

Legalism and Antinomianism: Why Do I Have to Obey God's Law?

CHRISTIANS are to obey God's law (Mt 28:20; Jn 14:15,21; Ro 2:13; 1Jn 2:3-6). Proper obedience is

- 1 according to the right standard (God's revealed will; i.e., his law; Dt 30:8-14; Mt 5:16-20; Ro 2:13);
- 2 from a right heart (love for God and others; Dt 30:16; Mt 22:36-40; Jn 14:15; 1Co 16:14; Gal 5:14; 1Jn 1:6); and
- 3 with a right goal (pleasing and glorifying God, honoring Christ, advancing his kingdom and benefiting one's neighbor; Lk 18:29-30; Ro 8:7-8; 12:1-2; Gal 1:10; Col 1:10; 1Th 2:3-4).

Throughout history, however, many people have misunderstood these truths, with the result that they have generally fallen into one of two major forms of error: legalism and antinomianism.

Legalism is a broad term for certain improper perspectives on God's law. Some legalism results from skewed motives and purposes, essentially seeing good deeds as ways to earn more of God's favor than one has at the moment. Some legalism unlovingly seeks self-advancement, and some actually changes the standards of God's revelation.

In the New Testament we see both Pharisaic and Judaizing legalism. In many ways, the Pharisees were formalists, emphasizing the externals of action over motives and purposes. They thought themselves faithful law-keepers even though

- 1 they majored in minors, neglecting what matters most (Mt 23:23-24);
- 2 their casuistry negated the law's spirit and aim (Mt 15:3-9; 23:16-24);
- 3 they treated traditions of practice as part of God's authoritative law, thus binding consciences where God had left them free (Mk 2:16-3:6; 7:1-8); and
- 4 they were hypocrites at heart, angling for humanity's approval at all times (Mt 6:1-8; 23:2-7; Lk 20:45-47). Jesus was harsh with them on these points.

The Judaizers in the early church taught that Gentile believers in

Christ had to perform certain good works, such as circumcision, to gain increased favor with God. Paul vigorously opposed this view in Galatians, condemning the Judaizers for obscuring and essentially denying the all-sufficient grace of the gospel revealed in Jesus (Gal 3:1-3; 4:21; 5:2-6). In Colossians he voiced a similar polemic against those who insisted that Christians needed to perform certain works in order to achieve spiritual completion (Col 2:8-23). All formulae that require us to take action in order to add to what Christ has given us are reversions to legalism and insults to Christ. *(A teaching that baptism is required for salvation falls into this error.)*

Antinomianism, which means being "anti-law," is a name that has, been applied to many different views that deny the applicability or importance of God's law to the Christian's life.

Dualistic antinomianism appears to have been present in the heretics against whom Peter and Jude wrote (2Pe 2; Jude 4-19) and has arisen at other times in the history of God's people as well. This view sees salvation as for the soul only, and bodily behavior as irrelevant both to God's interest and to the soul's health. Because bodily behavior bears no eternal consequences, physical violations of God's law (e.g., sexual sins) are acceptable.

Spirit-centered antinomianism puts such trust in the Holy Spirit's inward prompting as to deny any need to be taught by the law how to live. Freedom from the law as a way of salvation is assumed to bring with it freedom from the law as a guide to conduct. In the first 150 years of the Reformation era this kind of antinomianism was common, and Paul's insistence that a truly spiritual person acknowledge the authority of God's Word (1Co 14:37; cf. 7:40) suggests that the Corinthian church was in the grip of the same mind-set in his day.

Christ-centered antinomianism argues that because believers are in Christ, who kept the law for them, God sees no sin in them—which is true. But it wrongly concludes from this fact that Christians may freely embrace sin as a way of life, so long as they continue to trust in Christ for their salvation. But 1 John 1:8-2:1 (expounding 1:7) and 3:4-10 point in a different direction, showing that it is impossible to be in Christ and at the same time to embrace sin as a way of life.

Dispensational antinomianism holds that keeping the moral law is unnecessary for Christians, since we live under a dispensation of grace, not of law. Passages such as Romans 3:31 and James 2:8-13 clearly show, however, that law-keeping is a continuing obligation for Christians.

Dialectical antinomianism, as advocated by Barth and Brunner, denies that Biblical law is God's direct command. It affirms instead that the Bible's imperative statements trigger the Word of the Spirit, which may or may not correspond exactly to the original meaning of Scripture.

Situationist antinomianism asserts that a motive and intention of love is all that God now requires of Christians, and that the specific ethical commands of Scripture are merely examples of how love was expressed in other times and places. Such examples may now be disregarded so long as one retains the motivation of love. Passages such as Romans 13:8-10, to which this view appeals, teach that without love as a motive these specific commands cannot be fulfilled, but they also maintain the importance of fulfilling the specific commands.

It must be stressed that the moral law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments and detailed in the ethical teaching of both Testaments, is one coherent law, given to be a code of practice for God's people in every age. The Spirit is given to empower law-keeping and to make us more and more like Christ, the archetypal law-keeper (Mt 5:17). This law-keeping is in fact the fulfilling of our human nature, and Scripture holds out no hope of salvation to any who do not seek to turn from sin to righteousness (1Co 6:9-11; Rev 21:8). See theological article "The Three Uses of the Law" at Psalm 119.

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