if it is not explicitly forbidden in Scripture (1 Corinthians 6:12, 10:23).

But where do we draw lines, and how? Wisdom says, “Here’s where I personally draw the line for myself, and this is why.” Legalism says, “I draw the line here, and you’d better do the same!” When Scripture speaks, we must obey. But when Scripture is silent, the conscience and its liberty take the lead.

Joshua Sharp is the pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Orange, and a graduate of Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo., and Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary in Waco. The views expressed are those of the author.