

Lake Cities Community Church
September 28, 2008
Pastor Craig Schill

“The Lamentable Legacy of Legalism”
Colossians 2:16-23

We don't have all the details – but I imagine it went something like this. Shortly after delivering a healthy baby boy, the new mother insists on naming him a family name. She knows the name will not be well received. But she says, “It is a family name – I don't care what they say.” The husband is resistant – he wants a more traditional name. He replies, “Dear, this is not the battle to fight. There is too much at stake.” In the end, the husband gives in and their little boy is named – the family name. A few days later there is a knock at the door – it is the authorities. “News had reached us that you have named your new baby?”

“Yes” Says the husband, hanging his head, there is a little fear in his eyes. “And what is his name?” The husband pauses, and then the wife enters the room - her eyes flashing with defiance and pride. She says firmly, her eyes locked on the man: “*His name is Claude!*” You could have heard a pin drop, then the officer said to her, “You know the law – your husband will need to come with us.” They took the husband away and left the wife standing in the door, holding her new baby boy.

The city was Geneva, Switzerland – and the man in power was John Calvin – the great reformer. In Geneva, there was no separation of church and state – they were one and the same. Calvin sought to usher in the kingdom of God, and he and others set up strict rules for all aspects of life. Records show that on November 22, 1546 – John Calvin drew up a list of names that were inappropriate for naming children. He insisted that all children born in Geneva must be named after a character in the Bible. *And so the father spent four days in jail for naming their baby Claude.*

Our topic this morning is legalism – as we continue our study on unity in the local church – unity in a diverse community. Legalism is how *not* to deal with the gray issues of theology and culture. If you remember last week, we talked about three categories in which you can put nearly every theological or cultural issue. First, there are cardinal issues – dogma black and white truths that define Christianity (Trinity, deity of Jesus, etc.). Then, second, there clearly taught biblical truths (do not lie, steal, etc.). Third, there were many gray issues. *Gray issues are the raw materials in the production of legalism.*

Our goal today is to define legalism and to understand its impact on unity in the church. Our text is in Colossians 2:16-23. Please turn there with me:

Col. 2:16 Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— Col. 2:17 things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Col. 2:18 Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, Col. 2:19 and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. Col. 2:20 If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, Col. 2:21 “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” Col. 2:22 (which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? Col. 2:23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Exposition – Definition of Legalism

There are many passages in the New Testament that could be used to get at the issue of legalism. This one in Colossians is my favorite as it brings out three important parts that define the issue. The first part is that legalism is always based on **peripheral issues**. Peripheral is a synonym for gray issues. Look at verse 16 – the issues at work concerned what a person ate, or

drank, whether they would celebrate a festival and how to act on the Sabbath. These were Jewish Christians insisting that new converts adopt old the dietary rules and festival requirements under the Mosaic Law. But Paul told them these former decrees were nailed to the cross (v14) and have been taken out of the way. They used to be required, but now they are areas of liberty. A new believer could choose to what extent they would adopt old Jewish law – some adopted none of it and others certain parts. It became an area of preference.

But, Jews were not the only legalists in the church. There were others – probably Greek - false teachers calling for self-abasement (v.18) and the worship of angels (v18). The prohibition against angel worship was not a gray area, but a clear teaching. God alone was to be worshiped. But these false teachers also set up complicated rules of living that they expected people to follow – an ascetic lifestyle, verse 21, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.” They argued for separation from many things – the comforts of life and certain foods and drink. Paul says – “No!” Verse 20 – you have died to these kinds of elementary principles of the world - don’t reconnect with them. Paul said to the Galatian church (Gal. 5:1) It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

Eating, drinking, celebrating, the Sabbath, things not to taste, handle or touch - Legalism begins with gray issues – peripheral issues. Second, legalism **always passes judgment** against others on those issues. Look again at verse 16: “Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink...” In Romans, Paul says the same thing: “The one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats”(Romans 14:3). When it comes to gray issues – Paul says, “Stop judging one another – instead accept one another and your differences – in love. Unity in diversity is the goal and legalism works against this goal through a judgmental attitude.

Legalism is about **peripheral issues, passing judgment** and now third, it **promises holiness**. That is the bait on the hook – the promise – Do this and follow these rules and you will be spiritual, God will love you – you will overcome sin. Paul warns: Verse 23. These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence. The legalist says – keep these rules – stay away from these things and you will be godly. It sounds good – it appears to be wise – but what value does Paul say it has our desire to sin? None at all. Legalism for all its bluster – at the end of the day is a big disappointment when it comes to spiritual growth.

Summary: Let me see if we can pull together what we have learned so far. When we talk about a legalist – we are talking about: **A person who judges other people for having differences of opinions in gray areas of theology and culture. The legalist sets up rules around these areas that promise holiness, but in reality are of no value in spiritual growth.**

Tragic Legacy of Legalism from Christian History

Fighting legalism is a passion of mine, because legalism has left a lamentable legacy for the church. I, and I suspect you too have seen so many times where a legalist has brought division and pain to a church. Legalism divides people needlessly. A hobby of mind has been to collect legalistic examples from church history. I would like for you to take our definition of legalism and listen to how it has been manifested over the years.

First, Mark Knoll, a Christian historian, has written that Christians have (at various times) crusaded against: dancing, cigarettes, alcohol, and feminism. Remember that rhyme. I don't dance, smoke or chew and I don't go with girls who do? Legalism. Chuck Swindoll, in his book

“*Grace Awakening*”, writes that Christians have set rules against: Wearing cosmetics, Watching television, Going to the beach, Going to a restaurant that sells liquor, any cosmetic surgery, Working out in leotards, (there is documentation from the early church there were rules about) Colored clothes (Christians should only white clothes), soft pillows, musical instruments, eating white bread, warm baths, Men shaving their beards: “To shave is to lie against him who created us, to attempt to improve on His work.”

Other items that Christians have prohibited at various times: Can wear shorts, Can't attend circuses or carnivals or boxing matches. No coed swimming, no wearing jewelry, no radio. Christians were against radio when it first came out because Satan is the “prince of the power of the air.” My hero of the faith, D.L Moody, was strongly against reading the Sunday Newspaper. He wrote: “How many read the Sunday newspapers? I don't believe a man is in a fit state to hear a sermon whose mind is full of such trash as the Sunday newspaper if filled with. Men break the Sabbath and wonder why it is they have not spiritual power. The trouble nowadays is that it doesn't mean anything to some people to be a Christian...”

Christian schools are notorious for setting legalistic rules such as: No slacks on women (only dresses), No polka-dot dresses, Men: No hair covering the ears. No facial hair, no kissing or holding hands of your fiancée No short hair for women. Charles Finney's school allowed: no coffee and tea, no pepper, mustard, oil or vinegar (they are stimulants).

Going back to John Calvin's Geneva. If you lived in his city – you were prohibited from feasting, attending theatrical plays, wearing lace, playing cards, hunting, reading irreligious books and having hair of “an immoral height.” We also used to have many rules about what you could do on the Sabbath day. An early law in the State of Connecticut read: “No running, traveling, cooking, making beds, sweeping house, cutting hair or shaving on the Sabbath. If any

man shall kiss his wife, or wife her husband on the Lord's Day, the party in fault shall be punished at the discretion of the court of magistrates.”

Phillip Yancey' in his book *Church Why Bother* related that the church he grew up in frowned on such activities as roller-skating (too much dancing), bowling (some alleys serve liquor) and going to movies. He said, “The church erected this thick wall of external rules to protect us from the sinful world outside (i.e. the promise of holiness).” (Yancey, 18)

Speaking about movies. In his book written to young Christians, Dr. Martin Hegland argues strongly against Christians going to movies at all. Regarding movies he noted to his audience that in a review of 250 movies they found 97 murders, 51 cases of adultery, 19 seductions, 22 abductions and 45 suicides. Among principle characters...were 176 thieves, 25 prostitutes, 35 drunkards, etc. These 250 movies were reviewed in **1926!**

In summary, Legalism has left a lamentable legacy for the church. Legalism is an embarrassment to the church. Legalism is a barrier to the gospel. Legalism is arrogant and divisive. Legalism is a sin – because it is contrary to the cross of Jesus Christ – which brought us to freedom and not to slavery.

An Important Assumption and Clarifications

Legalism starts with peripheral issues, it passes judgment and it promises holiness. Legalism has indeed left a *lamentable legacy in the church*. With that said, I need to now surface an assumption and to make a clarification.

The assumption I have about this topic and the reason why I am hitting so hard on it is that I am assuming that legalism is a problem at LCCC and I am assuming that legalism is a struggle for you. It may be a struggle for you because you feel you have been or are under the

judgment of a legalist. Perhaps you struggle yourself with a judgmental attitude and believe so strongly in the rules you have made for yourself. I believe at some level we all struggle with legalism – both receiving it and doling it out.

As you pastor, I have observed people judge other people in our church in gray areas. I have observed people judge the church and the church leadership when it has not established the same convictions on gray issues as someone might desire. This is not a sermon for some other church and some other congregation – We have our issues here - Areas we must pay attention to.

But this is not a call to panic, but a normal process of self-discovery. *Every* church has their legalistic issues to some degree. If the churches that Paul planted had them – why should we think we would be immune from them? The question every church must ask itself is not whether it struggles with legalism – but upon what issues? What are the issues we struggle with? Are you curious to know my opinion on this matter? Well, you will have to come back next week to find out – Next week, as we begin to dismantle legalism I will share with you what I see as our particular challenges. So I hope you will be back next week.

The assumption is that legalism is something we must deal with at LCCC. Now the **clarification**. The clarification is this and it is an important clarification: *The problem with the legalist is not in their rules, but in their attitude about the rules*¹. Let me say that again – the Legalist’s problem is not in the rules – but their attitude about their rules. The rules are not the problem. Having rules and limitations can be helpful and necessary. Some people should never have alcohol because of their background. Others who struggle with purity may limit themselves from going to the beach. Parents set limitations on TV viewing or on what shows can or cannot

¹ Credit to Dr. Harold Hoehner at Dallas Theological Seminary for strongly making this point in his exposition through Romans.

be watched by their children – this is wise and responsible. Hear me clearly – having convictions or rules on a variety of topics is not the problem. The problem is the attitude about the rules.

*If your attitude is that everyone should share your standards on these issues... If your attitude is that your church should endorse your every viewpoint. If your attitude becomes prideful and you begin to look down on others different from you. If your attitude is that somehow God loves you more because you live a certain way. If your attitude is that certain rules will cause you or your children to grow in holiness -- **then you have fallen into legalism.***

I heard a caller to the Shawn Hannity radio show say this: “I don’t believe that a born-again Christian could be anything but a conservative.” If you have a conviction on politics and are a hard-core republican – good for you - but that statement is a legalistic statement! There are born-again Christians in both parties. Christianity Today this month asks the question – “Who are evangelicals going to vote for?” To have a position is great, but it is our attitude that carries us into legalism.

Application and Conclusion

I hope I have given us something to think about this week. My application for each of us is simply to ask two questions – (1) In what gray areas am I most prone to legalistic attitudes? (2) In what gray areas is our church most prone to legalistic attitudes? It would be a great question for your family or even your small group. Think about and we will pick it up there next Sunday, Lord willing.

Dr. Howard Hendricks is a professor at DTS is a living legend and I have learned so much from him. I took two elective classes from in seminary just to sit under his teaching. One day he said something in regard to legalism that seemed really important. I grabbed my pencil

and wrote down the quote. He said: “The greatest curse to evangelicalism is legalism. That’s what did us in. We are still trying to recover from it. Chafer (the founder of Dallas Seminary) said, ‘Gentlemen, nothing you will do will cause God to love you more, nothing you will do to love you less.’ (Hendricks said) That blew me away. I told God I couldn’t take any more. I was brought up in a very legalistic environment. We were taught that if a woman wore red fingernail polish; if she wasn’t going to hell, she was on the next train. At this stage in my life, I don’t know whether to laugh or cry; I think of all my friends who were driven from Christ because of legalism. I put my hope in sending you all out with an experience of the liberation that is in Christ.” (Dr. Howard Hendricks. September 5, 2003, DTS).

May we be a church of liberation and not of slavery, to God’s glory.