



STATEMENT DL-300

EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM

Addressing the Legalist

by Rachel D. Ramer

Though equipped with correct theology, specific verses, and compassion to face the Jehovah's Witness who sat on my couch, there was one element for which I had not adequately prepared. From my early experience in an ultraconservative wing of a Christian denomination, I should have recognized her haughty, and yet fearful, emotions — the tentacles of legalism.

I ignored this issue. My list of "shoulds" hadn't mandated door-to-door evangelism. Consequently, she held on to this duty stubbornly.

Across the spectrum of major cults, world religions, and some Christian groups lies the grip of legalism, the dependence on human works, which erects a barrier to God's grace. Ultimately, every religion or philosophy except biblical Christianity is legalistic in some sense, since they all depend on human effort for salvation, replacing *Christ's* work with a system. Legalism is the natural religion of fallen humankind, and Christians, too, can easily slip back into it (Gal. 3:1-3). Finding freedom from legalism may depend on dismantling the religious requirements set by one's group or on obtaining deliverance from one's psychological dependence on human efforts.

Legalistic Christians depend on specified works (often extrabiblical, or an ultra-literal interpretation of Scripture) as *evidence of salvation*, replacing much of the *Holy Spirit's* work with a system. Some may consciously or unconsciously depend on works to keep their salvation.

The unique snare of legalism. A works-based salvation is difficult to break from, because the person *feels* that he or she is displeasing to God. The conscience protests what it should not protest. Thus witnessing to a legalist requires a distinct sensitivity.

A legalist's rules should not be carelessly desecrated. God doesn't honor ignorance, but He does recognize dedication as an important ingredient in responding to Him. Conscience-stricken seekers don't need less commitment; they need Christ as the object of their commitment. Legalists often feel that liberated Christians simply want less restraint. A careless disregard for their requirements and the rationales for those requirements will never win them (Rom. 14:22-23).

Phrases such as "saved by faith" may not crack a legalistic system. Cult members often mentally check off faith, grace, and mercy as sideline doctrines already in their system of works.

Instead, a careful education may be necessary, such as exposure to various acceptable interpretations on peripheral issues. The New International Version calls them "disputable matters" in Romans 14:1 (they are "opinions" in the New American Standard Bible). The legalist needs to see that a difference exists between what is relative and somewhat defined by culture, such as expressions of modesty, and what is absolute and should be interpreted the same in any culture, such as the Ten Commandments.

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To legalists, God is difficult to reach. The holy God translates for them into a distant God. Yet, the Scriptures describe God as *both* holy (separate, pure) *and* intimate. God is not merely hard to please, but impossible to please *outside* of Christ. *In* Christ, however, there is complete acceptance for the believer on the basis of Christ's works, and Christ as our Advocate and High Priest provides immediate access to the presence of the Father (Heb. 4:14-16).

Legalism's cure may look similar to its slavery. While following Christ is liberating and delightful, it is also arresting. We are free; yet we are bondservants — a position at times more restrictive than a system. For example, the Israelites were required to give a tithe of their money. In the New Testament, the Spirit may require individuals to give more than a tithe.

Legalists can trade human efforts and dead works for dependence on Christ and enduring works — and be liberated in the process. They are liberated from a taskmaster to participate in a love offering. Rules are evaluated in light of a relationship with Christ. Human efforts give way to His righteousness. Distance from God is replaced with intimacy with God.

In witnessing to the legalist, we are not comparing religious systems. Christianity doesn't offer a system, but a Person.

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