

Legalism

In a recent sermon I mentioned the apostle Paul's ambivalence toward legalism. Perhaps we are more like Paul than we might think. I believe we also have a love-it-and-hate-it feeling about this thing we call legalism.

I should let you know where I'm going with this. First, I'll introduce the topic. Legalism is not what you might think—it is not a religious concept, although it often finds itself in religious settings. Next, I'll suggest that legalism found its way into the religious life of the people of Israel and became the milieu of first century Judaism. Finally, I propose that legalism is necessary for our society, and may even be good for some churches. But the reason it is needed is that we aren't doing Christianity right....

A friend of mine is what I call a "rules person." In pretty much any situation he knows what the rules are, and he contentiously follows them. That's OK with me until he decides that it's his duty to enforce them. "Hey! Get up off the sidewalk!" A person looking somewhat hungover glanced up and gave us a loving gesture as we drove by. "Hmph!" Turning to me from his passenger side, "You know it's illegal to sit or lay on the sidewalk in Reno." "Maybe so," I replied, "but some laws aren't needed, or they simply don't work." Boy, that was the wrong thing to say. "Every law is made for a reason! The real problem is that not everybody follows them! A world without laws would be anarchy—social chaos!" His eyes were sort of bulging out, and a vein on his forehead had become distinctly visible. I changed the subject....

This brings me to legalism. Did you know that legalism is not a religious thing? Rather it is a political philosophy with a great power to *unite people* and *establish conformity* within a community. Basically, it prevents chaos. Legalism was codified when it came to prominence in China during the centuries preceding Christ and is partly responsible for uniting China's warring clans into the first great dynasty. Some characteristics of this philosophy may be familiar: everyone follows the rules without exception, there is no leniency, outsiders are oppressed, society becomes stratified with classes or castes, rulers are supreme, bureaucracy becomes essential for social order.

If we look for this concept of legalism within the Old Testament, we see that it was not a powerful influence until sometime after the people demanded a king so that they could be like other nations (1Samuel chapter 8). Prior to their demanding a king, Israel had God as their sovereign, with the Law of Moses as their guide for how to be in relationship with God and each other. Can you imagine the freedom they had within their society? God appointed judges to settle disputes, but there were no governmental laws as we know them.

But after Israel had a king like the other nations, the people had to learn a new way of social order and the idea of rule-following began to influence their religion. Legalistic views of the Law of Moses replaced a relational understanding of the Law. People started simply following the rules, and the great Law of Moses became a means of social control. It is during this period that God raised up the prophets, calling the people back to relationship with God and with each other. Hundreds of years later, Jesus was viewed by many as a prophet, calling people back to right relationship.

What about today? I believe that legalism in the church today is not a religious concept any more than it ever has been. The appeal of legalism is its power to *unite a community* and *create conformity*. In churches it is a political philosophy applied within a religious setting, and it works quite well.

Unfortunately, legalism offers no quarter--grace is not to be found--and it rejects the idea of compromise. No compromise—in this respect, liberals can be just as legalistic as conservatives. Thus, legalism in our religion has given us very liberal churches and very conservative churches, and perhaps in these divisive days it has to be that way. But is this divided Kingdom of God what Jesus calls us to?

I suggest that, if any truly diverse group of people is to exist in harmony with each other, then there must be compromise. To some people, our approach to several “hot topic issues” here at Carson Valley UMC appears to be a compromise. I suppose it is. However, it is more than simply “agreeing to disagree.” We stay together because we are willing to look at the other side of these issues--not as an abstract concept, but as embodied in our neighbor next to us in the pew. Such compromise requires a humble and determined sort of love. It is not easy to stay together in these turbulent times. Yet, I believe this is the somewhat unique (these days) example of Christian unity that we are called to live.

Returning to my car ride, we were behind schedule getting back from Reno. I had to smile as my friend glanced impatiently at the 65 MPH sign. “You know the real speed limit is ten miles over the posted number.”

Be the church, --pastor tony