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## LEGALISM?

Alexander Campbell wrote in his *Christian System*, advocating using pure speech.<sup>1</sup> By this he meant calling Bible things by Bible names. The advantage of doing this is that we use the same categories of thought that God uses. That way, we have the same thought patterns and can understand at least some of God's conclusions. Campbell noted that so much debate in the Christian realm centers about religious jargon rather than the words of Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, those of us in Restoration churches have done a reasonably good job of using the same thought forms as the inspired writers. For instance, until recently, we have used the word "pastor" in a way that allowed us to see the true task of the shepherd. That has kept us away from the confusion of the roles of the minister (or evangelist) and the elder. At least we have kept away from confusion on paper. The practical application may be another story. Al Danielson expressed it well when he said, "The closer we come to Biblical terminology, the less room there is for error."

A perpetuator of division in Restoration Movement has been our religiously-based name calling. Obeying the Sermon on the Mount, we would not call another man a fool. Rather we dub him a *liberal* or a *legalist*. If he is to the left of us, we are friendly and label him a *liberal*. If he is to the right of us, we are unfriendly and label him a *legalist*. And who has any time for legalism? After all, we emphasize grace. And grace, in our limited definition, always looks to the left. Right?

We need a label for our own position. Let's call ourselves *conservatives*. That has a wholesome, trouble free ring to it and brings a Rush to our hearts. Now that our labels are comfortably in place, let's see how they are used in the Bible.

In Scripture the word *liberal* is used with reference to material possessions. Liberal giving is enjoined. There doesn't seem to be a philosophical position known as a *liberal*. So our first mistake is to take a meaningful word and use it in a provincial way.

Checking on *conservative* — the word isn't used at all. I think that category has heavenly holes in it, too. Or some kind of holes. They might even be liberal holes.

But my search is rewarded on the word *legalistic*. The NIV translators chose it to replace

"righteousness according to the law" in the KJV. That is still different than being legalistic as a philosophical category, but since we're not *legalists*, we can stretch a smidgin and accept the possibility. (We are not definite because by our own admission we are not *legalists*. All people who speak with definiteness are arrogant. Grace, coupled with our non-judgmental attitude, tells us that.)

The best we have come up with so far is to define *legalistic* as *being right with God by keeping the law*. Since the street theology of the Restoration Movement talks so much about *legalism*, I wish that the inspired writers would have told us more about it. Jesus discussed the way the Pharisees behaved (Phariseeism?) in the Sermon on the Mount. Further, he said that we had to do better than that. He gave six illustrations in Matthew 5 of how they hedged on the intentions of Scripture and found a way around it or fell short of keeping the intent of the words. Actually, the Pharisees were not *legalists* but *illegalists*.

Since these categories of *liberals*, *conservatives* and *legalists* have no genuine basis in Scripture, I have an alternative structure to recommend to replace the three categories. It begins with determining what is priority to God. That should become our top priority and main category. I have determined God's preaching priorities by charting every presentation in the Book of Acts and writing down each point. When a point was made for just one or two presentations, I reasoned that it was local to the situation and not universal to the message. The result is this chart that lists the surviving categories at the head of each column.

<b>The Message of Christ in Acts</b>							
<b>Case in chapter:</b>	<b>Predicted in the OT</b>	<b>Crucified by men</b>	<b>Raised by God</b>	<b>Enthroned with God</b>	<b>Signs to verify</b>	<b>Response required</b>	<b>Spirit Given</b>
2, Peter	Psalms, 25 - 28	23	24	33	43	38	38
3, Peter	18	15	15	13	16	19	
4, Peter	11	10	10		10, 16	12	
5, Peter		30	30	31		31	32
7, Stephen	37	52	implied in 56	56	6:6	Speaker terminated	55
10, Peter	43	39	40		44	43, 48	"Poured out"
13, Paul	22 - 23, 32	28 - 29	30	33, "raised"	31, appearance	39	52
17, Paul	Quoted pagan poet in 28		18, 31	31, implied	31 via resurrection	30, 34	
22, Paul	14		Implied in 8		13	16	21. See 13:2
26, Paul	6 - 7, 22	23	23	Implied in 15	Implied in 14	20	Implied in 22

It occurs to me that if the inspired speakers considered this the message needed for alien audiences, then we know what is the most important to God. Also, this message should represent the bulk of what we offer to alien sinners, be they religious sinners or dedicated heathens.

For those concerned that the Old Testament isn't given proper place, column one shows its authority and purpose for us. It points to the coming of Jesus into history.

For those who are touched by the crucifixion of Christ, column two is solidly in place. Without

His death, there would be no good news of our salvation.

The one that appeals most to me is column three and the resurrection. Lots of good men have died for others (consider our national battlefields), but only the sinless Jesus died for the whole of mankind and then rose on the third day. Let those who talk much of the death of Jesus spend an equal amount of time on the resurrection and the evidences of it. And let them include how we identify with the resurrection as we are born into his family. The "completed work of Christ on the cross" is modern theology, but it is not the message of the Book of Acts. Those gospel preachers emphasized the resurrection.

But the story of Christ is not merely historical. Column four is ongoing. He not only *was* enthroned with the Father, he is *still there* and is *still working* with His people, just as he did in Acts. Try it out by asking Him for an opportunity to tell someone else about Jesus right away. But be prepared.

For those who must have evidence, the inspired presenters of Acts spoke of the evidence of His resurrection in nearly every case. (Column five.) They could either demonstrate with miracles they were producing or could point to some very recent ones as evidence. For today, God has provided us with a well documented book of evidences, much of it written by a medical doctor. (Luke wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else.)

The message of Jesus was not merely academic and philosophical. The speakers, when allowed to live, called for action. (Column six.) For the action oriented, outcome based doers among us, the message is dynamic. Repentance was demanded. Baptism was the outcome.

God is active in every case of conversion and we see in the seventh column that the Spirit was given to each new believer. He "stays with us" until life is over and its outcome certain.

As a movement, we fear creeds now even more than the Restoration Pioneers. Their opposition was based largely on the authority of the creed rather than its mere existence. The message about Christ in Acts should be as near to a creed as we non-credal people get.

It seems that almost no one wants to be labeled a legalist. If being a legalist means "given to detail," then I want to be as detailing as Jesus said to be. "This you ought to have done and not leave the other undone."

The rule of life that has worked well for me has been to implement the frequent commands and examples to do what pleases God. This eliminates the categories of legalism and liberalism, replacing them with a Biblical thought form.

If we need legalism for a descriptive term, would it work to substitute “rule-making?” That seems direct and to the point, avoiding the emotion-laden term that adds so much to the divisions our Lord told us not to have. Now, instead of calling that group meeting over a few blocks “legalists,” we can correctly think of them as having different priorities than set forth in the Scriptures. Maybe then, we can find some basis for the discussion of our differences rather than judge them to be incurable.

1. Page 125.
2. Ibid, page 124.