

# ΠΡΟΣ ΓΑΛΑΤΑΣ

*A study of Paul's Letter to the Galatians with special reference to legalism.*

It's one of the worst accusations that can be leveled at a Lutheran pastor. No one wants to be called a legalist. Legalism is obviously a bad word, with a very negative connotation. Therefore, legalism is something that every one of us would fight against and, I suppose we would fight to avoid being called such.

The apostle Paul had a fight on his hands. In perhaps one of his most polemical letters, Paul comes out swinging. There is an enemy to be fought among the Galatians, and its name is legalism.

Well, Paul doesn't call it that. He doesn't even use the word. We use the word, and it seems that we tend to use the word in a wide variety of ways.

What exactly is legalism? This morning we will spend some time examining some of the ways the term legalism is used, and compare that to the enemy Paul opposes in Galatians.

I will submit that the legalism which Paul faces is the most serious kind, and so that we do not lose sight of that danger, I suggest that we reserve the labels "legalism" and "legalistic" for just this kind of error. That is, the kind of legalism that can destroy faith and creates a reliance on works for eternal salvation.

## **Defining Legalism**

Trying to arrive at a satisfying definition for the term *legalism* is a difficult task. Neither Scripture nor the Lutheran Confessions use the term as such. Yet I think we would all agree that both Scripture and the Confessions speak about the topic of legalism. But what exactly is it?

*Legalism* has to do with the law. My dictionary gives this definition: "strict, literal adherence to the law."<sup>1</sup> By itself that definition is neutral, but it is uniformly used negatively. It is some evil kind of misuse of law. But what law? And by whom? And what kind of mis-use? Is it an over-use or misapplication?

But since usage determines the meaning of a word, let's look at some ways others have defined the term legalism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Webster's II New College Dictionary. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> This list of quotations is not meant to defend or criticize any of the above definitions (yet). The point here is to note variety of definitions, inside and out of our own circles.

- ◆ “In the context of church growth, legalism is defined this way: “We do church the right way and if you don’t do church the way we do then you do church the wrong way.”<sup>3</sup>
- ◆ “Sadly, there are those who feel so strongly about non-essential doctrines that they will run others out of their fellowship, not even allowing the expression of another viewpoint. That, too, is legalism.”<sup>4</sup>
- ◆ “Legalism is substituting law for gospel, seeking to move a person to a desired activity apart from or in addition to the gospel. The law used may be divine law, human laws, traditions, policies, etc.”<sup>5</sup>
- ◆ “Legalism is using the law in an attempt to accomplish what only the gospel can, calling things sinful when God has not, or using the gospel as a club to coerce a certain type of behavior.”<sup>6</sup>
- ◆ “...for the specific purposes of this essay, we are going to be using the term legalism in a somewhat specialized way to refer to making laws where God has not, such as, “You can’t be a Christian unless you drive a Ford,” or “Packer fans shall not be considered as candidates for the WELS parish ministry.”<sup>7</sup>
- ◆ “Legalism among Christians consists in that they take the motives and and forms of their actions from the law instead of letting them flow from the gospel.”<sup>8</sup>
- ◆ “Legalism is trying to earn your salvation through your own efforts and works.”<sup>9</sup>

We understand that words with such broad meanings can be used in many ways. In other words, you *can* use it however you want to. But sometimes it is useful for people to come to a common understanding of terms to avoid misunderstanding.<sup>10</sup>

So before we throw around the label *legalism*, perhaps we should narrow our definition. And, I submit, that while we could label any number of misuses of the law as legalism, perhaps Paul’s opponent in Galatians is our real opponent.

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<sup>3</sup> “Legalism and Church Growth” <http://spiritualgrowth1.blogspot.com/2008/10/legalism-and-church-growth.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-Christian-legalism.html>

<sup>5</sup> WELS Topical Q&A [http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?1518&cuTopic\\_topicID=286&cuItem\\_itemID=4651](http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?1518&cuTopic_topicID=286&cuItem_itemID=4651)

<sup>6</sup> WELS Topical Q&A [http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?1518&cuTopic\\_topicID=46&cuItem\\_itemID=21748](http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?1518&cuTopic_topicID=46&cuItem_itemID=21748)

<sup>7</sup> Michael D. Schultz, The Scriptural Foundation for our Christian Freedom. WLS Symposium Essay 2001. Available at: <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/SchultzFreedom.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> J. P. Koehler, *Legalism Among Us*. The Wauwatosa Theology, vol. II (Northwestern Publishing House, 1997.) p. 229.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.answers2prayer.org/bible\\_questions/Answers/legalism/legalism.html](http://www.answers2prayer.org/bible_questions/Answers/legalism/legalism.html)

<sup>10</sup> Take the word *contemporary*, for example. The word itself can mean so many things that in order to have a fruitful discussion of the topic (and even to know what you’re really discussing), you need to have some common understanding of terms.

As we look into Paul's letter to the Galatians, we will stare into the face of the enemy as Paul confronted it. As we do, we will take note of a few things which Paul is NOT addressing, which will remain outside of this narrow definition of legalism.

## **The Galatians**

In order to understand the people whom Paul is addressing, we would like to know who they are. Unfortunately, we don't really know. Is Paul writing to the Celtic tribes (Gauls) who settled in northern Asia Minor around 280 B.C., or is he writing to members of the churches in the Roman province of Galatia which Paul founded on his first missionary journey and whom he visited again on his second journey? For various reasons which we will not recount here, I am inclined to identify these Galatians as members of churches such as Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, the "southern Galatians."

If that is indeed the case, we can compare Paul's missionary activity described by Luke in Acts 13–14 with Paul's description of these Galatians and how they came to faith. In Antioch, Paul preached the message of salvation apart from obedience to the law of Moses: "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:39) Some received this message in faith, but others (particularly the Jews) rejected it.

Despite opposition from the Jews in each Galatian city, a large number believed their message, and Paul and Barnabas even made stops on their return trip, "strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith" (14:22).

Compare this to the way Paul describes the Galatian's life of faith.

- ◆ They were "called...by the grace of Christ" (1:6).
- ◆ "Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified" (3:1).
- ◆ "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ" (3:26,27).

The Galatians came to faith through the preaching of Jesus Christ—without any works of the law.

The believers in the Galatian churches were a combination of both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 13:43,48; 14:1, 21,22). Paul's letter to them also seems to be addressing both groups, within the churches. On the one hand, Paul writes as though these people should be well familiar with the accounts of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah. He also writes as if at least some of his audience had been under the law but were now being led back under it. On the other hand, Paul seems to be addressing the Gentiles among them when he talks of their former life: "when you did not know God, you were slaves to

those who by nature were not gods” (4:8). We also assume Paul’s audience to be uncircumcised Gentiles, since some were being enticed to become circumcised.

But all of them, Jews and Gentiles, came to faith apart from law. He reminds them of the great joy they had in the gospel (4:15). And they kept it up, “running a good race” (5:7).

## **The Troublemakers**

Enter the Judaizers. These guys had been around the block before, but they had just started causing trouble among the Galatians. These seem to be the same men who, some years earlier, “came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15:1). They were from the party of the Pharisees, and their opinion was heard at the Jerusalem Council, but their position was defeated. The apostles in Jerusalem confirmed that both Jews and Gentiles can be sure that “it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved” (Acts 15:11). Paul writes, “We did not give in to them for a moment” (Gal 2:5).<sup>11</sup>

But the Judaizers didn’t give in, either. It appears that they travelled to other Christian congregations to advocate for their positions. The churches in Galatia were their next target. Their main contention seemed to be circumcision, but as Paul points out, why stop there? Why wouldn’t they also advocate for keeping many other regulations of the Mosaic law (5:3; 4:10)?

Luke refers to these Pharisees as “believers” (Acts 15:5). Whether these intruders still had any saving faith left by the time they arrived in Galatia, we do not know. But the point here is that this was an inside job. They were called Christians. They claimed to be just as Christian as Paul and the apostles—maybe even more. They were not asking the Galatians to give up faith in Christ. They weren’t looking to convert anyone back to Judaism. They believed that salvation was in Jesus, but that in order to get this salvation, you also had to submit to the law of Moses. They were certainly zealous for their position (4:17), but Paul says that their zeal is all a show. “Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ” (6:12). But no matter what their motives, the Judaizer’s message was gaining ground. They were causing confusion (1:7) and creating agitation (5:12). The Galatians were being swayed by the message of the Judaizers.

In addition, they tried to overturn Paul’s message by discrediting his apostleship. Can you imagine the conversation? “You need to be circumcised.” “But Paul said...” “Paul, schmall, he’s no real apostle. He’s second-rate, just a tag along, Johnny-come-lately.”

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<sup>11</sup> I am working from the viewpoint that it is the Jerusalem Council which is referred to in Galatians 2.

There are other arguments the Judaizers made. They claimed Paul was inconsistent when it comes to circumcision (5:11). On the one hand, he refused to have Titus circumcised. But then he turns around and circumcises Timothy right there in Lystra! (Acts 16:1-3).

They also suggested that the only reason that Paul was holding back from preaching the law (circumcision) was because he wanted to be popular (1:10). Paul must be preaching a Christianity-lite to make it all more appealing to those who don't want to make such a commitment. The Judaizers claimed to have the full gospel teaching, which included keeping the law.

Because of these attacks on his apostolic authority (and the truth of his message), Paul clears the air by defending his apostleship, and the direct revelation he received from God (ch 1,2). Paul wasn't reliant on Jerusalem or the apostles. In fact, most of the time he had spent in Jerusalem was as a persecutor, trying to capture and kill the apostles. Since his conversion, his time with the apostles was limited.

But even before Paul defends himself, he launches immediately into his concern for the Galatians.

### **Paul's Concern**

It's striking that Paul omits any kind of laudatory sentence in this letter. No "I thank God for you" section. Even the Corinthians, with all their problems, got that much. But what Paul has to say to the Galatians can't wait even for that. This is serious stuff. "I'm astonished." He can't believe it.

He can't believe "how quickly" they had fallen for this message. If our understanding and timeline is correct, Paul re-visited these Galatian congregations after the Jerusalem council, when he would have specifically shared with them the letter and the decision of the apostles. You can almost hear the frustration of a parent, "How many times do I need to tell you?"

Paul shows his sincere concern for the Galatians with some rather strong language. It almost borders on rude. In chapter one, Paul's ἀνάθεμα ἔστω shows that this is serious business (1:8,9). He adds shock value by calling them "You foolish Galatians!" (3:1). And who can forget his sarcastic call for the circumcisers to "go the whole way and emasculate themselves!" (5:12).

We take note at this point that Paul's concern for the Galatians is what drives the letter. He does use strong language to stir up the Galatians, and he does use strong language to condemn the Judaizers. But notice how Paul de-emphasizes them. He doesn't even acknowledge them by name. He calls them "some people" (1:7), "Those people" (4:17), and "the one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever he may be" (5:10). He doesn't want to draw attention to them. He doesn't want it to become about personalities. It is all about his concern for them that they might lose the salvation

they had. He was concerned that he had wasted his time, not because his time was so valuable, but because they were. They were like dear children to him, to whom he had once given birth by proclaiming the word of life to them. Now their relapse into the law brought severe pain to his heart (4:19).

## **The Danger**

What was the big deal? So what if some of the Galatians got circumcised? Wasn't Paul circumcised? Wasn't Timothy? Once again, the Judaizers were not asking anyone to give up Christ. Instead they were being told that circumcision connected you to Christ and that obeying the law would help keep you connected to Christ.

But the problem was not circumcision by itself. Twice Paul points out that for those who are in Christ, circumcision has no value, either positive or negative (5:6, 6:15). Similarly, the observation of "special days and months and seasons and years" (4:10)<sup>12</sup> is not dangerous in and of itself. We note how Paul near the end of his third missionary journey waited to leave Philippi until after the Feast of Unleavened Bread and moved on in order to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost. Marking time by celebrating festivals, even those appointed in the law of Moses, was not what presented such an immediate danger to the Galatians.

The danger is not in the law itself. The danger is in the *reliance* on the law. That's where the curse is (3:10). The Judaizers were not advocating obedience to the law for the sake of discipline or some other benefit, but were pushing it as an addition to faith that would be meritorious in the sight of God. The Judaizers claimed it was a matter of "both—and." Paul says it's "either—or."

Faith or works? Which was it when you came to faith? And if it was by faith that you received the Spirit, what's changed? It is by faith and faith alone that man is justified. And if you are relying on observing the law, you have lost faith. You have no need for Christ. And Christ no longer holds any value for you (5:2). "You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (5:4).

Paul's concern is that any reliance on the works of the law—any law, but elements of the Mosaic law certainly will do the trick<sup>13</sup>—overturns faith. It perverts the gospel. It is no gospel. A gospel of law and works is not good news.

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<sup>12</sup> Whether these calendar observations refer to a pagan ritual calendar or to the Mosaic festival calendar depends to some degree on whether we view Paul addressing primarily Jews or Gentiles. But his point is the same either way.

<sup>13</sup> You might be able to make the case that elements of the Mosaic law are more dangerous, simply because they originally came from God and were at one time part of his covenant with his people.

If you add the law to faith, you eliminate faith and are left with only the law. And “only the law” means “all the law.” There is no such thing as partial obedience to the law. In fact, part of the reason it existed was to demonstrate that very point. You can’t keep it. “Not even those who are circumcised obey the law” (6:13). Paul reminds the Galatians that the law was never meant to justify. It couldn’t. It was never given to “impart life” (3:21). The law was temporary, and added only “because of transgression” to supervise God’s people until the coming of Christ.

The danger of the legalism at work among the Galatians is simply this: because it introduced a reliance on the works of the law for eternal salvation, and because works are not able to save, those who do so, will lose their gift of faith and come under the curse meant for those who disobey the law. They will perish. The danger of legalism is eternal death.

### **Peter’s Hypocrisy**

Before we get back to defining the legalism at work among the Gentiles, we want to take note of the confrontation between Peter and Paul in chapter 2.

This incident shows us a couple things. First, it concludes Paul’s assertion that he did not receive his authority from Peter and the other apostles. He was not under their authority. If he was, it might have been out of place for him to admonish Peter. Secondly, Peter’s error is closely related, if not identical, to the error of the Galatians. By his example, he gave in to the circumcision group and did not give clear testimony to the error that the Judaizers were promoting in Antioch.

What we would like to note briefly is the manner in which Paul confronted Peter in public without previous private admonition. It would seem as though Luther had this incident in mind in his explanation to the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment in the Large Catechism:

All this has been said about secret sins. But where the sin is quite public, so that the judge and everybody know about it, you can without any sin shun the offender and let him go his own way, because he has brought himself into disgrace. You may also publicly testify about him. For when a matter is public in the daylight, there can be no slandering or false judging or testifying. It is like when we now rebuke the pope with his doctrine, which is publicly set forth in books and proclaimed in all the world. Where the sin is public, the rebuke also must be public, that everyone may learn to guard against it.<sup>14</sup>

Just as in Luther’s explanation, Paul’s intention was two-fold. First, it was to rebuke Peter. He had sinned, and led others into sin. But secondly, it was also intended to warn the other believers in Antioch against this false practice. Yes, practice and doctrine go hand in hand. Peter’s practice of not

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*. Concordia: the Lutheran Confessions (McCain, ed.), p. 391.

eating with the Gentiles revealed faulty doctrine that went right to the heart of justification by faith alone.

None of us would be quick to accuse Paul of side-stepping Matthew 18. Because the sin was public, Paul rebuked him publicly. But note carefully: Paul still spoke directly to Peter. He did not complain to Titus and Barnabas. He did not send an email to James in Jerusalem. He didn't post it to his blog.

It's also worth noting Paul's later relationship with Peter. Peter and Paul did not cross paths too many times. That was on purpose. They defined their roles and Peter worked among the Jews and Paul among the Gentiles. Paul mentions Cephas in his first letter to Corinth, but does not mention him again. Peter, however, writes about Paul in his 2<sup>nd</sup> epistle. Depending on whether Paul's Galatians were southern or northern, and assuming that Peter's audience in his second letter was the same as his first, it is possible that Peter was writing to these Galatians about his brother in the ministry:

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. <sup>16</sup>He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:15–16).

Confronting the issue and error directly did not destroy their relationship, but, in fact, it allowed them to continue to work together as dear brothers. Finally, we also want to remember that despite Paul's harsh words towards the Galatians and towards Peter, this counsel still rings true: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (6:1).

## **Narrowing the Definition**

Paul had an enemy to fight among the Galatians. The enemy wasn't Peter, the Galatians, or even, really, the Judaizers. It was the legalism the Judaziers promoted, which Peter complied with and the Galatians fell for. We noted earlier that the term legalism is used for all kinds of uses and misuses of the law, but we want to note a few things that are *not* included in Paul's battle.

## **Maintaining and fighting for sound doctrine is NOT legalism.**

The battle against the misuse of the law (legalism) among the Galatians was a battle for doctrine. It was a battle for the chief doctrine of the Scriptures—justification through faith, the gospel. But in order for the Galatians to fight against this legalism, battle lines had to be drawn. How else would they know what was true and what was false?

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! <sup>9</sup>As we have already said, so now I say



again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:8–9)

Doctrine is not an abstract concept. It comes in specific forms, in words, in preaching. And the battle line in this fight, Paul says, is the specific message which was preached to you earlier. Anything else is false. The message that we preached to you is exclusively true. Any other message, even if it contains some truth, is error.

We already noted that the reason for Paul's strong language in this letter is his concern for the souls of the saints in Galatia. That sincere concern must always be the driving force behind our concern for purity of doctrine.

But as it is, all too often, this concern is met with accusations of "legalism." It is especially true when we, for the sake of consistency and uniformity, draw lines in the sand such as "we ask that only those who have publicly professed their unity of faith with us to commune with us today." Just as the only way the Galatians could recognize the perversion of the gospel that was legalism, the only way we can recognize error is through the confession of faith a person makes. That's the only way we can show our concern for those who are caught in error.

So we have, in general, consistent practices that allow us to do this. We continue to discuss and evaluate the way in which we apply the doctrine of fellowship to particular situations. We rely on the advice of others, sometimes even synod-wide guidance on how to handle certain cases. But this is not merely a "one-size fits all" approach.<sup>15</sup> This is not merely "synod rules," or a "casebook governing the application of church fellowship principles."<sup>16</sup>

We are certainly capable of communicating our doctrine poorly and carrying out our practices unlovingly, but that by itself would not put it into the category of legalism.

### **Preaching the (moral) law is not legalism.**

Paul makes it very clear that relying on the law (any law) is contrary to and dangerous to the faith of a Christian. But that in no way keeps Paul from preaching the law. Of course, the law that he preaches is not obedience to the Law of Moses, but the law of God which is his unchanging will for mankind (moral law).

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<sup>15</sup> Dr. Mark Braun. *A Statement Regarding Non-WELS Students in the College's Choirs*. CHARIS, Spring 2005. Available at: [http://www.charis.wlc.edu/publications/charis\\_spring05/braun.pdf](http://www.charis.wlc.edu/publications/charis_spring05/braun.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Paul Kelm. Freedom from legalism. *Forward in Christ* Vol. 92, no. 11 Available at: [http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?1712&cxDatabase\\_databaseID=1&id=8618&magazine=Forward%20in%20Christ](http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?1712&cxDatabase_databaseID=1&id=8618&magazine=Forward%20in%20Christ)

In chapter 5, Paul preaches clearly against the acts which flow from the sinful nature in opposition to God's will. And he lists several specifically. Certainly there are many more specifics he could have named. In his day, witchcraft was named. In my catechism days, it was called superstition. Now it's witchcraft again. The point is that the acts of the sinful nature may appear in different ways at different times, and it is often the job of pastors, teachers, parents, etc., to help people make those applications.

Once again, the label *legalism* gets thrown into this ring also. These are also called "church rules," when certain biblical principles are applied to an particular activity, and that activity is called sin. In specific, we are talking about things that the Bible does not mention. If the Bible calls it sin, it is sin. That's good enough for us. Unfortunately it's not good enough for others.

But we get very nervous about those things which the Bible does not specifically address. Shall we list some of them? Card-playing, birth control, smoking, hair length, gambling. You can probably list others. There are other things that the Scripture does mention, but are not specifically commanded or forbidden, such as dancing or the use of alcohol.

In our desire to not go beyond what Scripture says, we do not make blanket condemnations of activities which God has not condemned.

But it appears to me that we sometimes go out of our way to avoid making applications of the law and calling sin *sin* in fear of being labeled legalists. I suspect that the apostle Paul would not have been so cautious. It's very true that we do not want to bind consciences where God has not bound them. But he has called us to bind consciences where they need to be bound, and letting them figure it out on their own doesn't seem to always be the best pastoral philosophy.

If "legalistic" blanket laws and rules were made in the past because the law was misapplied or applied too generally, we can acknowledge that. But that need not prevent us from directly applying the principles of Scripture to the lives of people today.<sup>17</sup> Could it be that in our hesitation to call sin what it is, we have from time to time emboldened our people to use their "freedom to indulge the sinful nature" (5:13)?

**Maintaining rules and laws (all by themselves) is NOT legalism.**

Technically, the broad definition of legalism applies to any kind of law. As one of the definitions cited above notes, these "may be divine law, human laws, traditions, policies, etc." And Paul certainly would agree that any kind of law *could* become dangerous. That is, it is dangerous IF that law is

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<sup>17</sup> Kelm article, cited above.

taught or obeyed as a condition for salvation. But Paul makes no blanket statement regard all kinds of laws.

Rules and laws exist in society, homes, schools, even in the church. They exist for the purpose of good order and discipline. Airlines enforce all kinds of rules about what is allowed and not allowed during flight. The authorities that exist have posted speed limit signs on our highways. My children do not get a treat unless they finish their supper. Those are rules. But none of them are attached in any way to the salvation of souls.

At the same time, any one of these laws could be obeyed or even taught in such a way that one believes that he will be saved if he follows the rules. That would fit Paul's definition of legalism. But the rules themselves do not warrant that label.

What about church rules? Are all rules off-limits within the walls of the church? We have spent the better part of this conference already discussing adiaphora and worship. We will try not to repeat what others have said. But allow one more observation from Galatians.

In 4:10, Paul criticizes the Galatians for "observing special days and months and seasons and years." Whether Paul had in mind a pagan ritual calendar or the Jewish festival calendar, marking certain days as religious celebrations was dangerous to the faith of the Galatians. But as we noted above, the danger was not in the observation, but in the reliance on such observation for salvation. Luther's comments are useful here:

Here someone may say: If the Galatians sinned in observing days and seasons, why is it not sinful for you to do the same?" I reply: We observe the Lord's Day, Christmas, Easter, and similar holidays in a way that is completely free. We do not burden consciences with these observances; nor do we teach, as did the false apostles and as do the papists, that they are necessary for justification or that we can make satisfaction for our sins through them. But their purpose is that everything be done in the church in an orderly way and without confusion, so that external harmony may not be disturbed; for in the spirit we have another kind of harmony.<sup>18</sup>

So we observe the liturgical church year. And we set certain days as holidays (holy-days). But we do not rely on these days or observances to save us. They cannot do that.

At the same time, however, the church calendar to which most of us submit ourselves is not merely an arbitrary ordering of days. It is not done merely for good order. It is a practice meant to teach. Luther again:

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<sup>18</sup> Luther, 1935 *Lectures on Galatians* LW 26, p. 411.

Most of all, however, we observe such holidays to preserve the ministry of the Word, so that the people may gather on certain days and at certain seasons to hear the Word, to learn to know God, to have communion, to pray together for every need, and to thank God for His spiritual and temporal blessings. And I believe that this was the chief reason why the fathers instituted the Lord's Day, Easter, Pentecost, etc.<sup>19</sup>

We realize that the Christian year is an historical development. We realize that our use of it is voluntary. But it is a form. It is a structure that we, in general, have bound ourselves to, and that I, in particular have placed myself under. And when we use this structure, we teach this structure. And perhaps, we even teach our people to use this structure to give order to their lives of faith.

Let me explain. I don't know about you, but about this time of year, I grow weary of wearing green. I look forward to the Sunday when I will be able to again put on a red, white, or purple stole. It's not because I like the colors. No, I'm particularly looking forward to donning the purple stole because I just can't wait for Advent.

But I will. Because I have to. Oh, I know. I don't really have to. No one is binding my conscience on this. It wouldn't be a sin to have Advent in October. But I have to wait for Advent. Because the church year is all about the life of Christ. And I have to wait for Christ's Advent. Just like they waited for his coming in the flesh. We wait. We live in the church year, precisely because as Christians we are always living from Advent to Advent.

We could show this for every season of the liturgical year, that because we observe the life of Christ in our calendar, we find a uniquely Christian order for our lives.

So when we teach this ceremony of days and seasons and years, is it a kind of rule, or law? Well, sort of. But is it legalism? And what's the difference? Luther notes in the introduction to his 1535 lectures on Galatians about the observation of these kinds of ceremonies:

There is also a ceremonial righteousness, which human traditions teach, as, for example, the traditions of the pope and other traditions. Parents and teachers may teach this without danger, because they do not attribute to it any power to make satisfaction for sin, to placate God, and to earn grace; but they teach that these ceremonies are necessary only for moral discipline and for certain observances.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, rules are not legalism. Submitting to the rules of another or establishing our own rules does not, by itself, lead to legalism. Certainly, these things can become legalism. Any rule can become legalistic, if it is done to earn God's grace or commanded as necessary for salvation.

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p. 412.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*. Luther's Works, vol 26, p. 4.

We do take note of the danger inherent in any ceremony, rule, or law. And perhaps the danger becomes all the more threatening the closer you come to ceremonies that relate to Christian faith and life. The *opinio legis* could potentially make anything into a work for salvation. Sometimes people will falsely assume that anything that we do is based on some rule or law that it has to be that way.

But if we teach them rightly, they should be so full of the gospel that we give no room for true legalism. That is, the gospel is so full and so free that we need not look any further for our salvation. Not to Moses. Not to the moral law. And certainly not to any ceremony or rite.

## **Conclusion**

The reliance on the works of the law for salvation is the most destructive and dangerous form of legalism. It perverts the gospel and destroys faith in the promise of God. That is the legalism against which the apostle Paul speaks to the churches in Galatia.

In order that we not take our eyes off of this danger, I have suggested that we not simply apply the label of legalism to every use or misuse of the law. Of course, we will not make a law about it.

However, for the sake of clearly understanding the concerns we have for maintaining the freedom we have in Christ, perhaps we can be more careful with the words we use. Perhaps we will be able to find other words which more clearly communicate our concerns. If a brother is communicating pure doctrine unlovingly, call it that. If someone is moralizing, call it that. If a brother is placing an over-emphasis on ceremonies or rubrics, maybe we call that “ceremonialism” or “rubricism.” But whatever terms we use, we are best served to be specific, be clear, as well as being gentle.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you, brothers” (Gal 6:18).

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