

LEGALISTS, PERFECTIONISTS AND RIGHT-WINGERS

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Introduction

Unflattering accusations, pejorative terms, epithets, name-calling—these have for ages been the weapons of weak arguments. Abraham Lincoln is credited for the story of a lawyer who, in the midst of a trial, passed a note to his associate which read. "Our evidence is weak. Skin the defendant." The use of the argument (ad hominem), against the man, is an all too familiar technique of those whose position is not well sustained by evidence. It is a long-established principle of discussion and debate that those who have evidence will present their evidence, while those who do not have evidence will resort to the argument “against the man.”

Many of us have become targets of this technique. We have been called Jews, legalists, soul-sleepers, cabbage-eaters, calamity howlers, and so forth, because of our teaching of Bible truths that our opponents find difficult to disprove with evidence. Likewise, those who are still clinging to the principles of our historic faith now find a similar technique being used by those who are promoting Calvinism among us. Since it is virtually impossible for them to meet our evidence with theirs, we are now being called legalists, perfectionists, right-wingers, traditionalists, et cetera.

A variation of this argument against the man is the statement, "We are under grace," as if those who keep the Sabbath are not under grace; or "We are New Testament Christians," as if those who wish to obey all of God's commandments are not New Testament Christians. The counterpart of this is seen in our church when the Calvinists among us affirm "We are evangelicals" as if those among us who have won one, scores, hundreds, or thousands of souls to Christ by outreach and evangelistic endeavors are not evangelicals.

However, we should not let these accusations cause us to retreat into an attitude of defensiveness. We can well afford to analyze and examine them, with no apprehension that they might contain injurious truth. We can simply ask the question, "What do these accusations mean?" This, in itself, will prove to be an adequate defense against them.

Legalism

Definitions of the term "legalism" may be found in standard dictionaries, as follows:

"In theology, the doctrine of salvation by good works." *Webster's New World Dictionary*.

"In theology, the doctrine of salvation by works, or strict adherence to a religious code, rather than by grace." *Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary*

We pause to note that Christ has no place at all in such a doctrine of salvation as is pictured here. We compare this with a Spirit of Prophecy definition:

"The spirit of bondage is engendered by seeking to live in accordance with legal religion, through striving to fulfill the claims of the law in our own strength." *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, 1077

Again we observe the Christless characteristic of legalism, indicated by the words "in our own strength." The classic scriptural treatment of this condition is found in Romans 7, where the apostle Paul, who had once been a legalist, describes with accuracy the futile struggles against evil within and evil without which are the experience of one who tries to perform the will of God with no assistance from the Son of God. Paul sums it up in verse 25:

"I myself," in Greek (ego autos), which means "I alone" (Larson); "I left to myself" (Moffatt); "I, thrown on my own resources" (Arndt and Gingrich); "With my mind ... serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin."

I alone, left to myself, thrown on my own resources, striving to keep God's law in human strength, with no help from Christ—this is legalism. That this meaning of the term has been so understood for centuries is witnessed by the dictionaries which have reported, in the above definitions, how the word has been used in theology.

Certain truths are immediately apparent.

- First, legalism does not apply to one commandment any more or less than to any other commandment. To strive to obey any of God's commandments in one's own strength, without Christ, is legalism. So those who would describe a person who worships on Sabbath as a legalist, but maintain that one who performs the same acts of worship on Sunday is not a legalist are incorrect,
- Second, legalism is not an act. It is an attitude. One who attempts to control his tongue, relying on his own strength, is a legalist. One who attempts to do the same thing, relying on Christ, is not a legalist. The difference is in the attitude, not in the act.

Note how clearly this principle is established in Paul's allegory in Galatians 4:22-23:

"For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a free woman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the free woman was by promise."

There was no difference between the act of Abraham in his relation with Sarah and the act of Abraham in his relation with Hagar. The two acts were identical. The difference was in the attitude, not in the act. One was an act performed in faith and reliance upon the promise of God. The other was an act performed in self-reliance, which is legalism. Legalism is an attitude, not an act. The same act performed by two different persons may be either legalistic or Christian, depending on the attitude; and the same act performed by a single person at two different times may be either legalistic or Christian, depending on the attitude.

It follows that no act of man can be defined as legalistic by a human observer unless it is openly confessed to be a Christless, self-reliant act.

Legalism is an attitude, and attitudes are within the heart, where they cannot be read with accuracy by human eyes. How inappropriate, then, for any Christian to pronounce judgment on another Christian and call him or her a legalist, thus claiming the divine power to read and judge human hearts. Let all such persons consider whether they are manifesting the attitude of Satan himself, "I will be like the most High." Isaiah 14:14

And let all of us consider that we human beings are not even as expert at reading our own hearts as we might be. If there is any possibility at all of our becoming involved in legalism, it is here in what might be called an unconscious or unintentional legalism.

But it is not impossible for a Christian to hold this truth without effectively practicing it. Through carelessness in *the personal* relationship with Christ one may be deprived of the strength of Christ without realizing it, and thus become unsuccessful in the Christian life. Against this type of inadvertent legalism we should all be on guard. We should keep our hearts diligently and analyze our attitudes carefully, making it our determined purpose never to let ourselves be separated from the strength of Christ.

A Calvinistic Definition of Legalism

But this is altogether different from the type of legalism that the Calvinist has in mind when he accuses historic Seventh-day Adventists of being legalists. The Calvinist has turned from the historical definition of legal religion as "salvation by works," an attempt to perform God's will and to overcome temptation in one's own strength. He puts in its place his own Calvinistic definition that legalism is any attempt at all, by any means whatsoever, to perform God's will. He maintains that victorious Christian living is simply not possible, even through the power of Christ.

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This leads to the ludicrous conclusion that "legalists" may be identified by their fervent desire to live unsullied lives, and through the grace of Christ to be truly Christlike in character and in performance of God's will. By this incredibly twisted reasoning high standards of Christian living would indicate legalism, while low standards would be indicators of true Christianity. Such confusion as this was exhibited by the college professor whom I told his students, "I eat enough meat to avoid being a legalist." With equal logic one might say, "I break the Sabbath just enough to avoid being a legalist," or "I commit adultery just enough to avoid being a legalist."

Do high standards indicate legalism, and do low standards indicate true Christianity?

Yes, to one who is desperately confused. No, to the Bible-believing Christian who remembers 1 John 2:6:

"He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked."

To God's special messenger to the commandment-keeping remnant church Ellen White, who bore witness to the saving and keeping power of God the answer to the above question is a most emphatic No! Here is a representative sampling of her testimony:

"To human beings striving for conformity to the divine image, there is imparted an outlay of heavenly treasures, an excellency of power that will place them higher than even the angels who have never sinned." *Signs of the Times*, vol. 4, 243

"There is a reservoir of power at our command, and we are not to remain in the dark, cold, sunless cave of unbelief; or we shall not catch the bright beams of the Sun of Righteousness. To be a Christian requires more than a profession of faith. There must be an earnest effort to conquer through the grace freely given of God." *Review and Herald*, vol. 3, 14

"Christ's death and resurrection have opened before every soul an unlimited source of power from which to draw. This power will enable you to overcome the most objectionable traits in your character. God's supply of grace is awaiting the demand of every sin-sick soul. It will heal every spiritual disease. By it hearts may be cleansed from all defilement. It is the gospel remedy for the curse of sin. It unites human beings with Christ in the performance of good works, enabling them to run in the path of obedience, representing to the world the meekness and lowliness they have learned from the Saviour." *Review and Herald*, vol. 4, 349

"God has power in reserve for us. Those who are reaching out for help, exercising faith in Jesus, will receive it. Divine power will co-operate with human effort. Brethren, the gates are open, and the glory of God is shining for every soul who looks to Heaven in times of trial and perplexity." *Signs of the Times*, vol. 2, 307

Perfectionism

The doctrine of perfectionism has been and still is an overreaction against the errors of Calvinism. Many Christians have observed the baleful effects on individuals and on society that are produced by the Calvinistic doctrine that it is impossible, even through the power of Christ, for any human being to stop sinning. They have turned from this false doctrine of "justification only," and endeavored to give the Bible doctrine of sanctification its proper place in the plan of salvation. We sympathize with them and appreciate their concerns, but unfortunately some of them have overreacted and have gone too far. Even John Wesley accepted the idea that by a second work of grace which might occur some time after conversion, a Christian might become instantly and permanently sanctified. He called this the attainment of "perfect love." Yet Wesley never claimed to have had the experience himself, nor did John Fletcher or Francis Asbury, two of his leading co-workers.

Probably the most influential school of perfectionism that the world has seen was developed at Oberlin College in Ohio under the leadership of Charles Finney, Asa T Mahon, and their associates. Under their ministries the doctrine was more fully developed than by earlier perfectionists. It is for this reason that we have waited until now before introducing a definition.

Their full grown doctrine of perfectionism had five parts:

1. Victorious Christian living, perfection of character through the power of Christ, is possible and attainable.
2. This perfection of Christian character may occur in a moment of time, instant sanctification.
3. When instant sanctification has occurred, the Christian will be aware of it, and can testify to the world that he or she has become sinless.

These three basic parts of the doctrine were held by most, if not all perfectionists. The reader will recognize that Ellen White, though an apostle of power, accepted only the first of these three propositions and firmly rejected the other two. At Oberlin two more propositions were added:

4. The doctrine of the simplicity of moral action. According to this doctrine, every act of life, however large or small, is in itself either totally sinless or totally sinful, and the person who is performing any act of life, large or small, is likewise either totally sinless or totally sinful. There is no security in Christ, no covering robe of righteousness by faith, but only a never-ending anxiety over one's spiritual condition. To partially offset the discouragement of this grim doctrine, a fifth was added:

5. The doctrine of the assured providence of God. This was the teaching that God would never let any Christian who had sinned be taken by death without giving him or her, time and opportunity to repent.

Ellen White, though protesting strongly against the errors of Calvinism, never became involved in any of these overreactions. Thus, to call her a perfectionist, or to call those who accept her writings as the testimonies of the Holy Spirit to God's people, perfectionists, is to badly misapply the term. Space here does not permit us to present all of her strong arguments against the errors of perfectionism.

Right-Wingers

This is the language of politics, not religion. The politician who respects no standard of right and wrong places the words "right" and "left" in place of the words "right" and "wrong," and separates people into categories, or voting blocks, according to their attitudes toward various topics. He estimates that a certain number of voters hold views to the right or left of what he sees as a central position (probably his own position). To the politician, the words "right" and "left" have nothing to do with correctness or moral rectitude. These words simply indicate to the politician what language he should use and what promises or concessions he should make to each group in order to gain their political support, their votes.

The church leader who carries this concept into his relationships with church members is displaying the same cynical, amoral attitude as the politician. He does not concern himself with what is morally or theologically right or wrong, but only with the pragmatic question of how to win or hold the support of the different segments of his constituency. Thus he regards groups in his Conference whose theology is incorrect as people to whom certain concessions must be made, rather than people who need to be led to a more correct theology.

This is very far from the attitude of the true shepherd of the sheep who would make no concessions in sacrifice of truth or principles for the sake of popularity. And he would never take the basely, cynical attitude that he need not worry about disappointing or offending the "conservatives," because he considers, as one administrator said, "Even if they are offended by what we do, they won't give us any serious trouble."

The true spiritual leader will consider it his duty to bear witness to the truth of God in any and all circumstances, regardless of the effect this may have on his political advancement. He stands for principle, not for policy, placing the approval of God above the approval of men. To stay in office is not his highest goal, but rather to stay in a right relationship with his God. He is prepared at all times to "stand for the right though the heavens fall." *Education, 57*

On the other hand, if the Conference president who is primarily a politician finds division of thought in a church or churches in his Conference, he does not ask the question, "Who is holding to the truth of God?" Rather, he asks, "Who has the most influence and the most money? Who will give me the most trouble if I disagree with them?" Such administrators are called "menpleasers" in the Spirit of Prophecy, and they are not applauded.

Those who would apply these political attitudes to the theological divisions that are threatening our church's unity today are not only cynically pragmatic; they are far out of harmony with the facts and need to consider the realities of the situation. Even a cursory examination of the historical records will reveal that **most of those who are being called "right-wingers" today have not deviated a single hair's breadth to the right of the positions that were generally held by all Seventh-day Adventists until the book *Questions On Doctrine* was published in 1957.**

There is no scarcity of evidence on this point. One need only look at the publications and the teaching materials that were in use until the 1960s to establish this fact. Such materials would include *Review and Herald* and *Signs of the Times* articles, school textbooks and syllabi, the various Bible study guides being circulated by the Voice of Prophecy and other agencies, and even the *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*. In none of these will be found any trace of the Calvinistic doctrine that it is not possible, by any means, for Christians to stop sinning.

But many of those who have wandered far to the "left," as it were, from this straight pathway of historical truth into the false doctrines of Calvinism, are now looking back at the church members who are refusing to follow them in their deviation and calling them "right-wingers ... You have moved from the straight pathway to the right," is the charge.

It would be difficult to imagine a greater misinterpretation of the facts than this. Those of us who are called "right-wingers" insist we have not moved to the right. We are continuing in a straight, undeviating course from which the Calvinists have departed far to the left. Let us do all that we can to call them back, but let us never permit ourselves to be upset or deceived by these false accusations.

Traditionalists

The use of this term to describe the Seventh-day Adventists who are trying to cling to the principles of their historic faith is a propaganda trick; some feel that may well have been conceived in the mind of Satan himself. The call to turn away from the traditions of men to the pure word of God has been a central and consistent theme in all Seventh-day Adventist soul-winning endeavors. Our pioneers set the example by rejecting tradition-supported Sunday observances and accepting Scripture-supported Sabbath observance. Those who have accepted the Seventh-day Adventist message have made a conscious and deliberate decision to live by the Scriptures and not by tradition. They have done this because they could see that not a single doctrine held by Seventh-day Adventists is based on tradition.

But the Calvinists among us would change the definition of this term, just as they would change the definition of the term "legalism."

Instead of properly defining tradition as a teaching of men that is not supported by the Scriptures, they are applying the term to Bible doctrines that have been held by others before us. Thus, they apparently hope to redirect our strong mindset against tradition, and turn that force against the very Bible doctrines that have made us a people.

A Bible truth is not a tradition of man and cannot be made so by the passing of time.

Age does not change truth into error, nor does it change Scripture to tradition. We are not "traditional Adventists" because we hold firmly to the principles of Bible truth that were studied out by our pioneers, truths that have not been made void by time or trial.

If a descriptive term is needed to distinguish us from the Calvinists among us, then let us be known as "historical Adventists" and not "traditionalists."

And let the Calvinists among us not attempt to hide behind the term "evangelicals," but frankly and straightforwardly identify themselves as what they really are—Calvinists.

In summary, let us remember the common principle of discussion and debate:

those who have evidence will present their evidence. Those who do not have evidence will resort to the argument (ad hominem) against the man.

Let us rejoice that our cause is sustained by evidence and not by false accusations, pejorative terms, epithets, and name-calling. Truth has no need of such defenses. And let us remember the words of Jesus:

"Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." Matthew 5:11-12