



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 191

Practical legalism – Though the eating or not eating of meat, and the observing and not observing of certain days are no longer issues which believers grapple with, there are many other forms of practical legalism in churches today, pertaining to issues or activities which are not directly addressed in the Bible, which do cause friction and disunity among believers, adversely affecting their growth in holiness, and ultimately bringing dishonor to God. The following are some of the most debated items.

Length of hair – The passage that is usually cited regarding length of hair is 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, where it is said that a woman's long hair is a glory to her and that long hair is a dishonor to a man. This is a very difficult passage with various interpretations; however, per majority of commentators Paul is not teaching a universal and permanent biblical principle but is referring to a specific cultural situation. It seems that in first century Corinthian society, men and women were obliterating male-female gender differences. In doing so and based on that culture, they were rebelling against God ordained roles of authority and submission. Covering or not covering the head, having long or short hair were not moral issues, were not in and of themselves sinful; rather, the biblical principle was the God established male-female roles, which apply at all times and in all places, as appropriately expressed within each society.

Alcoholic beverages – There are major disagreements among Christians over whether a believer should drink alcoholic beverages or not, or whether wine should be used as part of Communion. We even see some churches and ministries include alcohol abstention as a condition of their membership. However, in spite of these this is not a complicated issue, for the Bible does not forbid the sensible consumption of alcohol, and actually refers to it as a blessing from God, which if properly used can be enjoyable, lightening up the mood (Psalm 104:14-15; Deuteronomy 7:13; 14:26; Judges 9:13; Nehemiah 5:18; 1 Timothy 5:23). Drinking wine or other alcoholic beverages is not a sin, being addicted to or intoxicated by them is (Ecclesiastes 10:17; 1 Corinthians 15:34; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Timothy 3:3). The Bible warns against drunkenness, describing its consequences as lack of self-control, violence, dizziness, confused thinking and poor judgment (Proverbs 20:1; 23:29-35; Isaiah 28:7). Thus believers are to be careful and discerning in their use of alcohol, safeguarding themselves from drunkenness.

Smoking – We have heard the typical arguments against smoking, that we are to be careful with what we put into our bodies as they are the temples of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), that smoking has many damaging consequences, and that it can result in addiction. These are all valid arguments, however we have to be careful not to focus on smoking, because it is easy to denounce, while ignoring other things which many if not most Christians partake of, that could be just as harmful as smoking (Proverbs 23:20-21). There are many who smoke casually, are not addicted to smoking, and find it to be enjoyable and relaxing. Though it seems logical that Christians would want to avoid smoking given its harmful consequences, the Bible does not present it as a sinful activity in and of itself. Every case is different, and each person will need to make a wise decision, weighing the dangers of smoking against its benefits.

Tattoos – Those who oppose tattoos refer to the only verse in the Bible which mentions this practice, Leviticus 19:28. The context of Leviticus 19 is the holiness of God and how Israel was to be a holy nation. Some of the laws were given to teach the idea of separation (vv. 19, 23-25, 27). These and similar laws were given to keep Israel separate from Gentile nations. However, such distinctions are no longer valid today, for in Christ both Jew and Gentile believers are united, and thus the Old Covenant ceremonial and dietary laws have been abrogated (Ephesians 2:11-16). Cutting of the body or tattooing expressed in Leviticus 19:28 were pagan practices. The current practice of tattooing has nothing to do with such practices. Thus, we do not read in the Bible that tattooing is inherently a sinful practice. However, there are many reasons to think long and hard about getting a tattoo, or to even refrain from it, which are decisions that individuals will need to make, requiring much wisdom and discernment.