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Legalism The Scourge of Christianity

(March, 2008)

by
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think it signifies three things: first, that Christ is the purpose and object of the law; secondly, that He is the fulfilment of it; and thirdly, that He is the termination of it'. (Charles Haddon Spurgeon - 'Christ The End of The Law')

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(1) See the 'Fellowship, Separation & Sectarianism' article in the Separation section on our website.

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(2) Documentation is available from this ministry to show that the early church kept Sunday long before the Constantine era.

(3) Article by Ps. Graeme Ellingsen.

As one pastor puts it: *‘Legalism is not a Christian allowing God’s Word to control their every action. Legalism is not one seeking to call attention to God’s pathway and plan for our lives. Legalism is not obedience to God’s Word. Legalism is when one seeks to bind others with requirements of the Old Testament that have been done away with in Christ. Legalism is when I seek to bind upon another, something that is not commanded of God. Legalism is when obedience to a set of rules becomes the standard of ones salvation. It is God’s Word that gave us life, (1Pet.1:22- 25)...It is God’s Word that the Spirit of God uses to clean the church, (Eph.5:27). It will be God’s Word that will form the basis of our assessment at the judgement seat of Christ, (1Cor.3:10-13; 4:1-5)...’* (3)

Are we ‘led’ or ‘driven’? Are we prepared to let the Holy Spirit convict other people in their own personal consciences? Do we attempt to ‘convict’ people with guilt on an issue that is simply not explicitly found in the Word of God? This kind of ‘conviction’ is often just a thin disguise for assumed guilt, condemnation and legalism. If we are using these methods then we cannot claim to be ‘Sola Scriptura’ in practise.

Can our *doctrine* on any subject be fairly substantiated from Scripture alone; is it in the spirit of ‘Sola Scriptura’? *We must start with Scripture and trust the Holy Spirit to do whatever he might (or might not) do.* If we want people to stop doing something that we imagine as ‘wrong’ (for their own good and growth) we should be able to clearly and explicitly show them where and why it is ‘*wrong*’ from Scripture alone. Otherwise we are simply offering our own, and possibly wrong, personal opinion.

Legalism is a scourge in Christian circles. It brings people into bondage and does not produce happy and contented spirits. There is a freedom in Christ that knows no bounds except that of the God breathed Word. Our plea to our readers is to distinguish between doctrines and ‘preferences’. Our doctrines must be based in the grid of scripture alone. The Holy Spirit is well capable of doing the rest!

‘Now, what has our Lord to do with the law? He has everything to do with it, for He is its end for the noblest object, namely, for righteousness. He is the ‘end of the law’. What does this mean? I

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We often meet good Christian people who have a strict list of behavioural ‘do’s’ and ‘dont’s’ or a particular social issue on which they like to be heard, and would have others agree. Many are bent on *legalistically imposing* these edicts upon other souls as doctrinal commands. Having standards is one thing, (and probably advisable in today's apostasy); however it is dangerous to present these ‘standards’ as Biblical doctrine if they are really ‘preferences’. The difference is vitally important.

Some even go as far as insisting on adherence to Old Testament Law! The apostle John did say to keep God’s commandments (Jn.15:10), but keeping His commandments is equated with keeping His Word (1Jn.2:3), and believing on His name, (1Jn.3:22).

The difference between what is scriptural doctrine and what is a ‘preference’ can be discerned if we practise ‘Sola Scriptura’. Before we address issues of ‘legalism’ let’s clarify some terms and lay a firm foundation for our doctrine.

Sola Scriptura:

‘Sola Scriptura’ is Latin for ‘Scripture Alone’. It is mostly a term coined during the Great Reformation which went a long way to restoring Christian doctrine to its roots. ‘Sola Scriptura’ teaches *the Bible alone is sufficient for faith and morals*. This Biblical doctrine supports the all sufficiency, inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture as our only guide for doctrine and the spiritual life. ***‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works’***, (2Tim.3:16-17).

There are many today who claim to practice ‘Sola Scriptura’ but in fact abandon it when personal preferences, denominational bias or moralistic teachings take hold. Some Pentecostal discernment ministries (so-called) even claim to be ‘Sola Scriptura’ yet still validate extra Biblical prophecies and revelations. Other churches teach as doctrine what are really ‘preferences’, which cannot be sustained by any reasonable hermeneutics. This article will

Not Antinomianism:

While legalism is a following of a law to earn merit, it is not a refusal to go beyond the requirements of the law as found in the Word of God. The ‘liberty’ we have is not a license to do as we please but a submission to the Lord’s will *as found in His Word*.

Exposing the problem of legalism tends to incur the wrath of every legalist or those who have a strong view on any one subject. This article may anger those people. We may also be accused of being ‘liberal’ or ‘antinomian’. ‘Antinomian’ means ‘against the law’. In common terms it is when a person has a low view of sin and might think: ‘I’m saved, sealed and delivered and so it does not matter if I sin’. But Paul answers this thinking with ***‘God forbid!’***, (Rom.6:2,15). We are by no means touting a liberalism of any kind, but rather making a plea for *balance* in our thinking, and a correct (and *contextual*) use of Biblical texts. Simply put, doctrines believed and taught must be based on clear and explicit scripture. Opinions, preferences and strong views must not be taught as doctrine when they cannot be clearly found in God’s Word!

Conclusion:

The authors want to make it clear once again, that we do not speak against those who would have strong views on any of these issues. Indeed, the authors themselves individually have definite views on many of the controversial things mentioned in this article. But our desire is to challenge the reader to not only believe in ‘Sola Scriptura’ but to *practise it* in the interpretation of various doctrines, and in our relationships with others. The philosophy of ministry we have will influence the way we relate to those in the body of Christ and in our local fellowship. ‘God’s little helpers’ and those who have their ‘hobbyhorses’ and ‘preferences’ are not usually edifying people to be around, and can often be quite troublesome to Pastors and elders. Those who allow the Holy Spirit to witness through their lives in character, conduct and speech feel no need to ‘help’ the Holy Spirit in any way.

the world, for it is evil and corrupting regardless. They see their 'salt' as preserving and slowing the necessary corruption. They know that a carnal mind cannot understand the things of the spirit and that the Spirit must illuminate the Gospel to depraved minds.

The driven sometimes recite 1John 3:9 and impose a sinless perfection upon Christians. The led fear the habitual sin of 1John 3:9, yet know the carnal deception of saying they have no sin, (1Jn.1:8-10).

The driven feel they must impose their doctrine and thinking upon any who are ignorant of truth. They load up someone with 'truth'. The led trust the Holy Spirit to raise the questions that might be answered in meekness. They feed the hungry souls first with milk, lest they choke them with meat.

The driven feel nervous and guilty if they have not read their Bible each day. The led reflect on the freedom and the desire they have to need spiritual food consistently.

The driven pray over and over for the same things that they would change God's mind on a matter. They wrestle with God in the flesh. They do 'spiritual warfare' so that God's hands might be untied. But the led place the request with the Lord and wait for the will of God to be clear, all the while knowing God will have His way anyway. They wrestle the flesh in prayer.

The driven are busy helping God. They nominate for and expect positions in the church. They feel they must do something. But the led are busy serving God. They are already the hand, the eye or the ear in the body. They feel free to do something.

The driven must succeed. The led know that Christ is already succeeding.

The driven emphasise the will of man. The led know and live the sovereignty of God.

The driven weary the saints. The led refresh the troops.

The driven strive in the flesh. The led surrender to the Spirit'.

highlight possible examples of this and no doubt raise the ire of some readers who have strong views on some matters. To those readers our constant question is this: Can your *doctrine* on any subject be fairly substantiated from Scripture alone; is it in the spirit of 'Sola Scriptura'?

'Legalism':

Sometimes we in this ministry are accused of 'legalism'. This always shocks us as we have a deep and abiding hatred of extra-Biblical 'legalism'! Having come out of false religion and teaching, we have been exposed to our fair share of 'legalism'. Nowadays we ask our accusers for their definition of this charge - and often the answer is surprising.

Unfortunately today a person is often called 'legalistic' because he or she will not go beyond the Word of God or conversely ignore it. *The term 'legalism' has been given a new application.* One risks being labelled 'legalistic' when attempting to expose false teaching and contending for the faith (Jude 3); so too when one deliberately separates from error, false teaching, false teachers and from professing Christians who are living unholy lives. Such defence of the faith and application of Scriptural separation (1) is increasingly bringing the charge of 'legalism'. Yet all these things are explicitly taught in scripture *as doctrine!* In fact, separation from error is one of the abiding themes throughout the Old and New Testaments.

'Legalism' is primarily defined as 'the theory that a man by doing good works or obeying the law earns and merits his salvation'. But legalism can take on a much more subtle nature when we stray from a philosophy of 'Sola Scriptura' when defining doctrine.

Man is by nature, legalistic. Religions are basically the outworking of that legalism. For example, Roman Catholics willingly put themselves under laws and rules not found anywhere in scripture, that they might ease the conscience over sin, thinking that works and sacraments might merit salvation in some way. But even Bible believing Christians are not immune to this. The Bible says the flesh wars with the spirit (Rom.7:23; 1Pet.2:11) and it is in the flesh that we will pursue the spirit of legalism, performance and self righteousness. We often 'strive' to please God in our flesh.

‘Philosophy of Ministry’:

The answer to the danger of legalism that lurks within all of us is found in our understanding of how God the Holy Spirit works in a Christian’s life. This brings us to a very important ‘Philosophy of Ministry’: *How does God change the character and behaviour of a saved person?* And how does a pastor/elder/teacher, as a co-worker of God, see the desired change in a persons life?

There are two ways to affect change in peoples lives. One is of God and one of man. One produces lasting fruit, the other is deceptively fleshly and legalistic.

The Scriptural method is as follows: The Word of God, the preaching/teaching of Scripture in the believers own life, gives understanding and personal conviction by the Holy Spirit, (Heb.4:12). The persons attitude then changes. It is this Spirit inspired attitude and conviction that leads one to continued repentance and a change in character and behaviour. They should then practice what they believe and understand. They will be ‘doers of the word’, but from the right motivation - to glorify God. They will have been transformed by the renewing of their minds directly through the Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit , (Rom.12:1,2).

Biblical philosophy defined:

So this Biblical method for ministry could be defined as:

Doctrine > Attitude > Application

This method takes a great load off the elder/teacher or those involved in discipleship! The teacher is responsible for the *teaching of doctrine* and thus points the recipient *to truth*; the Holy Spirit is responsible for taking the person *into truth* and thus producing the *conviction* and *attitude*. The resultant application will be spiritual instead of fleshly.

If the conviction and attitude is appropriated by the believer then it will be his or her own conviction and they will willingly change with a *compliant and contented* spirit. No one will have to make them do things and check up on them. There is no pressure or

which are, of course ‘from the Lord’. Legalists are often driven by their flesh in attempting to ‘please God’ in some way by their ‘behaviour’. But we are to be ‘Spirit-Led’. Nevertheless, we do inhabit bodies of ‘death’ and it is often tempting to adhere to self imposed ‘laws’ that make us feel more ‘holy’. We all have the possibility of legalism within us!

Are you ‘led’ or are you ‘driven’? In a former Diakrisis (Australia) article we wrote: *‘The driven may think they are ‘in the spirit’ but the force behind this ‘spirit’ is the flesh. The led are too busy mortifying the deeds of the flesh to be concerned if they be not in the spirit.*

The driven say they are saved by grace yet live as though they are saved by works. The led dare not trust in any works lest they forget that this grace which saved them was a gift and must have nothing added to it. They know that by no works of the law will anyone ever be justified, (Gal.2:16).

The driven separate faith and works. The led understand that faith works, (James 2:14,17). *The driven look for works to do. The led know that Christ has already before ordained the works to do, (Eph.2:10).*

The driven feel the compulsion to be ‘soul winners’. They see soul winning as the work of man. They must witness, be knocking on doors, handing out tracts and getting ‘decisions’. They know they must bear ‘fruit’ to prove they are ‘spirit led’. When this is done the sense of relief and good works fills them with a sense of righteousness and esteem. But the led know to be witnesses is to let their light shine out of earthen vessels, to exhibit the treasure within - the character of Christ himself. They know God is the ‘soul winner’ and that no man can come to Christ, except the Father has first drawn him, (Jn.6:44). They see soul winning as the work of God. Yet they are ready and willing at the first divine appointment to give an answer to every man that asks the reason of the hope seen within them, (1Pet.3:15).

The driven are prone to moral campaigning to change the world. They feel insistent on correcting the evils of the world and see their ‘salt’ as changing the world. But the led know they cannot change

There is nothing wrong with a tradition or a preference in how we might best keep any day providing it does not contradict the Word of God. Scripturally, *it is up to the individual as to which day he chooses*, (Rom.14:5,6) and how he would keep that day. However, anything that would cause us to ‘*forsake the assembling of ourselves*’ (Heb.10:25) or take priority over our worship could rightly be questioned using scripture.

We are not to judge others concerning food or drink, keeping of days, or the Sabbath, (Rom.14:1-3;1Cor.10:23- 33; Col.2:16,17). With this in mind, why exegete and apply texts from Exodus 20 as our correspondent did when writing the following: ‘*observing morning and evening attendances at church. . . to rest from our labours. . . [and from] our recreation which is lawful on all other days.*’ And where do we get the law of ‘*no self pleasure or entertainment...*’? The simple answer is that none of these things are required of us in New Testament scripture! But again there is nothing wrong with the individual choosing to spend his ‘Sabbath day’ in this manner. But to teach this as *doctrine* or a command is gross error - it’s the essence of legalism!

We would however suggest that within God’s Word the principle of a seventh day rest is derived from the creation week narrative. This principle is a worthy one and those who work 7 days a week will soon find out how worthwhile it is. Man was not created to work every day of his short life.

‘Led’ or ‘Driven’?:

‘Legalism’ naturally leads to obsessiveness and ‘straining at gnats’. Legalists are the very ones who will use obscure and selective scriptures to prove a strong view that they wish to transform into a ‘law’. They are often quick to see faults in others yet are blind to their own; and quick to vilify yet slow to apologise when successfully challenged. They often try to impose their view on others and then judge those that do not acquiesce.

Legalists often act like ‘God’s little helpers’ who ‘point’ the elder/pastor to a ‘problem’ in the church. These people subtly attempt to control the pastor with information and suggestions

coercion required. However, the attitude developed is governed by where *we start*. We must start with the truth of Scripture and doctrine and trust the Holy Spirit to do His promised work *in His own time!*

Legalistic philosophy:

But what if we were to start in reverse as multitudes do - with ‘application’?:

Application > Attitude > Doctrine ...

... The pastor/elder/teacher sets the rules and standards or pushes his ‘hobbyhorse’ and preferences that he wants the believers to adhere to. As he finds more and more things that he sees as wrong behaviour he sets more rules in place. Likewise, the Pharisees continued to add to their already long list of laws. These kept people under bondage but also made it even harder for the Pharisees themselves to live up to these laws. Finally of course, they hardly bothered to observe them at all but continued to expect others to do so ... *Legalism breeds hypocrisy!*

Because of the rules the pastor/elder/teacher has applied, he now develops an attitude of authority to administer these rules. To justify this he may go to the Bible for proof texts for his ‘rules of behaviour’. So he preaches from ‘application’ rather than ‘doctrine’. The starting point is wrong and it is the breeding ground for ‘legalism’!

At this point it is important not to confuse legalism with standards or preferences. We do not need to forego all standards so as not to be ‘legalistic’. For example, there is nothing wrong with a church setting a standard of reasonable dress for its leaders, preachers or for those who are in the public eye. This may be simply a preference or a requested standard to which most willing workers would submit to for the sake of unity and a good public image. It might also be based on modesty and not wanting to create a stumbling block, which is perfectly scriptural.

Biblical issues / or ‘preferences’?:

Some issues are clearly addressed in Scripture such as homosexuality, adultery, etc. In other areas that are not so clear we may have personal convictions and some of these may even be strong ‘preferences’. But do we have the right to expect people to have the *same* personal conviction as us unless the specific conviction is *clearly* and explicitly addressed in Scripture? The Word of God does not tell us that TV, the computer, internet, competitive sport, etc ... is inherently evil. Many of these things are ‘amoral’, (morally neutral *in and of themselves*). But as we read Scripture or preach expositionally through Scripture we trust the Holy Spirit to address any area of idolatry, time wasting or selfishness that may be attached through the use of, and involvement in, these things. It is what *results* from certain actions and pastimes that scripture would deal with.

Someone may be personally convicted about, or greatly dislike such things as, TV, computers, a particular sport ... or whatever else he sees as ‘evil’. He then speaks out condemning those that are not necessarily troubled by these things. And in so doing applies *selective* Scriptures in an attempt to prove the evil of the matter. Although none of the Scriptures selected may have anything *explicitly* to do with the topic, nevertheless it is made clear to the reader or hearer that if one engages in the activity in question they are guilty of fleshly behaviour! Now the hearer may be ‘convicted’ but it may not necessarily be by the Holy Spirit, but rather by pressure brought to bear by the instigator of the ‘doctrine’. The material presented has not been worked *explicitly* from scripture as *the starting point* for doctrine; or the Scriptures used have really nothing to do with the topic. The real Scriptural issues (such as, say, idolatry) have not been addressed - because the ‘rules’ have been made without scriptural application. This method of discernment is not in the spirit of ‘Sola Scriptura’, and is not only legalistic but actually *a counterfeit, and opposed to the true work of the Holy Spirit!* As legalists develop methods of applying God’s laws (and some of their own) to others, they soon become the authority and the administrator of their behavioural requirements.

Ezek. 20:12) and is specifically to Israel!: ‘*..Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my Sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations...¹⁶ Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. ¹⁷ It is a sign between me and the children of Israel forever...*’ If this ‘sign’ is to be kept by Christians today, then we must observe many other procedures, rituals, and feasts given to Israel with this command as ‘statutes forever’?

The ‘Sabbath’ was given as a ‘sign’ pointing to Christ who is ‘our Sabbath’, our ‘rest’ (‘Sabbath’ - Heb.4). If we are going to obey Exodus 20 then why don’t we keep it correctly? - as the Jews did beginning with the seventh day - Saturday. We would not light fires and not travel more than one mile. Then add this: the Jewish Sabbaths fell on different days - it fell on the first day (Lev.23:39), sometimes it fell on the 7th day, (Ex.20:8) and sometimes on the 8th day, (Lev.23:39). Sabbaths were also of different lengths. Some were one day long (Ex.16:23-39), some two days (Lev.23:6-8; 15-22), some one year (Lev.25:4), some 70 years (2Chr.36:21), and some eternal (Heb.4:9)! In the week that Jesus died there were two Sabbaths, one a special Sabbath and one the regular weekly one. The problem with obeying such a law regarding the keeping of a ‘Sabbath’ day, is that you will eventually break it somewhere, somehow!

Historically, Christians in the first few centuries kept the ‘*first day of the week*’ (Sunday) as their day of corporate worship. (2) The apostles met together in fellowship, breaking bread and taking offerings on Sunday (Jn.20:19,26; Acts 20:7; 1Cor.16:1,2). There are numerous and irrefutable accounts of the early church Fathers, (from Justin Martyr (100-165AD), Ignatius (110AD) to Cyprian (200-258AD), who spoke of keeping Sunday as their Sabbath and as a day of worship. (‘Sabbath’ does not mean worship but ‘rest’). All the great leaders, (Jerome, Huss, Wycliffe, Luther, Calvin, etc) all observed Sunday. But *there is no scriptural command to keep a Sabbath or a ‘Lord’s Day’ on any fixed day!*

There is simply no problem with having a personal standard in any of these areas but to expect everyone else around us to accept that same standard when it is not based on scripture, is plainly legalistic!

The Sabbath question:

Recently we received a letter to this ministry saying: *‘Dear editor, how should we observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy? Exodus 20:8-11 implies that worship is our first priority, and does that not mean observing morning and evening attendance at church, for it is the ‘Lord’s Day’ ... We are to rest from the labours of the week, such as our work and recreation which is lawful on all other days. The day is to be taken up without self pleasures or entertainment of any kind, the exception being works of necessity and mercy ...’*

This thinking reveals the need to restate what it means for a person to practice ‘Sola Scriptura’ (‘Scripture Alone’) when defining Biblical doctrines. Firstly, most of this letter is quoting from the *‘Westminster Catechism’* and not from Scripture. This Confession was produced by the Westminster Assembly of Divines, which had been created by the English Parliament in 1643 to settle various theological and ecclesiastical issues in the British Isles. It was presented to Parliament in 1646 and was an English Puritan document that didn’t take hold in England, but was embraced enthusiastically in Presbyterian Scotland and later the English-speaking Presbyterian world. Although most of our denominations originally drew upon its teachings, it is mostly now used in Presbyterian, and especially Reformed Presbyterian circles. It is an admirable document but *should never replace scripture!*

The command in Exodus 20 was given specifically *to the Israelites*. Nine of the ten commandments mentioned there are repeated in the New Testament as at least a moral guide.

But the fourth, concerning the Sabbath day, *is not repeated* and not commanded anywhere in the New Testament! This commandment is mentioned in detail in Exodus 31:12-17 (see also

In practical terms *legalism is someone or something taking the place of the Holy Spirit!* This approach has shipwrecked not a few pastors, families and churches. Many children of Christian families sometimes go ‘off the rails’ when they rebel against a ‘conviction’ that they had no real understanding of - *it was not their own!*

Rules and convictions without relationship and understanding may well foster rebellion .

The Bible alone is our authority in all things spiritual. The Holy Spirit is the administrator, the interpreter. If we want Holy Spirit conviction in peoples hearts we must begin with Scripture and *trust the Holy Spirit to do whatever He might (or might not) do*. If we want people to stop doing something they are doing (for their own good and growth) we should be able to clearly and explicitly show them it is wrong from Scripture alone and *Scripture as the starting point*. Otherwise it is nothing more than our ‘*personal opinion*’.

‘Conscience Decisions’:

Many areas that are not *explicitly* addressed in scripture may come under what some call ‘conscience decisions’. These can be scripturally addressed in the following fashion:

1. *Will it be spiritually profitable?: ‘All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not’, (1Cor.10:23)*
2. *Will it master me?: ‘All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any’, (1Cor.6:12)*
3. *Will it cover my sins?: ‘As free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God’, (1Pet.2:16); ‘For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another’, (Gal.5:13).*

4. *Will it help others?: Will it be a ‘stumblingblock’?: ‘But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak’, (1Cor.8:9); ‘Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give none offense...’, (1Cor.10:31-33); ‘And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God, and toward men’, (Acts 24:16); ‘Abstain from all appearance of evil’, (1Thess.5:22).*

Examples of ‘legalism’:

Most readers would say they are not ‘doing good works or obeying the law to merit salvation’. But often we forget about more subtle and dangerous forms of legalism.

Let us work from the obvious to the not so obvious:

The Bible says to *‘Stand fast therefore in the liberty where with Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage’, (Gal.5:1)*. ‘Liberty’ here refers to ‘freedom and independence from religious regulations and legal restrictions’. We are free from legalistic Judaisers who would bring us back under laws with Sabbaths, foods, drinks, etc, (Col.2:16; Rom.14:5-21). This is an obvious form of legalism. These ‘Sabbaths’, feast days and other Jewish ordinances were ‘shadows’ or ‘signs’ of the real thing to come. Christ is now our ‘Sabbath’ (Heb.4). The law pointed to Him and He has fulfilled all. Today there are movements of professing Christians who immerse themselves in Jewish customs, keeping the feasts and practising Jewish rituals. These may well be ‘preferences’ at best but the Christian under Grace was never meant to be immersed in such lawful practices and they certainly can nowhere be found in the New Testament as a command.

We are thus free from anybody imposing upon our conscience anything outside of Scripture; likewise, people who would subtly *impose* upon us their dreams, visions, revelations, prophecies, and words that ‘God told me’. Their ‘hobbyhorses’ and preferences, are simply not to be listened to.

If one believes it is evil to erect a ‘Christmas tree’ then let them follow their conscience. But to use this scripture in an attempt show that a Christmas tree is pagan in origin is surely using an interpretive method unknown to any worthy scholar of scripture? On the other hand, one wonders why some Christians also go to great lengths to explain how the Christmas tree reminds them of Christ and His Gospel message. Both arguments are not *anchored* in scripture!

The US dollar bill has the all-seeing eye of Horus upon it. Some believe this to be a Satanic symbol. Should one refuse to spend this money on that basis? If so, there are numerous evils in other forms that could well end up prohibiting us from leading a normal life if we became prey to such thinking! Jesus said: *‘I pray not that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil’, (Jn.17:15)*. Jesus did not pray that we would be taken away from this evil but that we would be kept from being touched or affected by it. Is it possible by striving to achieve a form of purity and self-righteousness we can become an island unto ourselves? We may be successful in achieving that goal through a kind of Monasticism - but that would work *against* the teaching of John 17.

‘Dating’?:

So too, there are many legalistic arguments we have heard concerning Christians ‘dating’ members of the opposite sex. Some of these arguments are moralistic to be sure, but have no real basis in scripture. Many are taken directly from Jewish traditions. Scripture simply does not give a clear-cut guide to ‘dating’ but rather only speaks of marriage. There are issues, however, with purity, trust, abstaining from the appearance of evil and not causing a stumbling block to others, that can be addressed and *are in scripture*. Any standard for such relationships should begin with scriptural issues, rather than with rules and laws that may seem moralistically righteous, but are based on a *reaction to* the immoral ‘dating’ that belongs to the world. Our emotional reactions to the evils of the world are too unreliable to be used to formulate rules and regulations! Scripture alone must determine these.

Christmas?:

For example, how a Christian decides to conduct himself concerning the tradition of Christmas is really a matter of personal choice, assuming that Christ and His person and work are uppermost in his mind. Let Christ honouring Christians decide if, and how they will celebrate these traditions, (Rom.14; Col.2:16). Arguably there is nothing in scripture against celebrating the birth of Jesus *on any day*. But if you put Santa Claus or anything else before Christ then one could bring a fair *scriptural argument* against celebrating the birth of Jesus at Christmas in that manner. If however, you rightfully place Christ above all the secular hype surrounding Christmas, surely one is free to spend that time as one sees fit?

Many who are aghast at Christians having any traditional celebrations at Christmas, ask: 'Where does the Bible mention 'Christmas?'; or, 'where are we taught to celebrate the birth of Christ?' But this is *an argument from silence!* The Bible obviously does not mention 'Christmas' or any celebration of the birth of Christ. But nowhere does scripture state that you cannot celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas or any other time! Too many argue *from silence* without realising that there are a multitude of things we are free to do that are also not found in the Bible. *Being 'Sola Scriptura' does not forbid what is not in the Bible!*

What is 'pagan' to one might be simply seen as 'traditional' to another. Yet many Christians actually invent pagan origins for many common superstitions. The 'Christmas tree' is said to be found in Jeremiah 10:3-5 as a 'pagan' practice. Yet the reference is actually referring to a trunk of a tree shaped and hewn by craftsman into an idol, and according to many commentators - in the form of either a man or a beast. (The same *idolatry* is mentioned also in Isaiah 40 and 44). The image was decked with silver and gold and is said to be 'dumb' and 'unable to speak'. We have yet to find a single commentary that even attempts to show this was the forerunner of any 'Christmas tree'!

Alcohol - a debatable example:

One example that has separated Christian friends, caused some debate in churches and hatched not a few legalistic teachings - is whether a Christian should or should not drink alcohol. Firstly, let it be said here that the two authors of this article are not here advocating that Christians drink alcohol! But it is our united view that too many of the arguments against Christians drinking alcohol are simply either not based on Scripture at all, or are misusing selective scriptures.

'Social' arguments concerning alcohol induced accidents and deaths may be valid in themselves but they are not scriptural to building a *doctrine* against alcohol consumption. So too, arguments concerning wine in the Bible being either 'alcoholic' and 'non alcoholic' are also seriously lacking credibility, particularly in the light of studies with Hebrew and Greek words. The original words do not clearly distinguish between alcoholic and non alcoholic wine, no matter how many semantic gymnastics are done to achieve this. In the New Testament there is just one word for wine - '*oinos*'. It is *obviously* referring to alcoholic wine in several places. The Israelites living too far away for attendance at the feasts were told to use their monetary gift to buy wine and 'strong drink' to be consumed in a 'rejoicing before the Lord', (Dt.14:26). No method of storing unfermented juice was known. In accordance with Jewish custom, at the marriage feast of Cana they were drinking *fermented* wine. The product had to be fermented, for if it had been mere grape juice, there would have been complaints rather than compliments. The best wine was normally drunk first and when the guests had well drunk of that - the inferior, less expensive product was served, by which time the guests were less able to tell the difference. The wine Jesus produced however, was a quality vintage.

At the 'Last Supper' Jesus passed around wine to His disciples. This was six to seven months after the grape harvest and there was no way to preserve unfermented grape juice. The phrase used here is '*fruit of the vine*', and as pointed out by *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, it was '*employed by the Jews from time immemorial for the wine partaken of on sacred occasions, as at the*

Passover and on the evening of the Sabbath. The Greeks also used the term as a synonym of wine which was capable of intoxication'. There are also numerous other scriptures which simply cannot refer to 'unfermented' wine, (eg. Ephesians 5:18 'be not drunk with wine').

The Bible simply does not come out and say explicitly that Christians should never touch a drop of alcohol. (Paul did tell Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach and Jesus did change water into wine ...). We also are well aware of some eastern believers and other Christians who have a *cultural* preference for drinking wine with a meal. Are they violating scripture? Not a few believers have said to us that they do not drink alcohol because they want to feel 'clean'. Yet scripture is clear on this - it is not what one intakes that defiles a person, (Mk.7:18).

Yet there are scriptures that give fair warning of the dangers of alcohol and drunkenness. Proverbs 20:1 states, '**Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise**'. There are certainly problems attached to over-indulgence and it is widely accepted that our wine today is stronger than in Biblical times when it was approximately 3 parts water to 1 part wine. But *scripturally*, if you isolate the scriptures *for* and *against* alcohol you will actually find *numerous* favourable mentions of alcohol. Wine is often praised; it 'cheers' both God and men (Judges 9:13); it gladdens the heart of men (Ps.104:15); it gladdens life (Ex.10:19); it makes the heart exult (Zech.10:7); and it cheers the spirits of the depressed (Pr.31:6); etc...

Most, if not all the references 'against' alcohol consumption concern *drunkenness* or 'strong' drink. It is also interesting to note that many who advocate total abstinence conveniently make all of the positive references to wine relate to grape juice and claim that all of the negative ones apply to alcoholic beverages. Yet in every case *the words used are the same*.

In our opinion the best and most faithful scriptural argument concerning alcohol is the 'stumbling-block' issue. If drinking alcohol will cause a stumbling-block to others then this must be considered *in the light of scripture*. But whatever argument we use

against the use of alcohol, it must not be based on selective scriptures that may warn of the dangers of strong drink and drunkenness yet might not explicitly show a doctrine of total prohibition.

Our writing here of Christians and alcohol will no doubt bring howls of protest from the prohibitionists. However, our purpose is not at all to put forward *our* view on the subject, but to show that many arguments for and against Christians drinking alcohol have taken on a shotgun approach rather than sound exposition of the texts involved. Put simply, if we are going to have a debate on this subject at least let us base it on scripture *in context* as opposed to opinion and scripture taken out of context.

There is no doubt that we are entitled to express our opinion on any issue, especially when questioned. Our opinions and personal convictions may range from interest only - to discussion - to a preference - to contending/debating - and even to dying for them! Many, if not all 'preferences' are hardly worth debating and certainly not worth dying for? But more importantly, what is the final interpreting authority? Surely it is Scripture rightly divided?

More issues...Biblical /or preferences?:

What is the interpreting authority in such issues as: celebrating Christmas/holy days; mixed bathing at beaches; Christian 'dating'; going to the movies; watching TV; Christians in politics; Christians in the army; competitions and playing/watching sports; having 'shares' in the stock market; wearing make-up; contraception/or pro-creative sex only; Christian vs Public schooling...etc? There are mature Christians of varying affiliations who have wide and differing views on these issues and arguably very few are based on sound hermeneutics?

Other examples of legalism might include: the demanding that women wear head-coverings; that Christians be re-baptised if they were baptised in another church; or a requirement that a particular Bible version be accepted as the only correct translation.