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A Legalistic and Abusive Christian Religion

Dr. Joseph A. Thipa

Vice Principal, Lecturer in Systematic Theology
Zomba Theological College, Malawi¹

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Introduction

We are living in a time when many Christian communities around the world tend to be legalistic, and their vocation as Christians being oversimplified into moral codes or made into a matter of living up to rules and following a set pattern. As a result, many Christian members would love putting more emphasis on external purity about their Christian life than on internal purity of their heart. Such does lead them easily enough to selfishness and callous indifference to others around them.

¹ See www.ZombaTC.org and JosephThipa@yahoo.co.uk.

This paper, therefore, constitutes an investigation of the extent of harm or abuse that a legalistic Christian religion would cause towards its members. It is no exaggeration to say that many Christian churches in Africa today, including Malawi, are faced with legalism crisis. Hence, the paper will investigate Law in the Old Testament, the Law in Jesus' time, the Law in Paul's time and the Law in Church of Central Africa Presbyterian for any traces of religious legalism.

I. The Law in the Old and New Testaments

The words 'legalism' or 'legalistic' do not occur in the Old or New Testaments. But legalism may be connected to the Law when it explains about adherence excessively to a Law, most especially the Law of the Old Testament. In Christian circles, legalism refers to any doctrine which states salvation comes strictly from adherence to the Law. Such is a works-based religion. Groups in the New Testament said to be falling into this category, include Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes and Judaizers. The English word "Law" is better rendered "guidance" or "direction." Ancient Jews sometimes used the word to refer to the set of laws that Moses received on Mount Sinai, as recorded in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books are also known as the "Pentateuch (meaning "the five scrolls").

A. The Law in the Old Testament

Many Christian believers frequently misunderstand the intent and purpose of the Law, popularly known as Jewish law. Many think and believe that it was God's intention that Jews keep all of the laws in order to earn God's favour. Indeed, many think the Jewish religion was a religion of works in the sense that the Jews had to follow a long list of do's and don'ts in order to find salvation. Bart D. Ehrman affirms that now many recent scholars have increasingly realized, ancient Jews were committed to following the Law because they had already been shown favour by God, just as in the New Testament believers do good works out of gratitude for God's favour they have received in Jesus Christ (Ehrman 1997: 34-35). With reference to the Old Testament, therefore, God had already shown favour to the Jews when he had chosen them to be his special people, and God gave them the Law to show them how to live up to this calling. For such a reason, keeping the Law was not meant to be strenuous and hated

task, but rather a great joy and willingness to uphold with thanksgiving for being appointed God's chosen people.

David H. Hinson, too, suggests that there were two accounts of God making a covenant with the people of Israel, concerning the basis for Jews' obedience to the Law (Hinson 2001: 113-114). The first is concerned with a time before the Law was given (Exodus 19:2-8) and the second after the giving of the Ten Commandments and the Book of Covenant (Exodus 24:3-8). On one hand, Exodus 19:2-8 is in keeping with the earlier covenants that God made with Israel through individuals like Noah and Abraham, and to whom God had already showed his love and goodwill. Israelites' obedience to the Law, therefore, would follow as an outcome of gratitude for God's love and goodwill for them. As it were, the giving of the Law is historically and canonically surrounded by God's gracious acts as it looks back to the Exodus (which took place on the basis of Abrahamic covenant), and it looks forward to the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land (Dillard and Longman 111 1994: 67). On the other hand, Exodus 24: 2-8 implies that the foundation of the whole relationship with God was obedience and that it was totally depended on the fulfilment of the fulfilment of the Law.

John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Calvin 4.1.24-25), affirms that there were promises of divine mercy that were manifested in the Law and Prophets of the Old Testament worth of gratitude through good works. He, thus, sees the presence of divine mercy in Law and Prophets in the Old Testament as meant for upholding willingly the Law with thanksgiving by the Jews, out of their gratitude or thanksgiving for the availability of such promises of divine mercy toward them. In so doing, God did show that he was willing to forgive their offences as his people (Deuteronomy 30:3-4). In other words, God was willing to receive his chosen people back, despite their filthy loves towards him (Jeremiah 3:1, 12; Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11).

Also, the Law from God consisted of rules pertaining to both cultic and communal life of the Jews. Ehrman argues that in the context of the first century the Law would not have seemed out of the ordinary in certain instances because the Law tended to be consistent with some Jewish cults that did not have written rules and regulations to govern their ethical behaviour, but were already there in the

practical life of the Jewish people (Ehrman 1997: 35). Similarly, in Malawi, one's faithfulness to God's Law goes along with cultural Malawian view of society and customs (Ross 1996: 65). The Law in such instances would assist in encouraging something that had roots already in the life of an average Jew. Hence, the Law did not turn out to be something that only a few would be capable of practicing. All-in-all, it was a great joy for the Jews to keep the Law because it was inseparable from everyday cults, and even more, doing so showed that they were the elect people of God.

B. Jesus and the Law in the New Testament

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is not opposed to the Law in the Old Testament. Again, Bart Ehrman says that following Jesus does not mean abandoning Judaism and joining a new religion that is opposed to it (Ehrman 1997: 87-88). Even in Matthew's day some Christians appear to have had the mind that Jesus had come to abolish the law. Those who thought Jesus had come to overturn the Law in the Old Testament were stunned to hear what Jesus had to say about the Law in the Old Testament, especially in Matthew 5:17-20:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all I fulfilled. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (5:17-20).

Jesus himself is not opposed to the Law. In his birth, life and death, he says he fulfils the law. He was born of Jewish parents and had a typical family tree, as is indicated by the genealogies in Matthew and Luke. Indeed, Jesus had Jewish ancestors. In Luke 4:6 we read that Jesus attended worship in the synagogue, did so on regular basis as a Jew. He also had a very prayerful life as every other typical Jew would be.

Also, Jesus' interpretation of the law over and against it was so remarkable. He does not actually contradict the law. Matthew 5 does not show that Jesus contradicts the Law. Besides telling his followers to adhere to the Law, Jesus goes to heart of the law in question, to its

root intention, and insists that his followers adhere to that, rather than the letter of the law as strictly interpreted. For example:

- The Law says not to murder (Matthew 5:21). On one hand, this Law is meant to preserve the harmony of the community. On the other, the root of disharmony on (which leads to murder) is anger against another individual. Hence, Jesus advises us to refrain from anger against another if we want to fulfil this Law.
- The Law also says not to commit adultery (Matthew 5:27), that is, not to take the wife or husband of another. Therefore, those who want to keep the Law completely should not passionately desire a person who belongs to another.

Jesus tells them to do so more vigorously than even the religious leaders. For the religious leaders, the Law was an end in itself as written and was practiced as an obligation. When Law is practiced as an end in itself it tends to lack the willing heart or love for the individual being attended to by the Law. That is, when religion is legalistic and oversimplified into a moral code or is made a matter of living up to rules and following a set pattern, or practiced as an obligation, it divides people into superior and inferior categories. Such was the practice of the by the Pharisees. That was the reason why Jesus more often denounced the Pharisees for their self-imposed high place of honour in society and for treating others as of little worth.

Indeed, the rules and regulations that developed among the Pharisees, for example, came to have a status of their own and were known as “oral” Law, which was set alongside the “written” Law of Moses. The Pharisees may have been a closed up society in Jesus’ day, to the extent that they stayed together as a group, eating meals and having fellowship only with one another, that is, with those who were like-minded in seeing the need to maintain a high level of obedience before God. Those who did not show this obedience were thought to be unclean (Ehrman 1997: 207).

In connection with the Pharisees as a closed-up society, William Barclay speaks of Palestine people being divided into two sections (Barclay 1975: 333). There were the orthodox who rigidly kept the law in every detail; and there were those who did not keep the laws’ petty regulations. The second were classed as “the people of the land”; and it was forbidden to the orthodox to go on a journey with

them, to do business with them, to give anything to them or to receive anything from them, to entertain them as guests or to be guests in their houses. By accompanying with people like these Jesus himself was doing something which the pious people of his day would never have done. That is, for Jesus to be intimate with publicans in his day, it was against the tradition of the elders, and therefore, the Pharisees looked upon it as a heinous thing. The Pharisees were a proud generation of men, conceited of themselves, and censorious of others. Hence, Jesus denounced them as being strict in avoiding sinners, but yet would not avoid sin themselves.

C. Apostle Paul and the Law

Legalism in the New Testament is revealed by the life of Apostle Paul prior to his conversion. Apostle Paul had been brought up as a Pharisee in the manner of the Pharisees above. In Philippians 3:3, therefore, Paul has struggle with his Pharisaic upbringing. Once for all he had learned through bitter experience that no legalistic religion could save a person. Here, the apostle Paul was concerned with the Jewish law as was practiced by the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the purists of their day, the strict observers of the law, with the inevitable result that thought themselves “righteous” and “despised” others.

In Galatians 1:14, the apostle Paul claims that, as a Pharisee, he vigorously followed the Law. These are usually understood as to be the Pharasaic “oral laws” that were in circulation in Paul’s youth, or ones like them, written in the Mishna – a collection of Rabbinic opinions about the Law (Ehrman 1997: 248). Oral laws, therefore, was about one being totally committed to understanding and practicing the Jewish religion according to the strictest standards available. According to oral laws, thorough adherence to the Law would be the ultimate goal of devotion.

However, in Galatians 1 and Philippians 3 we read that Paul as a law-abiding, zealous Jew that he persecuted the followers of Jesus. Far from adhering to the Gospel, Paul violently opposed it, setting himself on destroying the church.

II. The Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) and the Law

Kenneth Ross suspects the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP.) as being legalistic in the line of the Pharisees. In his survey

of Malawian sermons and the general impression left by the Malawian preachers on their listeners, Kenneth Ross² discovered that there is relatively little emphasis on the deity and humanity of Christ in the practical lives of the Reformed Christians in contemporary Malawi. Instead, there is but more emphasis on the works of Christ than they do with features of God the Father or God the Holy Spirit (Ross 1995: 85; Wendland 2000: 18; Mijoga 2000: 114). Again, Ross' survey shows that more sermons dwelt substantially on either the need for personal conversion or duties of the Christian life (Ross 1995: 87). He, therefore sees extreme strong emphasis on law-keeping and good works, on the part of Malawian Christian believers, which gives him the impression that these believers in Malawi have it that good works do contribute to salvation (Paas 2006: 42). Of some significance too, Matthew, John, Luke, Acts, Mark, and Romans, were the five most commonly chosen books by Malawian preachers in the whole of the New Testament - whilst "practical" James and "moralistic" 2 Timothy were the more commonly chosen rather than the more doctrinal Ephesians and Colossians (see table A below).

² Kenneth Ross has worked with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian for many years as a missionary from the Church of Scotland. He may be amongst the pioneers in research about contemporary life and impact of these mainstream churches in Malawi. He made a very broad survey encompassing three different Malawian churches, Presbyterian, Anglican and Roman Catholic that fall within the category of "mainstream". He made a study of each one of these mainstream churches on its own, followed by a comprehensive and comparative study. His general objective was to provide a survey and analysis of the general message being preached and its effects in the life of the people of Malawi (Ross, *Gospel Ferment in Malawi*, p.82).

O.T.	Prominence	N.T.	Prominence
Genesis	34	Matthew	48
Isaiah	23	John	36
Exodus	21	Luke	33
Psalms	17	Acts	25
Proverbs	11	Mark	22
Jeremiah	10	Romans	21
1 Kings	9	Revelation	11
Deuteronomy	8	1 Corinthians	9
2 Kings	7	2 Timothy	9
Ezekiel	6	James	8
Jonah	5	Ephesians	7
Joshua	5	2 Corinthians	6
Malachi	4	Hebrews	5
Numbers	4	1 John	5
1 Samuel	4	Galatians	4
Leviticus	3	2 Peter	4
Micah	3	Philippians	4
Daniel	2	1 Timothy	4
Job	2	Colossians	2
Amos	1	1 Peter	2
1 Chronicles	1	Philemon	1
2 Chronicles	1		
Habakkuk	1		
Hosea	1		
Judges	1		
Lamentations	1		
Nehemiah	1		
Obadiah	1		

Table A

Nevertheless, the picture that this Malawian church is trying to portray, here, seems to affirm that” theology ought to be constructed out of a committed engagement with the contemporary life of the

church” (Ross 1998: 16-18; Fiedler 1999: 23). Here, a Malawian view of God and one’s relation to God goes along with cultural Malawian view of society and its customs (Ross 1996: 65), just as in the context of the first century the Law would not have seemed out of the ordinary in certain instances because the Law tended to be consistent with some Jewish cults that did not have written rules and regulations to govern their ethical behaviour, but were already there in the practical life of the Jewish people (Ehrman 1997: 35). Hence, the actual knowledge of God from which theology may be constructed is not an idealistic or mystical form of knowledge but rather one that is worked out in personal discipleship and social praxis. It is the Bible as it is read and internalised, and found application in the life of the community that creates the field within which the theologian can operate. Hence, there is no theology that is culture free (Musopole 1998). We cannot artificially create an African theology or even plan it, but it must evolve spontaneously as the church teaches and lives her faith and in response to the extremely complex situation in Africa (Bueta ed. 1968: 332). Unfortunately, there has been a lot of scholarly attention as to the origin of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian and other mainstream churches in Malawi, but by contrast, their contemporary life and impact seem to have attracted little in a way of systematic study (Ross 1995: 81).

However, the findings that the Gospels of Matthew, John, Luke, Mark are among the five top most commonly chosen books of the New Testament, seems to suggest that the Reformed Christians in Malawi put much emphasis and importance on the oral material, that is, the preaching and teaching of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. In this direction, Ross’ survey revealed that preaching in Malawi, by and large, attempts to explain, amplify, illustrate, and apply a given passage of scripture into the lives of the people (Ross 1995: 86). Hence, such affirms why all answers to Kenneth Ross’ question about the most important rules or laws for a Christian to follow, fell into the one answer that Jesus gives in the Gospels: “Love God” and/or “Love your neighbour³” (Ross 1995: 88).

³ “Love your neighbour” tends to be very prominent in the Reformed church in Malawi and definitely it originates from what the Roman Catholic Father John Ambe describes as “an African strong sense of community,” which he detected [Footnote continued on next page ...]

In the Gospels of Matthew, John, Luke, and Mark are Jesus' life, sayings and parables, from which Malawian preachers draw out examples for application into the lives of their listeners - and hence, such are oral examples by Jesus Christ. Hence, such seems to affirm that in Jesus' life, sayings and parables (in the Gospels), Reformed Christians in Malawi are able to trace Jesus' active obedience to God his Father and Jesus' call for participation with him, in their renewed life. So, too, are the "practical" James and "moralistic" 2 Timothy, being the more commonly chosen rather than the more "doctrinal" Ephesians and Colossians, seem to serve as complements and support for "oral" examples in the Gospels that Jesus gives for the renewed lives of Reformed Christians in Malawi.

Indeed, for a Malawian Reformed Christian, Jesus' life, sayings, and parables, are very important, crucial and have a transformative power for the development of Christian duties in one's life. Certainly, Jesus' life, sayings, and parables, act as a base for Malawian Reformed Christian duties, stemming out of what Jesus said, and hence, Jesus' "oral" example for their renewed lives – without which, Malawian Christian duties would be isolated, and therefore, unworthy of God's justice. Therefore, Kenneth Ross' survey (see table B below) shows that "duties of the Christian life" has very high prominence in contemporary Malawian preaching.

among the Bafut society of Cameroon, good to enrich the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Ambe 1992: 37-38).

Theme	Prominence
Need for personal conversion	35
Duties of the Christian life	25
God's judgement	21
Christ's power to save/heal today	14
The life to come	12
Mission and evangelism	7
Christ's finished work	9
God's creation	9
Growth of Christian character	7
The incarnation	5
The deity of Christ	4
Marriage and family life	2
Importance of the sacraments	1
The humanity of Christ	2
Social renewal	2

Table B

Definitely, Jesus' pattern of life for the renewed life of the Reformed Christians in Malawi does stem out of Jesus' obedience to God for the demands of God's Law on behalf of human beings, as affirmed in his gospel teachings, sayings or parables.

Certainly, Jesus' transformative power in the Gospels for the renewed life of the Reformed Christians in contemporary Malawi remains faithful to the proclamation of God's grace because such does stem out from Jesus Christ's works and spoken words in the Gospels, and hence, reflects the true image of God in the lives of Reformed Christians in Malawi. Of course, humankind reflects the image of God when it relates and act in everyday life, upholding God's truth and justice. Jesus himself willingly maintained his obedience to God his Father by upholding God's truth and justice in life and word, of which he so persevered unto his death on the cross – hence, he demonstrated a life of conforming to the image of God.

Indeed, the Reformed Christians in Malawi do find in the Gospels so much proclamation of God's grace in the life of Jesus, such that they are constrained to respond in wonder and gratitude to God – leading to their “love of God” and/or their “love of neighbour”

as the most important rules or laws for them to follow (Ross 1995: 89). Thus, Jesus' "active obedience to God his Father in the Gospels" does present Jesus' transformational power for the renewed lives of the Reformed Christians in Malawi, in the sense that it is a revelation of the kind of renewed life that they are called to participate in. Hence, whatever Jesus Christ portrays as ethical, in his life, sayings or parables, becomes the measure with which the Reformed Christians in Malawi are capable of relating to God and to others in society.

III. Religious Legalism Today

Strict obedience to God's laws is not wrong. In fact, failure to obey is sin. Also, you can certainly decide to set a high standard for yourself in some area, based on your understanding of the obligations of the Christian life. This is not wrong, and it is not, even though it might be strict conformance.

For example, your view of the moral code of Romans 14:21 may lead you to adopt abstinence from alcohol as a standard, out of your regard for weaker brethren who might be caused to stumble. This would certainly be a strict and legal conformity; but it's not legalism, because you are not trying to earn points with God by your actions. Someone else may consider this excessive, but it's none of their business. It is not wrong for you to set high standards for yourself, and neither is it religious legalism. In fact, quite often what some believers might call legalistic is really someone else setting high standards for oneself.

A religion is legalistic when its members practice the Law as an end in itself, lacking the willing heart or love for the individual being attended to by the Law. The apostle Paul affirms in Romans 13:10 that love is the fulfilment of the Law. Christians must obey the Law of love which supersedes both religious and civil laws. How easy it is to excuse our indifference to others merely because we have no legal obligation to help them, and even to justify harming them if our actions are technically legal. Whenever love demands it, we are to go beyond human legal requirements and imitate the God of love.

Also, a religion is legalistic when its members practice the Law leading them to attainment of high place of honour in the society they live. In Matthew 23:5, phylacteries were little leather boxes containing Scripture verses. Very religious people wore these boxes on their forehead and arms in order to obey Deuteronomy 6:8 and

Exodus 13:9, 16. But the phylacteries had become more important for the status they gave than for the truth they contained. The Pharisees just looked holy with such phylacteries on them, and did receive people's admiration and praise. Indeed, they knew the Scriptures but did not live by them. Today, like the Pharisees, many people who know the Bible do so to earn a place of high honour in the society they live. They say they follow Jesus, but they do not live by his standards\of love. Again, many people today desire positions of leadership not only in business but also in the church. It is dangerous when love for the position grows stronger than loyalty to God. Jesus is not against all leadership – we need Christian leaders – but against leadership that serves itself rather than others.

Indeed, a religion is legalistic when its members fail to reflect the image of God in their relation and actions, in their everyday life, and hence, such is a failure in upholding God's truth and justice in the world. Such does lead to lack of love for a neighbour. The apostle Paul urges Christian believers to be imitators of God in Christ. Just as children imitate their parents, we should imitate Christ. His great love for us led him to sacrifice himself so that we might live. Our love for others should be of the same kind – a love that goes beyond affection to self-sacrificing service.

It is religious legalism when one says, "I work for God and God rewards me by saving me and blessing me in some way." That's not how God operates. He has no need or desire for our works. In fact, our works are offensive to Him. We read Isaiah 64:6, "All our righteousness are as filthy rags..." Here, if one tries to impress God with good works, God discards them as filthy rags. For it is by grace we have been saved, through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8). We become Christians through God's unmerited grace not as a result of any effort, ability, intelligent choice, or act of service on our part. However, out of gratitude for this free gift, we will seek to help and serve others with kindness, love, and gentleness, and not merely to please ourselves. While no action or work we do can help us obtain salvation, God's intention is that our salvation will result in acts of service.

Today, religious legalism also refers to any system of religious bondage imposed on someone by another individual, or by an organization, that attempts to make that person a practitioner of

legalism. Bullying tactics are often used: "Unless you accept our point of view, you are not one of us!" Ostracism is a very powerful persuader of novice Christians. So, while it is not legalism to have high standards, it is legalism to try to impose those standards on others as a system of spirituality.

Conclusion

When religion is legalistic it inevitably gains the pre-eminence over a true spirituality because external acts can be performed whether or not there is any sincere spirit supplying the motive force. Also, legalistic religion always divides people into superior and inferior categories, where the purists set themselves apart from the life of ordinary men and women.

If left unchecked, legalistic religion will gradually take the place of God, and hence, it undermines God's mercy and grace towards his people that was revealed in his son Jesus. Grace is God's unforced initiative and pervasive, extravagant demonstrations of care and favour for all. On the one hand God's favour is poured out indiscriminately ("to the ungrateful and the wicked," Luke 6:35); and on the other hand, those in dire need - the poor and marginalized - can be assured that his compassion reaches especially to them. Definitely, God's grace is given freely but it also enables and invites human response, so that people are called to behave towards God with worship, gratitude and obedience and towards one another in ways that reflect and broadcast the graciousness of God (Alexander (Ed) et al 2000).

In Philippians 3:6, the apostle Paul had impressive credentials, upbringing, nationality, family background, inheritance, orthodoxy, activity and morality (see 2 Corinthians 11 and Galatians 1:13-24, for more credentials). However, his conversion to faith in Christ in Acts chapter 9 was not based on what he had done (legalism), but on God's grace. Paul did not depend on his deeds to please God because even the most impressive credentials fall short of the holy standards of God. As such, a legalistic religion often fails to see that human beings are not completely rational and that they often fail to do exactly what they know they ought to do. In his letter to the Romans Paul puts a searching question to those who boast of knowing the law, "While you preach against stealing, do you steal?" (Romans 2:21).

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