The Legalism of Man-Made Rules

Adding man-made rules and traditions

One type of legalism involves adding man-made human commandments or traditions to the teachings of the Bible. This type of legalism is not always in the form of a different “gospel”, but can occur as an “add-on” to the preaching of the true Gospel among basically godly believers. Legalistic man-made religious laws become like the man-made “laws of the Medes and Persians” spoken of in Daniel 6:8, 12, 15 and 17. These “laws of the Medes and Persians” could not be changed by their kings even if they were stupid laws that resulted in great problems.

Legalism in churches over the centuries

Over the centuries, many man-made rules have been taught by churchgoers as though they were laws of God:

- Some said it was wrong to enjoy sleep and a comfortable bed. They used to wake themselves up in the middle of the night with bells and often sleep in extremely uncomfortable clothes to avoid the so-called “worldly” pleasure of sleep. But note Proverbs 127:4 states: “…For so He gives His beloved sleep.”
- Some taught it was wrong to enjoy eating food. They often fasted so much their bodies became so thin and weak that they ruined their health and/or died at very young ages. Gluttony is wrong (see Proverbs 23:21 and 28:27) and sometimes God wants us to fast (see Matthew 17:21 and 6:16-18). But note in 1 Timothy 4:3-4, God said food is a gift from Him.
- Some taught it was wrong for men to look into the face of a woman when talking to her. Even the godly Francis of Assisi fell into this trap.
- Many taught it was worldly to laugh. For example in his Letter 130 (13) the early church leader Jerome (approx 347-419 A.D.) taught” “Leave to worldlings the privileges of laughing and being laughed at.” There is such a thing as evil laughter, when a person is drunk or is mocking another person. But laughter is a gift of God. One of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is joy (see Galatians 5:22). Ecclesiastes 3:4 reveals there is a time to laugh. In his “Encheiridion”, the pagan Stoic philosopher Epictetus (approx. 55-135 A.D.) wrote the following unbiblical view of laughter: “Do not laugh much, nor at many things, nor boisterously... Avoid also raising a laugh, for this is a kind of behaviour that slips easily into vulgarity, and at the same time is calculated to lessen the respect which your neighbours have of you.” 1 Quotes like this are the pagan source of Jerome’s unbiblical attitude to laughing.
- Others taught it was wrong to own property, land or material possessions. The Bible teaches it is wrong to make idols of houses, furniture, clothes and making money (see 1

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1 Epictetus, “Encheiridion”, 33:4 and 15.

- In the 1800’s, the wearing of a black coat and a wig by a minister was viewed as almost a command of God in the U.S. amongst Protestants.
- In the 1800’s, some Protestant churches taught it was wrong to kneel in prayer. This was contrary to Luke 22:41, Acts 7:60, 9:40, 20:36, 21:5 and Ephesians 3:14. Others taught that kneeling in prayer was the only godly way to pray.
- Churches have had rules against women’s prayer meetings, lay preaching, preaching without notes, church choirs, the use of organs in churches, cooking or riding a bike on Sundays, and hundreds of other things.

Some pastors from the Solomon Islands recently wrote to me about some churches there making the following man-made rules into supposed laws of God:

- Women who are having their monthly periods are not allowed to enter a church building. This is a misapplication of the very specific commands of Leviticus 15:19-23 to going to a church. Also note Leviticus 15:19-23 does not apply to new Covenant believers. This is because these verses are a part of the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law which do not apply under the New Covenant (see Hebrews 7:11-10:14).
- Husbands, who are living with wives who are undergoing their monthly period or childbirth, are not to participate in church activities.
- Husbands, who have had sexual union with their wives very recently, are not to participate in church activities. This involves a wrong application if the historical example of Exodus 19:15 and the specific command of Leviticus 15:16-17 to the context of attending a church. Also the New Testament does not teach anything about New Covenant believers having to do such things. In addition to this, Leviticus 15:16-17 is a part of the abolished ceremonial cleaning aspects of the Mosaic Law.
- All shoes are to be taken off before walking into a church building. This involves a misapplication of the historical examples of Exodus 3:5 and Joshua 5:13-15 to attending a local church. There are no verses in the New Testament which say we must take our shoes off when entering a Christian meeting.
- All church announcements must be made outside a church building.

**The man-made rules of the Pharisees**

Matthew 15:1-4 and 6-9 refers to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law re-interpreting the Old Testament according to the own man-made laws or traditions: “Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, ‘Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.’ But He answered and said to them, ‘Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying ‘...Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. ‘Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: ‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their
“Go away from me woman. The fire is still flickering”

1 Timothy 3:1-5 and Titus 1:5-6 refer to bishops and other church leaders having wives and children in a normal sense. But note through a misunderstanding of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 7:1-40 and competition with those Gnostic groups who regarded marriage as a lesser state than being single, after the time of the Apostles some church leaders began to impose man-made legalistic ascetic rules on themselves and other leaders in relation to marriage. One example of this can be seen in the words of Pope Gregory 1:

“I must not forget to mention the story told me by Abbot Stephen, whom you know very well. He died in Rome not long ago. According to him, there was a priest in the province of Norcia who ruled the church entrusted to his care in the fear of the Lord. From the moment of his ordination to the priesthood, he loved his wife as a brother loves his sister, but he avoided her as he would an enemy, never allowing her to come near him nor permitting himself any opportunity of going near her. In this way he cut off all possible occasion of familiarity with her. It is characteristic of holy men always to keep their distance from what is unlawful, and in doing so they usually deny themselves even what is lawful. This priest, then, in order not to incur any guilt through her, refused to have her render him even the necessary services. After a long life, forty years of which he spent in the priestly ministry, he was seized with a severe fever and brought to the point of death. When his wife saw him lying there half-dead, with all the strength of his body wasted away, she put her ear to his face trying to catch the least sound of breathing. Conscious of her presence, he mustered all his strength and with the little breath that was still in him he rasped in a hoarse whisper, ‘Go away from me, woman. The fire is still flickering. Take away the tinder.’” 3 Pope Gregory I lived between 540-604 A.D. He is also known as “Saint” Gregory the Great by those who esteem him.

By the 1500’s A.D., the seeds found in stories like Pope Gregory’s above bore fruit in the form of a man-made decree imposed on millions of churchgoers at the Council of Trent. This decree is recorded in my next section.

**Legalism of the Council of Trent**

In its canons on marriage or matrimony, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent in the 1500’s decreed: “CANON X – If any one saith, that the marriage state is to placed above the state of virginity, or of celibacy, and that it is not better and more blessed to remain in virginity, or in celibacy, than to be united in matrimony: let him be anathema.” The above is a man-made legalistic rule based on a false understanding of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 7:1-9 and 7:25-40.

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2 Sheed suggests that some extremists among the Pharisees even regarded having one’s bowels opened or urinating on the Sabbath as sin against the 4th Commandment (F.J. Sheed, “To know Christ Jesus”, Sheed and Ward, London, 1962, page 172). Sheed did not provide a source of this humorous information.

Humorous legalism

A humorous example of legalism was told to me by my wife. A number of Maltese Franciscan nuns taught at the primary school she attended as a child. In her class was a young Spanish boy called Jesus Lopez. The Maltese nuns had a belief that every time they mentioned the name of Jesus, they had to bow their heads.

So every time they spoke to this boy in class or in the playground and mentioned his name, they bowed their heads. After a while, the nuns became tired of bowing their heads every time they spoke to this boy. So they asked him if they could call him “Sam” instead. The boy agreed.

Examples of legalism among some Evangelicals and Pentecostals

Another example of legalism can be found in the teachings of Irwin, an Evangelical preacher of the late 1800’s. Vinson Synan said of him, “It thus became a sin for a man to wear a necktie, Irwin and his preachers declaring that they would ‘rather have a rattlesnake around their necks than a tie.’ Also, Irwin taught it was a sin to eat hog meat, catfish, oysters, or anything forbidden by the dietary laws of the Old Testament.” ⁴

Similarly some early American Pentecostals made a law against chewing gum. ⁵ Many believed medicines were “poisons” and Christians who took them were faithless and possibly unsaved. ⁶ In parts of the United States, some churchgoers interpreted Mark 16:17-18 in a presumptuous manner to suggest those who would not handle poisonous snakes were backslidden and without the power of the Holy Spirit. ⁷ All such laws were legalistic additions to Scripture. The major Pentecostal denominations in the United States came to renounce all such legalistic rules.

Buddhist legalism

Buddha, the founder of the pagan religion called Buddhism taught his monks to practice various man-made legalistic rules. They were commanded to abstain from:

- sexual intercourse in marriage
- eating after midday
- using cosmetics and adornments and
- using luxurious mats or beds.

These rules only applied to the person while he chose to remain a Buddhist monk. Buddha’s own personal bondage can be seen from the fact he left his wife and newly born child at the age of 29 so he could begin his new religious quest. ⁸

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⁵ Ibid, page 90.
⁶ Ibid, page 91.
A wrong understanding of legalism

At present in Western countries, most Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic believers oppose legalism. This is very good. But sadly, I have heard some make a tragic error in one aspect of their definition of legalism. They wrongly think legalism also involves applying certain New Testament practical living verses to specific life situations. For example, they argue it is legalistic to apply Ephesians 5:3-7 to our watching of television shows, movies, reading of books and magazines and listening to music. Ephesians 5:3-7 says: “But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and god. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them.” Some of them say because these verses do not specifically mention television, movies, books, magazines and music we are falling into error if we apply these verses to these things.

Ridiculous results of a false understanding of legalism

Let us assume it is a sinful legalism to relate Ephesians 5:3-7 to the specific circumstances of what television shows, movies, music, books and magazines we watch, listen to and read. Then this would mean it is legalistic to apply the previous verses in Ephesians 4:25-28 to specific situations not mentioned in them. Ephesians 4:25-28 says: “Therefore, putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbour, for we are members of one another. Be angry, and do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your wrath nor give place to the devil. Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.” Ephesians 4:25 commands us to stop telling lies and to speak the truth. This verse does not specially mention anything about Christian teenagers not lying to their parents.

Neither does Ephesians 4:25 specifically refer to pastors telling the truth about the state of their church’s finances or to Christians telling the truth on their tax returns or to Christian politicians telling voters the truth about their travelling expenses. If we wrongly think legalism involves interpreting Bible verses in relation to circumstances not specifically mentioned in them, this means we cannot use Ephesians 4:25 in relation to the above specific matters.

Ephesians 5:28 commands us to not steal. But this verse and all other Bible verses which command us not to steal, mention nothing specifically against stealing from the Federal Government in Australia by pretending we are unemployed when we have a full time job. (In Australia, this government department gives money to unemployed people who are actively seeking work). Nor does Ephesians 5:28 specifically mention anything about being dishonest about worker’s compensation and insurance claims. According to the abovementioned false assumption about legalism, it would be wrong for Australian preachers to relate Ephesians 5:28 to stealing from the Federal Government and being dishonest in relation to worker’s compensation and insurance claims. How ridiculous!

It is strange some will not teach that Ephesians 5:3-7 and similar New Testament verses apply to what Christians watch on television, in movies, read in books and magazines and listen
to in music, but will then say the New Testament clearly teaches going to a striptease show is wrong. Note there is not one specific mention of striptease shows in the Bible. Such preachers must apply general verses about immorality, lust and impurity, such as Ephesians 5:3-7 and Matthew 6:28 to prove striptease shows are wrong. How inconsistent is their use of the Bible!

The Bible does not specifically mention nudist beaches, pornography on the Internet, sex therapists who sometimes engage in sexual foreplay with their clients and many similar activities. Therefore if we have the attitude we cannot apply Ephesians 5:3-7 and similar New Testament verses to what Christians watch on television, in movies, read in books and magazines and listen to in music, then this means we would also have to condone nudist beaches, pornography on the Internet and so on. What hypocrites we would be!

**God’s great wisdom**

God deliberately made Ephesians 5:3-7 and other similar passages *general enough* so they could apply to all of the thousands of varied specific examples of immorality, impurity and greed that have existed down through the centuries. If Ephesians 5:3-7 had just listed specifics such as prostitution, sex with animals, rape and child molesting, people in later generations could have used this to say that since striptease shows and pornographic magazines for example are not mentioned specifically, this means God says these are right.

If the Bible had to record every possible type of immorality, impurity or greed, it would have to add hundreds of extra pages to make sure we did not overlook one. Instead of this, God made His commands against immorality, impurity and greed in verses such as Ephesians 5:3-7 *general enough* so they could apply to *every specific form* of them in every era, country or culture.

The false understanding of legalism spoken of above is one major contributor to the slack moral attitudes so prevalent among many Christians in Western countries at present.

**Accusing Jesus and Paul of being legalists**

According to the false definition of legalism some churchgoers have, even Jesus and the Apostle Paul would have to be wrongly regarded as legalists. This is because as seen in Chapter….. “Using the written Word rightly” and Chapter “How the Apostles and Hebrews’ author interpreted the Scriptures”, the Lord Jesus and Paul applied general Old Testament teachings and broad Old Testament commands to more specific situations.

Bible Study Questions

1. Does the New Testament teach there are false versions of the Gospel?
2. What are five examples of man-made religious laws which various Christian groups have taught?
3. Explain what Matthew 15:1-4 and 6-9 teach about many or all the Pharisees and man-made religious traditions.
4. Discuss the common false understanding of legalism which many churchgoers have at present?
5. What are the ridiculous results of this false understanding of legalism?
Early church man-made rules

One popular writer in the early church was a man named Tertullian. He lived between 155-222. Some of the things he wrote were Biblical and helpful. But in his following quotes, we can see the dangers of having various man-made rules being accepted in the church as commands of God. Tertullian said “…the male sex also has its own peculiar trickeries for enhancing their appearance: for instance, cutting the beard a bit too sharply, trimming it too neatly, shaving around the mouth, arranging…our hair,…smoothing off the rest of the body by some gritty powder…Are not all of these things quite idle and hostile to modesty once we have known God, have put aside the desire to please others and foresworn all lasciviousness?” (“Fathers of the Church – Tertullian – Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical Works”, Volume 40, page 140).

The Bible does not teach us to have an ascetic attitude to our outward appearance involving being dirty, not combing our hair, smelling and so on. Such ascetic attitudes encourage self-righteousness and are based on pagan religious ideas about God’s natural creation.

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9 Genesis 2:9 reveals God created trees pleasing to the eye: “And out of the ground the Lord God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight…” This was before the fall of Adam. God would not have created things that look nice if this was sinful in itself.

Genesis 12:11, 24:16, 29:17, 1 Samuel 25:3, 2 Samuel 13:1 and Esther 2:1-12 reveal Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Abigail, Tamar and Esther were beautiful in appearance. 1 Samuel 16:12, 2 Samuel 14:25 and 1 Kings 1:6 record David, Absalom and Adonijah were handsome in appearance. God created them all like this. God did not call them to make their appearance less attractive by ascetic pagan practices. But neither did God call them to overemphasise the importance of their appearance.