

Vows and Covenants are Killer Legalism: An Example

Legalism takes many forms and can occur in seemingly unknown places. We can think we are not legalistic, but we can be. Being routine and ordered is not legalism. Legalism is when there is a ‘force’ applied to others, demanding that they comply – e.g. eating fish on Friday,¹ tithing, attending mid-week bible studies. You can be legalistic if you berate yourself for unholiness because you failed to do something that is not unholy in itself – e.g. not going to a Sunday meeting, not celebrating Lent.

Legalism usually comes from the desire to be holy, as in the above examples. However, holiness is imputed to us and holy actions come out of following the Spirit into righteous activity. We cannot please God by laws (e.g. 10 Commandments), Torah, or any other form of legalism.

One way people want to please God is by making vows to him and to other believers. Here’s what Jesus said about it from a Kingdom perspective rather than a religious one:

Matthew 5:33-37 (AMP) – *“Again, you have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT YOU SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD [as a religious duty].’ But I say to you, do not make an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God; or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet; or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you are not able to make a single hair white or black. But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’ [a firm yes or no]; anything more than that comes from the evil one.*

Paul carried out a vow², however, this was a Jewish custom because he was keeping a Nazirite vow of abstinence. It appears that this was to satisfy the Jews that he was still a Jew, but this is contentious.

Making covenants outside of the New Covenant we are in is also overstepping the mark. It was an Old Testament formality, but we are in the Kingdom now – every thing has changed.

This quote is from John Kingsley Alley’s FREE e-book³ “Building An Apostolic People” shows how covenanting and legalism was the ‘death’ of the 1742 English revival:

“How do you maintain a revival once you have one? This is a relevant question because most revivals and moves of God are short-lived. Revival does not fade because of anything God does, but rather something that its leaders do.

This is what happened to Jonathan Edwards, the famous revivalist and preacher in 1742, in his church in Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards had a great heart and a very ordered mind, and he observed and understood many things to do with grace, and sin, and human nature, and society...

There are wonderful stories of how the Spirit of God fell on people and changed them completely, often transforming whole towns and communities. After recounting these stories, he conveyed the following: “About the same time there were two remarkable instances of persons led away with strange enthusiastic delusions.”

“Enthusiasm” was a word used to describe the motive of people who were considered “flaky”, “super spiritual” as we would say, or “over the top”. These were people very eager about religion but assumed to be running in the way of the flesh.

Jonathan Edwards describes their fault. “That which has made the greatest noise in the country was the conduct of the man at South Hadley. His delusion was that he though himself divinely instructed to direct a poor man in depression and despairing circumstances to say certain words in prayer to God as recorded in Psalm 116:4 for his own relief.”

In modern English, this was a brother who thought the Lord had impressed on him to tell another brother, one who was struggling, to pray according to Psalm 116:4 and God would help him. Psalm 116:4 says “Lord save me”. The “strange enthusiastic delusion” referred to was simply that an ordinary member of the church thought he had heard from God and should try to encourage a brother.

1 – A Roman Catholic legal requirement up until the 1970s.

2 – Acts 18:18

3 – www.peace.org.au/sites/default/files/building-an-apostolic-people.pdf

If this leaves you shaking your head, remember we are living in different times. Edwards goes on to describe that this man was actually a “pious man” and that he accepted correction and repented. He was sorry for thinking that he could be used by the Holy Spirit.

In Edward’s day they seem to have believed two falsehoods. One, that only some people were ministers, and the other, that only a few people who were ministers, could be led by the Holy Spirit. That year 1742 marked the end of the revival. Edwards remarked “The Spirit of God not long after this, appeared to be withdrawing from all parts of the country.”

If we wish to maintain revival, or wish to remain in grace, we need to avoid resisting God. He always seeks to push into new areas where we are not accustomed. That is not all however, as Edwards writes more regarding events in 1742.

“...the people were exceedingly moved crying out in great numbers in the meeting house, and a great part of the congregation commonly staying in the house of God for hours after the public service.”

Edwards believed that he had to maintain this revival (unlike previous unsuccessful attempts) and that the people needed to enter into an oath (a covenant) before God. In March 1742, he drew up a document (which took up 4 pages of his article) and required everyone over the age of 14 years to subscribe to it. He had many things to say (including much Scripture) on how this was going to help. However he writes, “In the beginnings of the summer of 1742, there seemed to be an abatement of the liveliness of people’s affection in religion...” This was just 10 weeks after the signing of the covenant, which was supposed to help maintain the revival.

You cannot take a system of law and impose it on revival to create some kind of spiritual order. It has to be a work of grace. We all need to find greater grace from God than we do have, and we will only maintain what we have by walking in the way of grace.

Vows and human covenants (all the Bible covenants were initiated by God) always take away freedom, and kill off faith and hunger for God. Jesus Christ said, “let your yes be yes, and your no be no, anything else comes from the evil one.”⁴ That is certainly food for thought.

It seems that a great many Christians and Church movements use vows, covenants, pledges, promises to God and similar declarations as ways to try to enforce our faith and make it stronger. It does no such thing. Grace and a move of God is supposed to change our heart so that by our love for Christ we continue to serve him from a place of pure devotion, not from rules or requirements. Resolve to serve Christ is wonderful, but turning it into a system of compliance removes the life from it.

Paul said to the Galatians, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law?”⁵ Of course the answer was no. They received the Holy Spirit by faith and grace, by believing the Gospel and what God said, and desiring what God had to offer. The same is true today.

God wants to do wondrous things in our midst, to change our churches and hearts. He wants to bring a sense of community and purpose, but it will not come through legalism. This is dangerous, and we will do well to avoid it. We will do well to renew our first love for Christ and our love for the brethren, the result of which is...life.”⁶

Read more on this topic in Chapter 9 of “Building An Apostolic People” it’s FREE here: [e-book link](#)

Laurence

7-5-2016

www.CanberraForerunners.org

COPYRIGHT

Quote: © 2016 by Peace Apostolic Ministries. All Rights Reserved.

This document is free to copy, republish and distribute, but only ‘as is’. It is free to quote from at length.

All Canberra Forerunners’ documents are licensed under

[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#)

4 – Matthew 5:37

5 – Galatians 3:2, 5

6 – John Kingsley Alley (2016) “The Danger of Vows and Covenants” [extract from “Building An Apostolic People”]
(www.peace.org.au/apostolic/holy-community/the-dangers-of-vows-and-covenants)