

**CONVERSING WITH GEN-XERS AND MILLENIALS CONCERNING
LAW AND GRACE, LEGALISM AND LIBERTY
(An Open Letter to John and Joyce)**

by David J. Hesselgrave

Soon out of high school, John and Joyce (not their real names) are seeking help. A major evangelical college has a “code of conduct” that incoming students are expected to sign. As far as Joyce is concerned, there is nothing wrong with such a code. In fact, it may be a “good idea.” But to John, the code infringes on Christian freedom and is a clear case of the kind of “legalism” that is widely disparaged among evangelicals. He has enrolled in a Christian college that encourages Christian values and conduct but has no “code” as such.

Joyce and John have taken the unusual step of co-authoring an e-mail letter to me (considering me a representative of the most legalistic generation they have known), and the letter asks which one of them is right. They thank me for listening and apologize for intruding upon my time, but they say the question has become a growing source of concern for them. I have debated about it for a while, realizing that a serious answer would entail much more than they bargained for. But I have now acquiesced. What follows is my response to these two young *Millennials*.¹ My letter reflects the fact that both of these two young persons are exceptionally bright—Joyce having graduated number three in a class of well over 300, and John having been home-schooled and admitted to college as a sophomore. My answer should also reflect that I have taken their question seriously.

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My dear young friends,

Thank you for asking. To begin with, I must remind you of three things:

First, it has required but little time to note your question. It will take considerable time to answer, but I am happy to make the attempt.

Second, it took but little time for you to frame the question; but it will require considerable time and patience to consider my answer. To aid you in that process, I will do my best to write clearly, proceed logically, and think biblically.

Third, I have come to certain conclusions on legalism through many years of both study and experience. I trust that what I write here will serve you and your Millennial friends well. What I write, however, is mine; and, of course, I am fallible. As young as both of you are, you have reached that time of life when, with prayerful study, you must weigh my conclusions in the light of Scripture and arrive at your own. Using some simple tools and the Bible, let's begin that study right now.

Getting on the Same Page—

Some Definitions

To commence the discussion, we need a definition of legalism, since that seems to be the heart of the matter. Since Bible writers do not employ the word "legalism" *per se*, a concordance will be of somewhat limited help initially; so it would be better to turn to a good English dictionary. There you are likely to find a definition such as "strict, literal or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code." For sake of convenience, let's call that "*excessive conformity legalism.*"

For a Christian definition, we could turn to the Dictionary of Christianity in America (IVP, 1990, p. 641). There we find that the primary meaning of legalism is "the act of putting law above grace by establishing requirements for salvation beyond repentance and faith in Jesus Christ." Now that definition is obviously different than the regular English dictionary's. It views legalism in the classical Christian context. Let's call this kind of legalism "*salvation by works legalism.*"

Though very different, these two types of legalism are often interchanged in popular writings. For example, when Charles Swindoll writes that "legalism is an attitude, a mentality based on pride. It is an obsessive conformity to an artificial standard for the purpose of exalting oneself. A legalist assumes the place of authority and pushes it to unwarranted extremes" (The Grace Awakening, Dallas: Word, 1990, p. 81), it seems clear that Swindoll is describing "*excessive conformity legalism.*" However, much if not most of what he has to say meshes with classic "*salvation by works legalism.*" Since these are quite different, readers are left with ambiguity. All we can be sure of is that, from Swindoll's perspective, both kinds of legalism are strictly negative.

In a more scholarly type of book on the subject, however, my former colleague, Richard N. Longenecker, introduces still another and, in this case, entirely positive type of legalism (*c.f.*

Paul: Apostle of Liberty, Harper & Row, 1964). Probably because the word “legalism” has such negative connotations, he uses the word “nomism” (from the Greek word *nomos* or “law”), but the meaning is the same as that of legalism. Anyway, Longenecker subsumes the two (negative) types of legalism referred to above under one category: “acting nomism.” He defines “acting nomism” as “ordering one’s life in external and formal arrangements according to the Law *in order to gain righteousness and/or appear righteous*” (p. 78; emphasis mine). Then he goes on to discuss a biblical and positive type of legalism which he calls “reacting nomism.” He describes “reacting nomism” as “molding one’s life in all its varying relations according to the Law *in response to the love and grace of God*” (p.78; emphasis mine). So in Longenecker’s definitions, the ambiguity between “salvation by works legalism” and “excessive conformity legalism” remains. Nevertheless, to my way of thinking, by introducing the distinction between an *active* nomism (legalism that is negative) and a *reactive* nomism (legalism that is positive), Longenecker has provided us with an all-important key to understanding both Old and New Testament teachings on law and grace, legalism and liberty, and so on. Please keep that in mind as we proceed with our discussion on those teachings very shortly. Before we get to them, however, I must digress in order to provide some basic but nonetheless essential information.

Some Relevant History

Joyce and John, I must admit that what I propose to do at this point is risky. In the first place, I have no alternative other than to write with bold strokes and resort to generalizations. That too would be risky, because for every generalization there is at least one exception and probably many more. In the second place, I am reporting my own experience and reading of history. Try as I may to be fair and balanced, personal biases will inevitably intrude. In the third place, I fully understand that not many Gen-Xers or Millennials will be interested in the historical dimension of the problem. But since your inquiry has been addressed to me as a representative of the old “Builder generation,” I am going to give an overview of some major forces within twentieth-century American Protestantism that helped to shape contemporary understandings (and *misunderstandings!*) of legalism and related issues.

The Rise of American Fundamentalism in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

The Western world in general and America in particular entered the twentieth century with an almost euphoric optimism born out of a blind faith in science, expansionism, and

progressivism. From a conservative Christian point of view, however, the future of Protestantism was clouded by a Higher Criticism that undermined the authority of Bible, a Modernism or Liberalism that negated the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith; and a Social Gospel that set the Great Commission on its head. The leaders of the great Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 were outstanding Christians in many ways. Nevertheless, they managed to avoid these and other basically theological issues in an endeavor to get on with the mission of the church. Participants subscribed to no particular statement of faith, so all were free to interpret the Great Commission as they pleased. Knowing that helps us to understand why that Edinburgh conference gave rise to three distinct ecumenical entities in ensuing years – one on Missions (the International Missionary Council) in 1917; and then in the 1920s, one on Faith and Order and still another on Life and Work.

When some theologians of that day denied cardinal doctrines having to do with the integrity of Scripture, the nature of God, the sinfulness of man, the deity of Christ, His virgin birth, His vicarious atonement, the coming judgment and so on, Fundamentalist theologians immediately and staunchly defended these doctrines as basic to historic Christianity.

When in one way or another Modernists encouraged Christians to conform to progressive ideas and cultural change, *not only in creed but also in conduct*, Fundamentalist Christians and their schools and churches took exception again. Although seldom (if ever) with anything like the careful consideration and precision that went into their defense of biblical doctrine, Fundamentalists tended to define Christian conduct in terms of certain “DOs” (*Do attend church; Do honor the Lord’s Day; Do separate yourself from the world*) and “DON’Ts” (*Don’t smoke; Don’t drink; Don’t attend movies; Don’t visit dance halls*).

To reinforce biblical teaching, mission, and practice, Fundamentalist churches and schools regularly scheduled evangelistic meetings and conferences on the Bible, missions, the “deeper life,” and Bible prophecy. Summer was the time for youth camps, yes, but especially for great Bible conferences that involved whole families and all ages. Almost all of these varied gatherings featured impassioned appeals and “altar calls” (sometimes greatly prolonged!) when sinners were invited to repent and be saved and believers were encouraged to live separated lives and commit themselves to Christian service, especially to world missions.

Speaking personally, those days were the days of my youth. My parents had been members of a very modernistic Methodist church where they heard precious little about sin and nothing about the new birth. They were converted to Christ shortly after I was born. Then,

over ensuing years, various members of our family were involved in two independent Gospel Tabernacles, two Assemblies of God churches, and several Evangelical Free churches. Without exception, these churches laid claim to being “Fundamental.” Their pastors made it clear that all people are sinners and must be saved, not by works, but by God’s grace and through faith in Christ. All condemned “worldliness” and emphasized the need to live “separated,” sanctified lives in order to serve Christ acceptably and be ready for his “soon Coming.” There was general agreement on most of the “fundamental” doctrines and even on the basic “DOs and DON’Ts” intended to guide Christian living and distinguish true believers from an evil world. The main differences between these churches had to do, not with the broad lines of Fundamentalism, but with manifestations of the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer – with the “baptism of the Spirit,” the “unction of the Spirit,” a “second work of grace,” the nature of the “sanctified life,” and so on.

My early experiences in these churches led me to believe that, when it came to “contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), the “separated life” including the “DOs and DON’Ts” and the nature of Christian life and service, Fundamentalists seemed to be in basic agreement. If in retrospect they are to be charged with “salvation by works legalism” I doubt that the charge is valid in most cases. If they are to be charged with “excessive conformity legalism,” that charge may or may not be valid, depending upon one’s perspective. If they are to be charged with divisiveness and contentiousness, that may well be a valid charge in many cases because for Fundamentalists the line between “contending for the faith” and just plain contentiousness often became blurred.

At the same time, the contribution of Fundamentalists in preserving a biblical faith, promoting holy living and forwarding the world mission of the church should never be forgotten. And, speaking for myself, some of the most dedicated and knowledgeable Christian scholars, leaders and lay-persons I have ever known were unashamedly “Fundamentalists.”

The Rise of American Evangelicalism in the Latter Half of the Twentieth Century

In the 1940s, certain conservative leaders responded to the doctrinal defections of Modernists and Ecumenists on the one hand, and to a perceived divisiveness and negativism on the part of Fundamentalists on the other, by forming the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). They also formed the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association (EFMA) and the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). The basic purpose of these organizations was to

maintain and promulgate biblical faith by cooperating on the basis of doctrinal essentials while at the same time proclaiming a positive gospel and avoiding divisions based on nonessentials.

With that in mind, the NAE and EFMA adopted a statement of faith that was very similar to that of the IFMA (Interdenominational Foreign Missions Association of North America) and which included cardinal Christian doctrines championed earlier by the Fundamentalists. The ETS, however, adopted a statement which maintained the inerrancy of the original autographs of the Bible and the doctrine of the Trinity. (The ETS position on inerrancy was later reinforced by a newly formed International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) and when the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) was formed in the 1980s its members were required to subscribe to one or the other of the IFMA or EFMA faith statements.

Note that in all of this it was the intention of Evangelicals (“Builders” for the most part) to bequeath to their spiritual progeny a Christianity that was purer in doctrine than that of Ecumenists, gentler in practice than that of Fundamentalists; and more promising for its missions than either of them. Within a few short years, however, troublesome clouds appeared on the horizon. Evangelical “Builder-theologians” debated among themselves as to whether the Bible is “inerrant” in all that it says on any and all types of subject matter (*e.g.*, history and science) or simply “infallible” in the sense that only when it speaks on matters of faith is it necessarily true and reliable. In addition, “neo-Evangelicals” debated with traditional Evangelicals and with almost all Fundamentalists concerning “cooperative evangelism” – the strategy of platforming Modernist prelates and giving them prominent positions in mass evangelistic efforts.

In general and for the most part, Evangelicals distanced themselves from the WCC and the Ecumenical Movement. But they also tended to distance themselves from traditional Fundamentalism, and that decision is a very important part of “legalism/anti-legalism” history. Why? Because, in a profound sense, Evangelicalism was “re-formed” in the 1960s and 1970s as an outgrowth of social ferment, the popularity of new forms of music, the rise of the Jesus Movement and more. Evangelical leaders and churches tended to become less concerned about “lifeless doctrine” and “separated living” on the one hand, and more concerned about social issues and worship and music styles on the other. Leaders were instructed on ways to “package the gospel,” and “*market* the church.” Many, if not most, Evangelical churches became less “exclusive” in doctrine and lifestyle on the one hand, and more “user-friendly,” “people-friendly,” and even “culture-friendly” on the other. Enjoying an acceptance never achieved by

their Fundamentalist forbearers, Evangelicals were often considered “popular” in the 1970s and 1980s. Time magazine even declared 1975 (?) to be the “Year of the Evangelical.”

But, if the Fundamentalists of the first half of the century paid a price for separation from the world around them, Evangelicals were destined to pay a price for snuggling up to it. As time passed, statistics made it clear that the effective worldview, basic values and everyday lifestyle of Evangelicals represented little improvement over those of the general population. For example, surveying his own findings, one of Evangelicalism’s leading statisticians and the author of the influential book Marketing the Church, George Barna, came to repudiate a marketing approach. He concluded that, far from the Church changing secular culture, secular culture had changed the Church! (c.f., Tim Stafford, “The Third Coming of George Barna,” Christianity Today, Aug. 5, 2002:33-38), However, by 2005 Barna had identified some younger “revolutionaries” as a source of hope. A growing number of young believers seemed ready largely to bypass the local church in an effort to express their faith in their own way and in their own homes, workplaces, and professional communities (c.f., George Barna, Revolution, Tyndale 2005).

For other examples, you need look no further than Brian McLaren and his colleagues in the Emergent Church Movement. Some of them have come to the place where, in an effort to reach your postmodern generation, they even seem willing to jettison absolutes. Having done so, they now “feel like life is big again – like life used to be black and white, and now it’s in color.” They may have grown up holding to an inerrant Bible, the cardinal doctrines of the Church and certain behaviors as indefensible and wrong. But now they “see black, white and gray as all equally unlikelike” and unrealistic (c.f., Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” Christianity Today, Nov. 2004 pp 37-41, esp. p. 39). In reading current evangelical writings, it would seem that at least some of the more radical ones denigrate not only legalism but *divine law* in almost any form. If Fundamentalists paid a price for their stand against *liberalism*, Evangelicals have a price for their stand against *legalism* – and, in some ways at least with less justification, as we shall see.

With that relevant history as a backdrop for continuing discussion, let’s get back to your questions on legalism and whether or not behavioral codes are justified in Christian college settings. When push comes to shove, I know of only one way to address such questions authoritatively and meaningfully. Relevant history is instructive, but it is not conclusive.

Contemporary leaders are forthcoming on the subject, but they are divided. However, though times, cultures, and people change, the Word of God does not. I am acquainted well enough with both of you to know that you will agree with on that score. So let's go to Scripture to see where many in your generation – and many in *mine*, for that matter – might have gone wrong.

Bible Teachings on Legalism and Related Concerns

As simplistic as it may sound, only to the degree that we can agree on what Scripture says can we expect to reach any kind of consensus on questions having to do with legalism, law, liberty, grace, antinomianism and the like. Providentially, the Bible is replete with relevant teachings and examples, principles and precedents. However, in dealing with relevant Scripture we will have to adjust our mental grid to the language of jurisprudence. We are concerned here with the courtroom, not the flower garden; with the judge's chambers, not the artist's gallery. Our conversation will be more propositional and logical, less imaginative and devotional. Biblical principles and precedents – no matter how basic, bold, and bald they may be – must take precedence over anything else, no matter how creative, popular and appealing.

Old Testament Foundations

Biblically-based discussions on legalism should go back at least as far as the call of Moses, the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Law, the inauguration of the Old Covenant, and early interactions between Yahweh and his people Israel. Generally speaking, that history is too well known to repeat it here, but we do well to review some aspects of it.

As you probably know, the Law included, first and foremost, the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5) but also three major collections of so-called “case-laws”: a collection of moral, civil and religious or ceremonial laws including instructions concerning religious festivals (Ex. 21-23); “holiness” laws having to do with religious worship and rituals (Lev. 17-26); and also a series of elaborations, promises and warnings also given through Moses and just prior to Israel's entrance into the Promised Land (Deut. 12-25; *c.f.*, The Lion Concise Bible Encyclopedia (Oxford, England: Lion Publishing Co., 1980, 418-24).

With the passage of time, Jewish scholars sought to “contextualize” the Law in accordance with changing circumstances. This body of oral traditions supplementing the Old Testament was collected over the centuries in the Talmud, which was primarily concerned with matters of law but which also includes discussions on a variety of other subjects. The Talmud

developed in two “layers,” the earlier called the Mishna and the later the Gemara. In the ensuing discussion, when reference is made to the Torah, I will capitalize and write “Law.” When the other laws of Scripture or generic law are referred to I will simply write “law” or “laws.” In those several instances where Jewish tradition and the Talmud are in view, I will specifically note that such is the case.

Now both in ancient Scripture and in modern parlance the Law is referred to as the “Law of Moses,” and it is easy to see why that is so. It is a matter of first principle that we understand that it was the eternal God who was the Deliverer from Egypt, the Initiator of the Law with all its provisions and promises, and the “the Party of the First Part” in the Old Covenant. In my view it is important that discussions on law begin with this Old Testament perspective. The Law was given to protect God’s glory. “I am the Lord thy God.... Thou shalt have no other gods before or beside me.... Thou shalt not bow down to them or serve them.... Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain.” But the Law was also given to promote the good of mankind in general and God’s people in particular. This is evident in the fact that the Hebrew word Torah, which is inclusive of the collections noted above and especially the Ten Commandments, though usually translated “Law” could also be translated “instruction” or “guidance.” Its Divine Author should not be thought of as a “Heavenly Taskmaster” or “Slave-Driver,” but as a Heavenly Father who was solicitous of the highest good and unmitigated well-being of his people Israel, not only in this life but in the life to come.

Imagine for just a moment the plight of that large number of people emancipated from the sad and sinful servitude of Egypt. They were free now, and yet bereft of the kind of laws and instructions that alone had the potential of making life – with each other, and with Yahweh himself – orderly, profitable, or even tolerable. I recently came across the lyrics of a praise song that implied that only after Jesus came to Earth did we learn that God could be our friend. Those lyrics may elicit a fuzzy feeling, but they epitomize a faulty theology. Yahweh made it abundantly clear that Enoch, Abraham, and David (among others) were his friends. It was “friendly” of Yahweh to give the Law. Thinking people of *all* generations should be able to appreciate that. Neither anarchy nor tyranny has ever served any people well. The proper response of Israel would have been to embrace Yahweh and obey his Law. Israel recognized that to be the case when, upon receiving the Ten Commandments, their immediate response was that they would do according to all that he Yahweh had prescribed. The problem did not

lie with Yahweh or what he prescribed, but with the people who, after their initial response to God's Law, proceeded to do what he had prohibited and reaped the just rewards of their disobedience.

Israel's disobedience set both a precedent and a pattern. As often as not they promised to go God's way and then proceeded go their own way. Disobedience took differing forms. Some, such as Nadab and Abihu, not only disobeyed Yahweh's Law (ceremonial and holiness laws in their case) but took extreme liberties with it. Some, like Korah and his company, took issue with divinely-instituted authority. Some priests and rabbis took it upon themselves to "contextualize" the Law in accordance with "new circumstances" and "enlightened understandings." They then came to regard their own interpretations and applications as having an authority almost commensurate with that of the Law itself.

In sum and in one way or another, many if not most of those Israelite signatories to the Law Covenant of the Old Testament managed to "get and go their own way," anyway. The Law, which had been designed to support lawfulness and liberty, gave rise to lawlessness and libertinism. And so the Law became their undoing. In one way or another, all of them were trapped in a web of disobedience, sin, and judgment.

Nine Sign-Posts Discoverable in the Old and New Testaments

In a profound sense one can say that all of Scripture comes into play at this point in our discussion but we will settle here on nine propositions that grow out of fundamental principles and precedents having to do with legalism and liberty. Some are selected because they are so obvious that they cannot be overlooked. Others are selected because they are not at all obvious, at least to the majority of Christians.

1. *As for "salvation by works legalism," neither Scripture nor experience makes any allowance for it whatsoever.*

This proposition can be sustained on several counts. First, no one has ever kept the Law. This is so clear in Scripture and human experience as to require no comment here.

Second, Christ is God's response to man's failure to keep the requirements of the Old Covenant. Christ said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17-20). Jesus did not do away with

either the divine imperatives or the divine promises of the Old Testament. What he did do was to “fulfill” (Gr., *plerosai*) them in the sense that he kept them and made them his own. He also fulfilled them in the sense that he filled them with fuller meaning. He made it clear that the Law has to do with attitudes and motives as well as behavior.

Third, and in still another sense, in his person and work Christ was the fulfillment of the Law as well as the prophets. Paul writes, “Christ is the end of the law in its connection with righteousness to everyone that believes” (Romans 10:4). What is often overlooked in this passage is the phrase “in its connection with righteousness.” In context, Paul is clearly referring to the Mosaic Law as a means of gaining righteousness – with *salvation by works legalism*. He says that that is impossible. Christ is the End of the Law in that regard. Righteousness is only available through God’s Anointed Son and Savior.

It might seem that there is a contradiction here, but there is none. Neither Jesus nor Paul is saying that divine law no longer has any place at all in the economy of God. In fact, Paul even speaks of the “law of Christ” (*ton nomon tou Christou*; Galatians 6:2). Commentators are not necessarily agreed on all that may be involved in the “law of Christ” – whether New Testament restatements of many of the Old Testament commandments or Jesus’ maxims in the Gospels (some of which have been called the “new Torah”) or instructions not recorded in the Gospels but attributed to Jesus (*e.g.*, regarding giving and the Lord’s Supper), or all of these. But we can be sure that no period and no people of history has ever been left without the direction provided by divine law. Neither has any people of any period attained salvation by keeping God’s laws.

2. *As for “excessive conformance legalism,” in the final analysis, Christ himself must be the judge of it.*

We have noticed that there is a certain ambiguity with regard to both the more popular and the more scholarly approaches to legalism we discussed earlier. One reason for this ambiguity is that one’s motive and/or mental state is involved, such as when Charles Swindoll connects it with pride. But conformance may be excessive without emanating from pride. It may grow out of sincerity. So Christ must be the judge of it, for he alone can see the heart.

Again, excessive conformance legalism is obviously a matter of degree. Certainly *all* conformity to rules is not bad. There must be some conformity, because no conformity at all would equal chaos. But who is to judge as to when conformity is or is not “excessive”? All informed Christians of every generation have their ideas about this, but which ones are right? Who can say? Only the Lord Jesus and those apostles to whom he revealed his will through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Briefly examine with me two pertinent cases from the New Testament:

Jesus judged the *excessive conformity* of some of his contemporaries to be wrong on a number of occasions. In Matthew 12:1-12, for example, certain Pharisees criticized Jesus and his disciples for picking grain (and Jesus for healing a man’s withered hand) on the Sabbath. Both were allowable under the Law but expressly forbidden in the Talmud. As “Lord of the Sabbath” Jesus quickly judged them to be wrong on both counts.

Turning to Paul, when writing to the Colossians, he dealt with a kind of legalism that was both similar to, but also different from, that of the Judaizers in Galatia. The Galatian heresy had to do with the false notion that Gentiles who believed in Christ were also required to obey Old Testament Law or, at least, certain critical parts of it, in order to gain righteousness. The heresy that plagued the church in Colossi stemmed not only from the religion of the Hebrews but also from Greek, Roman, and Oriental religions and philosophies. The resultant mixture included angel worship and all sorts of rules and regulations that paraded as a “higher form of wisdom.” If not to be saved, at least to be “really spiritual,” one had to obey these rules and regulations. In no uncertain terms, Paul made it clear that, though adherence to rules growing out of this religious and philosophical mix – “Do not handle; Do not taste; Do not touch” – may serve to brand one as “super-spiritual” in the eyes of men, they have no value whatsoever when it comes to pleasing God or “stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Colossians 2:22-23).

At the very least, we can say that the kind of legalism that requires adherence to man-made rules and regulations, judges others on that basis, and issues in human pride of any kind is to be avoided. It is subject to divine judgment.

3. As for a “positive legalism,” both of the Testaments posit a “reactive legalism/nomism” that is highly pleasing to God.

It is imperative that we remember that, if there were in the Old Testament era those who were both libertines and legalists, there also were numerous saints who, like David, studied and extolled God's Law and responded to its Giver with love and devotion even though they were themselves imperfect in keeping it. This is perhaps where Longenecker is most helpful. While most other writers on the subject stop with a condemnation of "active legalism" of the variety that either seeks to gain righteousness and salvation by keeping the Law, or is characterized by excessive conformity to the Law for whatever reason, Longenecker goes on to describe an Old Testament "reactive legalism or nomism." Those who practiced it sought to mould "life in all its varying relations according to the Law in response to the love and grace of God."

Illustrations are not hard to come by. Look at Psalm 1 where the psalmist says, "Blessed is the man...his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night!" (Psalm 1-2). Or again, look at Psalm 119, where over and over the psalmist extols the Law of God and writes, "I love your law! Seven times a day *I praise you for your righteous rules* (vss. 163-64; emphasis mine)! And, yet once again, look at the reflection of this attitude in Philippians 4 where Paul says, "If there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice these things" (vss. 8-9).

Far from Eastern meditation, which is designed to empty the mind, thereby preparing it for an illuminating moment, biblical meditation is designed to fill the mind with divine law and learning that come from God thereby preparing both mind and heart for godly living. This is neither a "salvation by works legalism" designed to gain righteousness, nor is it an "excessive conformance legalism" often connected with the pride of (religious) life. It is indeed a kind of legalism – if we choose to retain that term – that represents a most desirable goal – to emulate and honor the greatness and goodness of God himself. It is wholly positive and pleasing to our Lord. It was a defining characteristic of all that was praiseworthy in Old Testament Judaism. And it is clearly reflected in New Testament Christianity!

4. *As for saving faith, New Testament faith involves belief(s), believing and behavior.*

Faith (Gr. *pistis*) is such a familiar word that we often do not stop to explore its fuller meaning and significance. For example, we cite Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for the evidence of things not seen" (AV), or "Now faith is the assurance of things

hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (ESV). Since that is the “biblical definition,” it may seem to be sufficient. However, though English translations of the verse have all the earmarks of being a definition of what faith *is*, it can just as readily be interpreted as a description of how faith *operates*.

For example, *pistis* can be passive or active. When passive, it refers to trustworthiness, honesty and dependability. When active, however, the noun *pistis* and the verb *pisteuo* have various meanings depending on grammatical form and the particular context. When active and objective, it has to do with “beliefs,” a “belief system,” “teachings” or “doctrine” – with the “what” of revealed faith. Jude speaks of this kind of faith when he exhorts believers to “contend for the faith (*ho pistis*) once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). When commenting on faith in the context of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, Lightfoot refers to faith as the “teachings of our Lord, enforced and explained by St. Paul, the foremost place in the phraseology of Christian doctrine” (J.B. Lightfoot, The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians, Zondervan, n.d., p. 157).

When active and subjective, on the other hand, faith generally has to do with “trusting” and “believing.” To return to Hebrews 11, verse 6 is most usually understood as referring to subjective faith. The writer says that true believers understand that the world was created out of intangible and invisible things. He also says that the Old Testament heroes of faith were so convinced of the veracity of God’s promises and the reality of things not yet seen, that they staked their lives on that conviction; and in so doing they received the commendation of God himself. What we have here is complete trust in God – that he exists and rewards those who trust him.

Both Paul and James point to still another aspect of faith that is exceedingly important. Namely, true faith evokes the right kind of behavior. In Romans, for example, Paul first emphasizes the “word of faith which we proclaim” and then goes on to say that people must confess with the mouth as well as believe in the heart (Romans 10:9-10). James writes about what we can call “show me faith.” With a twinge of cynicism he says that he will show his faith by his works and invites any of his readers to show faith without works (James 2:18). Truth, trusting, and behaving go together like H₂O. Keep the three parts together and you have water. Separate them, and you have air.

5. As for grace, “God’s unmerited favor” is but the half of it.

Etched in my memory is the challenge of my erudite professor of Greek at the university when, in response to his question, “What is *charis* (grace)?” I blurted out, “*Charis* means unmerited favor.” From long experience he was well prepared for my answer. Without missing a beat he replied, “Mr. Hesselgrave, that is fifty percent correct but fifty percent will not pass this class. I’ll give you until our next class meeting to discover the rest of the meaning.”

What Paul and the New Testament writers are talking about when they use the word “grace” is not only God’s gracious gifts and unmerited favor, but also “the divine influence on the heart, and its reflection in the life including gratitude” (*c.f.*, James Strong, Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible). It is not God’s unmerited gift and goodness alone, it is also the thankful reception our forefathers had in mind when they bowed their heads before a meal and “said grace.” It’s the kind of grace that John Newton referred to as “amazing.” It saves sinful wretches like you and me. It teaches our hearts to fear. Then it relieves the fear. And when it has occasioned a thousand years of praise that praise will have just begun!

What we have in New Testament *charis*, then, is the counterpart of Old Testament “reactive legalism/nomism” – an appropriate response in attitude and lifestyle – especially thankful reception of whatever God in his goodness gives to us. That includes, for example, the Old Testament Law and New Testament gospel. But if there is a similarity here, there is also a difference. The Law of Moses was perfect but powerless. The gospel of grace is both perfect and dynamic.

The Law of Moses was like an old-fashioned leash, bringing an animal up short and establishing a definite limit beyond which it may not go. The gospel of grace, on the other hand, is like those new spring-loaded leashes that establish limits, yes, but, just as importantly or more so, exert a constant tug that invariably brings the animal to the feet of its owner. In fact, that is what biblical grace does when it is full-orbed. It does not just “save” in the narrowest sense of that word and with but a tip of the hat to the Divine Giver. It also “saves” in the sense in which Paul uses that word when he writes, “For the grace has appeared bringing salvation to all men, training [*paideuo* means to correct or discipline as a parent does a child] us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:11-12).

6. *As for lawlessness, in the case of born-again Christians, it is an impossibility.*

A passage that has long troubled many Christians is found in I John 3:9, where, according to the Authorized Version, the apostle John wrote, “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (AV). For all the world, at first blush this sounds as though sinless perfection is not only possible, it sounds as though nothing but sinless perfection is plausible!

Readers of newer translations such as the English Standard Version (which I have been using here) will not be so troubled by the passage because, instead of “doth not commit sin” and “cannot sin,” ESV translators use phrases like “make a practice of sinning” and “keep on sinning.” In other words, one who is born again may, in fact, will sin. But the twice-born will not sin with impunity or without responding to God’s grace by confessing the sin, asking for forgiveness, and seeking victory.

I believe that John is saying still more, however. In verse 4, he makes it clear that the sin he is talking about in this context is the sin of lawlessness (Gr. *anomia*, lit., “without law” or “absence of law”). We use words such as “antinomianism,” “libertinism,” and “licentiousness,” to convey similar ideas, but “lawlessness” connotes an unwillingness to recognize either the existence or applicability of law or authority or both. For example, if I were to be stopped for speeding while driving in our neighboring state of Wisconsin, I might be willing to admit that I had indeed been driving 80 miles an hour in a 65mph zone. That would be tantamount to admitting that I am a “lawbreaker.” But suppose I simply disregard the speed limit and respond to the officer by saying something like, “You can’t give me a ticket. I’m from Illinois. Your Wisconsin laws don’t apply to me and you have no right to arrest me.” At that moment, I become something other than just a lawbreaker. I become an “outlaw.” I become “lawless.”

As I understand him, the apostle John is saying that one who is born again not only will not, but cannot, look into the face of God’s Son and say, “You have no authority over me.” Paul says that one of the conditions for salvation is that we confess that “Jesus is Lord.” From our first birth and by virtue of our old nature, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). From our second birth and by virtue of our new nature, “Whoever keeps his [our Lord’s] commandments abides in him, and he in them” (I John 3:24). Lawlessness, antinomianism, licentiousness, libertinism – these may characterize the once-born, but never the twice-born!

7. As for Christian liberty, it means “set free” not “self-serve.”

One definition of the word “license” is “an excess of liberty;” another is “freedom abused.” The Christian is called to liberty but not to its excess; to freedom but not to its abuse. Paul said it both succinctly and well: “Brethren, you have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty as an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13). In Judaism, liberty was more corporate and centered in the God’s Law. It called Israel from the bondage of Egypt to the liberty of the Promised Land. In Greek Stoicism, liberty was more individual, centered in the human will, and allowed the “enlightened” to live freely without infringements or bondage to fate. But in Paul’s gospel, liberty is both similar to and different from Hebrew and Greek backgrounds. To the “apostle of liberty,” its corporate expression was in the *Church* and its individual expression in the *believer*; it was centered in God’s *grace* as well as his *sovereignty*; and it led from *bondage to the old nature and human wisdom* to *liberty and hope “in Christ.”*

The New Testament generally and the Pauline epistles particularly have much to say about both the doctrine and practice of Christian liberty. As to their “standing,” Christians are free from the Law of Moses, the condemnation of God, the compulsion to sin, and the powers of evil. As to their “walk and work,” they are free to live selflessly, love God supremely, and serve their neighbors sacrificially. Christ himself, of course, is the greatest example of this. But as a missionary-apostle who lived and labored among the very people to whom he wrote his letters, Paul also called attention to himself and his own ministry as being exemplary. On at least three occasions, he exhorted believers to *follow him as he followed Christ*. Accordingly, in Paul’s *teaching* we have the *principles* of Christian liberty. In Paul’s *practice*, we have the *precedents* of it.

In order to see what it means in practical terms to be “free from the Law,” then we may look again at Paul’s first letter to those self-centered Christians in first-century Corinth. Located in a city where all the “vices of East and West met,” it was imperative that the Corinthian church as a body and its members as individuals display Christian virtue and demonstrate Christian behavior. As matters were, however, the church and its members were characterized by factionalism, immorality, lawsuits, compromise, heresies, infidelity, disorder and more. In writing to them Paul is firm but he does not “lay down the law” as we might say. Instead he points to his own example and, not once but twice, he says, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful” (1 Corinthians 6:12, 10:23). The first time he says this, he adds that he will not be enslaved by his “rights” whether they have to do with marriage, food,

money, or whatever. In the latter instance he adds, “but not all things build up [the body of Christ].” Christian freedom is the freedom to please a holy God so he will be glorified and that entails the freedom to “please” weaker neighbors (*i.e.*, let *their* conscience be your guide!) so as to encourage their salvation (10:31-33).

By way of concrete illustration, Paul says that as an apostle, he is as free to take a wife as are the other apostles (including Peter); but for the sake of his particular ministry he does not. Again, he says that he and Barnabas are at liberty to receive offerings from the church rather than work with their hands. But for various reasons they do not. And yet again, since idols are nothing, meat offered to them is uncontaminated so he is free to eat that kind of meat. However, if it becomes apparent that eating it might cause a weaker Christian to stumble, he will not eat it. It’s as simple as that! The reader gets the idea that, even if some ideas that are entertained by “weaker brothers and sisters” are stupid, Paul will defer to them if those stupid ideas are sincerely held. In sum, though Paul is “free from all,” he has made himself “servant to all” in order that he might “win some” (*c.f.*, 1 Corinthians 9:1-19). *That is the nature of Christian liberty.*

8. *As for the mission of the church, Great Commission requirements are at the heart of it.*

Prior to his ascension, Jesus met with the eleven and gave them the Great Commission to evangelize the world. The circumstances were reminiscent of Moses’ call at Mount Horeb—the mountain setting, the assurance of authority, the specific directions, the promise of divine presence. Note that, like “Moses’ mission” the mission given to the disciples (and the church) was *God’s mission*. It was not left to Christ’s disciples either then or later somehow to “catch” or “cast a vision” of what needed to be done, determine how to do it, and initiate the effort. From start to finish, it was, is, and will be a divine mission. Therefore, it was and is imperative that his disciples then and now take care that “their mission” conforms to “his commission.”

That being the case, as often as we quote Matthew 28:16-20, one would think that it would be thoroughly understood and rigorously applied. Such is not necessarily true, however. In fact, it is rather rare that speakers who quote the Great Commission stop long enough to exegete it. And that is too bad, because, as we have seen before, here also it is all too easy to miss both the meaning and requirements of the biblical text. Look at Christ’s command again:

- The one imperative in the text is “make disciples of all the nations” (Gr. *ethne* or all peoples; Gentiles but not excluding Jews). In the original, the English words “go,” “baptize,” and “teach” are participles. They take their imperative force from the main verb, “make disciples.”
- Method is involved. Disciples are to be made by going into all the world, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that Christ commanded.
- An order of importance is also indicated. Least important is the going. In fact, though we tend to stress the willingness to go, the text itself could as well be translated “Going into all the world” without the emphasis we put on willingness to “go.” Next in order of importance is the baptizing. But in making disciples, teaching is more important than either going or baptizing.
- Finally, we are instructed to teach hearers to observe all that Christ has commanded. That includes “Obey my voice,” “Come unto me,” “Repent and be converted,” “Take up your cross,” and “Follow me” – in fact, and by extension, it includes all the divine commands of the New Testament!

The foregoing could be greatly expanded, but it need not be. In the most succinct way possible, our Lord Jesus has given his final command. In plain language, it requires that all his commands be communicated and observed. In a nutshell, that is our mission. Almost one hundred years ago at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, mission leaders allowed participating missions and their delegates to decide for themselves what the Christian mission consisted of and how best to go about it. Today, almost a hundred years later, we tend to do much the same. We read the words of the Great Commission, close the pages of Scripture, look at the needs of the world, decide how to go about meeting them, and proceed with “our” mission. One of the most astute of contemporary missiologists, Ralph Winter, writes, “Mission has become any Christian volunteering to be sent anywhere in the world at any expense to do anything for any time period” (“The Gravest Danger ... The Re-Amateurization of Mission,” Mission Frontiers Bulletin, Mar./Apr.,1996:5.)

Notice the tendency to turn liberty into license *even in “obeying”* the Great Commission! It is not so much that in our missions we do not do good things. We do. But one can almost

hear the voice of our Lord saying, "These things you ought to have done. But you ought not to have left the other undone" (or done so hurriedly, half-heartedly, haphazardly and half-way).

9. *As for the Kingdom of God, rulership is the essence of it!*

Jesus came declaring the Kingdom of God. He announced the arrival of the Kingdom. He characterized the nature of the Kingdom. He taught his disciples to pray the Kingdom prayer. All that we know well. In fact, in recent years the Kingdom has become a favorite theme in many if not most of our churches. "Kingdom," however, is a ubiquitous term; and, generally speaking, it means a variety of things to Christian people. Most often, however, it is taken to refer to a time when, and a place where, Christ reigns as King. That understanding has some validity, of course. But it may also blind us to what Paul Harvey might term "the rest of the story."

When we use the word "kingdom" in English, it is quite natural that we immediately think of its temporal and territorial dimensions. After all, the term represents a combination of two words: "king" and "domain." But "king's domain" is not the primary meaning of either of the corresponding words in Hebrew or Greek. Both *Malkuth* in Hebrew and *basileia* in Greek have to do, first and foremost, with "rule" or "rulership." And, quite apart from boundaries of time and space, the locus of "rulership" is in the person of the king! Wherever and whenever the king is present, there is the kingdom! That is why Christ's forerunner, John the Baptist, could say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). That is why, when our Lord sent disciples ahead of him, they were instructed to say, "The kingdom of God has come near to you" (Luke 10:9).

When we Christians today are asked to quote a favorite Bible verse, we almost invariably respond with a divine promise, hardly ever with a divine command. How easily we forget that promises were an important part of the Covenant of Law and that commands are an important part of the Covenant of Grace! It is the implementation of Christ's rulership that allows for the fulfillment of God's promises. And, as unlikely as it may seem at times, there is a profound sense in which Christ's rule and reign actually commenced when he was a baby in a cradle, continues now when he is Head of the Church, consummates in a millennial reign, and then continues on in a new heaven and earth "wherein dwelleth righteousness." Apart from his reign, there would be no peace possible on the earth here and now; and no righteousness in the

new heavens and earth to come would be possible. In the final analysis, it's all about Christ reigning and ruling over all – all individuals, all peoples, all lands, all institutions, all powers, all of this world and all of the world to come!

Conclusion

Well, my young friends, you began this conversation with a question. Is it or is it not legitimate for a Christian college to infringe upon the liberty of its students by requiring them to submit to a code of conduct designed to maintain the integrity and testimony of the institution as a whole? In the course of our conversation we have considered historical developments in American Protestantism that have contributed to misunderstandings with regard to legalism, liberty, and related topics. We also looked at Scripture in an effort to illuminate and, if possible, resolve some of these misunderstandings. If not entirely beyond dispute, certain propositions seem to have sufficient support from both history and Scripture to serve as a basis for further intergenerational discussions if not immediate agreement.

1. Both of the Testaments disclose types of legalism and liberty that are good and bad, desirable and deplorable. To be truly Christian and contributive to understanding, all conversations, sermons, and studies on these subjects should be more nuanced than they often are and characterized by less heat and more light.

2. Bible-believing Christians of every generation are greatly indebted to forbearers who have preserved and passed on to them an authoritative Bible, orthodox doctrine, and New Testament churches. To recognize this does not require us to overlook or disregard the perceived faults and weaknesses of our forbearers. It only requires that we not parade their faults so as to blind us to either their strengths or to our own weaknesses.

3. When it comes to surrendering personal liberty to meet the needs of other individuals, the weight of biblical principles and precedents clearly seems to be on the side of deferring to the needs of others – provided they are sincere. When it comes to surrendering personal liberty to meet the need for credibility on the part of corporate entities such as a Christian church, school, or mission agency, the weight of biblical principles and precedents clearly seems to be on the side of that Christian entity – provided that its requirements and regulations are clearly announced and biblically based. It is Western individualism rather than Christian conviction that recoils at the idea of serving by submitting. The Scriptures stress the testimony of the Church as a Body, not just or primarily the freedom of its members.

¹ Dr. Hesselgrave delineated the following terms and definitions in a variant edition of this paper. The breakdown is included here as background information:

- A. *Builders* – born before 1946
- B. *Boomers* – born between 1946 and 1964
- C. *Busters* (“Gen-Xers”) – born between 1965 and 1976
- D. *Millennials* – born between 1977 and 1994
- E. *Babies* – born after 1994