

Roaming the web recently, as I am wont to do, I ran across an article by one Marshall Beeber in which he attacks certain trends in the Messianic Movement and passionately advocates a return to older paradigms, which he deems to be the God-honoring old paths from which we never should have strayed. I could spend a few days working on responses to the red herrings Mr. Beeber evokes in his comments, but for today I want to concentrate on one: his frequent evocation of the term "legalistic" or "legalism." This is what I term a "theological swear word," by which I mean an alarmist term, seldom if ever defined, which is used for effect. The effect is usually to label a position or person or group of persons in such a manner as to warn others away.

"Legalism" is one of the more common terms being used in this fashion by certain persons in the Messianic Jewish Movement and in the Jewish Missions Movement. I think it is past time the term was defined, and its misuse exposed.

In his article, "Dismantling Legalism In the Messianic Jewish Movement Today, found on-line 7/14/06 at <http://www.messianic-literary.com/dismantle.htm>, Mr. Beeber says the following:

The greatest threat to the Messianic Jewish (Hebrew Christian) Movement in the 21st Century is the de-spiritualization of its ranks by legalism in the form of mandatory Torah observance. I believe the reason why the "gospel of grace" was overtaken by "Torah observant legalism", is due to a spirit of unbiblical compromise and conformation to a false spirit of religiosity among Messianic Jewish leaders. To make the situation worse, grace oriented Messianic Jewish (Hebrew Christians) leaders have themselves been polarized by various secondary issues. To reverse the stemming tide of legalism before the entire movement is lost, we must put aside our differences and work together for the common goal of the gospel.

. . . . Let me take some time to explain why legalism in the form of strict Torah Observance has successfully overtaken the correct doctrine of Grace and how Grace oriented Messianic Judaism can regain the hearts and minds of believers.

. . . Today almost all dissenting teachers have been ostracized from much of the movement. Those that remain but disagree have learned a certain "politically correct" posture to take regarding legalism and have therefore been neutralized. Both the UMJC and MJA are now supportive of [this view]. . . . It looks like the battle against legalism is being lost! But the legalist leaders have not yet faced the repercussion of their folly, nor the full opposition of their Grace oriented Messianic Jewish and supportive Christian brethren. . . .

The preceding are excerpts from Mr. Beeber's article. I invite you to read the original as well as these excerpts and note how many times he uses the term "legalist" or "legalism" without defining either, and the strongly perjorative and polemical manner in which he uses the terms. This is what I mean by theological swearing.

How shall we respond to this? Well, many ways. There are a number of red herrings, half-truths and mischaracterizations in this document. But for today, let's settle for just one—a better definition of "legalism."

I like the one given by Charles Caldwell Ryrie, a well-known Christian theologian of a camp [Dispensationalism] with which Marshall Beeber is usually in full agreement:

Legalism may be defined as a fleshly attitude which conforms to a code for the purpose of exalting self. The code is whatever objective standard is applicable to the time; the motive is to exalt self and gain merit rather than to glorify God because of what He has done, and the power is the flesh, not the Holy Spirit. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that having to do something is not legalism, but the wrong attitude is ----- Israelites had to bring their sacrifices, otherwise they would have suffered certain penalties. It was the attitude toward doing what they had to do that determined whether or not their action was legalistic ----- Having to conform to a law is not of itself legalism (Charles Ryrie, "The Grace of God" 1963: 117-118).

"Legalism" is a word commonly thrown around by people seeking to either avoid or discredit Torah observance. It is not usually defined, and is most often used as a accusatory term stigmatizing others while, in fact, exalting oneself as more faithful than they to the core of New Covenant truth. I believe that Ryrie's approach is most helpful in clarifying the entire issue.

To put it in my own words, "Legalism is an attitude which seeks to leverage God through human performance, often serving as a basis for claiming or feeling oneself superior to others."

Saying that God requires certain kinds of conduct from us, including Torah commandment-keeping is not legalism. It is covenant-obedience in the context of seeking to honor God. It only becomes legalism when it leads to feeling proud, superior, or entitled, when it is used as an occasion for dominating others, and when it obscures the fact that confidence with God is, was and always will be grounded on His grace and mercy, not our own achievement.

In our time, a sizeable group of Messianic Jews are advocating and attempting a return to Torah observance. They do not require others to accept their views, nor do they claim spiritually superior status because these views are theirs. We just happen to think that the commandments of God retain a mandatory character. Even if we are wrong in this, which I doubt, the word is out courtesy of Dr. Ryrie: Such views do not make us legalists. While some no doubt misuse the terms "legalism" and "legalists" without polemical intent, I believe it is time the careless and self-serving polemical misuse of this theological swear word was exposed and retired, and that the right use of the term became the norm.

What do you think?