Connecting the “Legalism” of the Galatians to Our Modern Day “Legalism”

How do people “add to the gospel” today in ways that diminish it’s power?
by Tim Keller

There are many examples of this. Spend time as a group thinking about and discussing this. Overall, Paul condemns any teaching that is not based on the fact that:

- We are too sinful to contribute to our salvation (we need a complete rescue),
- therefore, we are saved by belief in Jesus work, (the grace of Christ) plus nothing else.

Here are three examples of current views that deny one or both of these two truths:

(1) In some churches, it is implicitly or explicitly taught that you are saved through your “surrender” to Christ plus right beliefs and behavior. This is a fairly typical mistake in evangelical churches. People are challenged to “give your life to Jesus” and/or to “ask him into your life.” This sounds very biblical, but it still can reject the grace-first principle fairly easily. Most people think that it means that we are saved by a strong belief and trust in and love for God, along with a life committed to him. Therefore, they feel they must begin by generating a high degree of spiritual sorrow, hunger, and love in order to get Christ’s presence. Then they must somehow maintain this if they are going to “stay saved.” In other words, many conservative churches functionally teach the idea that we are saved because (the level of) our faith. But the gospel says that we are saved through our faith. The first approach really makes our performance the savior, and the second makes Christ’s performance the Savior. It is not the level but the object of our faith that saves us.

(2) In other churches, it is taught that it doesn’t really matter what you believe as long as you are a loving and good person. This is a typical mistake in “liberal” churches. This view teaches that all good persons, regardless of their religion (or lack of one), will find God. This sounds extremely open-minded on the surface, but it rejects the grace-first principle in two ways. First, it teaches that good works are enough to get to God. (If all good people can know God, then Jesus’ death was not really necessary; all it takes is virtue.) The trouble is, this means that bad people have no hope, contradicting the gospel, which invites “both good and bad” to God’s feast (Matt. 22:10). If you say that people are not saved by faith in Christ, but by being good, then you will only invite “the good” into God’s feast. Second, it sets up tolerance, openness and love as the ultimate virtues, rather than a scrupulously moral life. Though it sounds flexible, it is moralistic in another sense. It indirectly encourages people to feel that if they are tolerant and open, that will please God. The
gospel, however, challenges people to see their radical sin. Without that sense of one's own evil, the knowledge of God's grace will not be transforming.

(3) A third example is found in churches that are extremely intolerant of small differences of dress or custom. Most of us immediately will think of these kinds of churches when we read about the false teachers of Galatia. They wanted (as we will see) to impose many old rules and regulations having to do with dress, diet and ritual observances. It is natural for us to associate them with highly regulated churches and religious communities, which control their members very tightly and direct them into the “right” way to eat, dress, date, schedule their time, and so on. Or they may insist on a detailed observance of many complicated rituals. So, modern day examples of the Galatian heresy would be highly authoritarian churches, highly ritualized churches, highly legalistic churches. However, I listed legalistic churches third because their problems are so obvious to most people and therefore less dangerous. The first and second examples are much more prevalent and perilous.

A close cousin of the third kind of ministry would be missionaries who plant churches in new cultures and insist that all the converts adopt the same dress, eating, and cultural patterns of the missionaries' home country in order to be baptized. We often insist that other people "become like us" in their cultural styles and preferences if we are going to consider them "real" Christians. Different cultures express joy and reverence differently. They often have different levels of tolerance for different sins. It is too easy to read a Christian from another culture negatively. (“You see, a lack of true gospel orientation always leads to cultural narrowness.” ~ Pastor Heath)