

(Spiritual) Anarchy and Legalism

There is an interesting dichotomy that has emerged in our society. It seems to be, ostensibly at least, based in *morality*, but has become a if not *the* primary *political* motivation for many, especially of the younger generations. It is a strange combination of two diametrically opposed philosophical views: ***anarchy*** and ***legalism***...

Anarchy is, in principle, the opposition to or rejection of governing authority generally and regulatory laws restricting personal freedoms specifically. Legalism is, by and large, exactly the opposite: the fondness of laws or rules and excessive conformity to them. So, the *anarchist* says, "No laws!" while the *legalist* demands, "More laws!" And here we are. But the problem is not so much that these contradictory ideologies are bound to yield disagreements and divergences; humans have struggled throughout history because of conflicting philosophies of life and society. The real problem is that these polar opposites exist and are being manifested in the same person(s)- both anarchy and legalism in the same individual(s). How so?

Think about it. While rejecting laws that would in any way restrict or ban their own personal behavioral choices, they seem to be anarchists espousing absolute individual moral freedom. But at the same time, they demand all sorts of laws to restrict anyone/everyone else from even questioning, let alone dissenting with, their individual moral choices- even when the expression of those choices affect society generally and other individuals specifically. So, if I have this right, it's "**No laws for me**" regarding or restricting my personal choices, but "**As many laws as possible for you**" to prevent your disagreeing with, dissenting from, or in any way restricting the promotion of, my choices. Anarchy and legalism rolled into one package of massive contradiction!

But this strange conglomeration of anarchism and legalism isn't limited to societal issues and politics; it has also bled over into "religion." There are plenty of people who claim to believe in a "Higher Power" of some sort, but don't really seem to know how "It" should affect their lives, if at all. Their "belief" doesn't seem to require any particular set of doctrines to be known and understood, let alone dictates to be obeyed. So, despite a professed belief, they seem to *spiritual anarchists* when it comes to any rules of conduct governing their lives. And yet, there is one law that, to them at least, supersedes all others, "*Thou shall not judge.*" With this one "law," they become absolute *spiritual legalists* seeking to make and enforce precedents everywhere in every way possible. **So what does God's Word actually have to say about all of this?**

This kind of conflicted hypocrisy is not new or novel. Jesus said of the *scribes and Pharisees* in His day, "*they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger,*" Matthew 23:4. Hypocritically making rules/laws for everyone else while excluding yourself from them has been around a long time. In society and politics, it typically produces rebellion and revolution. In the spiritual realm of religion, it always produces condemnation from God.

It was predicted to get worse. "*But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have*

denied its power..." 2Timothy 3:1-5. It's pretty easy to "see" these problems in our current society. What has apparently eluded us is their *cause*...

We've followed worldly wisdom instead of divine wisdom. "*Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace,*" James 3:13-18. Because of our own "*selfish ambitions,*" we have hypocritically followed *worldly* rather than *divine* wisdom and ways and produced "*disorder and every evil thing.*"

Whether in matters of morality, society, politics, or religion, neither *anarchy* nor *legalism* is the solution. We can free neither our consciences nor our souls from the condemnation of sin by espousing *spiritual anarchy*, cf. Isaiah 5:20-21. But neither can we earn our way to spiritual freedom and eternal reward through the *legalistic* devotion to making and/or keeping laws, Romans 3:23; 6:23. Thankfully, these two extremes are not the only options!

God has ordained the "rule of law" for *human government* and *eternal salvation*. Romans 13:1-7 makes it clear that *governmental authority* (and therefore the rule of law) is necessary for human society and polity. Obviously, to be "*a minister of God*" to us "*for good,*" such government, and the society produced through it, must function according to "*the ordinance of God.*" Likewise, in the spiritual realm, Hebrews 9:1, 15ff indicate that there are also "*regulations of divine worship and the earthy sanctuary.*" So, believers in God can't be *anarchists* in regard to either government or religion. But they can't become hypocritical *legalists* who "*strain out a gnat and swallow a camel*" in their fondness for and excessive devotion to rules either, cf. Matthew 23:23-24.

The truth is that believing "in" God comes with the incumbent requirement to do what He says, Luke 6:46. We can't say these requirements don't exist, or that they don't apply to "me" for some reason; they do. All of them. You don't get to pick and chose as it suits you. But the great part of Christianity is that we don't have to become *legalistic rule-keepers* in order to go to heaven. God provides *grace* and *forgiveness* when we fail if we will but *confess* and *repent*, cf. 1John 1:8-10; Hebrews 4:14-16. You don't have to be sinlessly perfect, just forgiven! While such certainly isn't a license to abuse God's grace (cf. Romans 6:1ff), it certainly is *good news*! See? You don't have to become an *anarchist* or a *legalist*, just a Christian by the grace of God. (Philip C. Strong; Viking Drive Church of Christ; 3791 Viking Drive, Bossier City, LA; online at vikingdrivechurchofchrist.com; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)