

To the Pure, All Things Are Mostly Impure: Legalism

5 Entertainment

My father boasted from the pulpit that he didn't "dance, drink or chew, or go with the girls who do." It was his way of declaring inward purity by outward actions, an expression typical of his generation of Pentecostals. Pentecostalism emerged out of the holiness strand of Protestant Christianity. To be "holy" means to be "set apart," separate. As a fourth-generation Pentecostal, being holy, to me, often meant following prescribed rules that previous generations had practiced. Most of the time, the rules made sense to me. Sometimes they didn't. Common restrictions centered on lifestyle behaviors including entertainment, food and drink, and sex. Unfortunately, the rules sometimes became the point and the reasons they were developed receded into distant memory, creating a kind of rule-keeping for its own sake, affectionately known as legalism.

The dangers of legalism are at least three-fold. For some believers, the habit of rule-keeping stunted the mental capacity for making mature decisions, so they always lived at the level of rule-keeping for its own sake. For others, when the rules failed to address a real-life situation, such as betrayal or natural disaster, they lost faith altogether. The rules were their faith and when the rules failed, faith failed. For others, rule-keeping led to arrogant judgments toward those who do not keep the rules.

Legalism reduces and oversimplifies judgments. It produces either/or thinking. You're either in or out, one of us or not, saved or unsaved, right or wrong. It's impossible to discuss here all the problems with this worldview, and yet, I see people practicing it all around me, not only fundamentalist Christians, but an increasing number of secular people in political and business life as well. The simplistic approach is easy, clear-cut, and efficient. If we reduce all our judgments to one side or the other, we don't have to think about them. We don't have to be responsible for our thoughts or actions because the choices have been defined for us and the options are clearly opposed. And once the thinking is ingrained, it is very hard to shed.

I slammed full speed into this difficulty while in college. Until I left for college, I had never been to a movie in a movie theater. Our family and our church were “against them.” When cinemas were popping up in American culture in the early 20th century, the Pentecostal movement was young and vigorous. Along with the tee-totaling stance on alcohol, non-religious modes of entertainment were shunned by those seeking whole-heartedly to serve God by purity of lifestyle. Even early movies, directly or indirectly, depicted smoking, drinking, and sexually compromising activities, and good Pentecostals dared not darken the door of a cinema. When my mother was young, her family had been known to drive from the farm into Attica, Kansas, to watch movies projected on the side of a building from the back of her dad’s pick-up truck. Once she had married into the Musgrove family and full-time ministry, such entertainments were abandoned.

I was so far from rebelling against this restriction against movies that my sophomore year in college I turned down a guy I really wanted to go out with because he asked me to a movie. Soon after, however, my dad visited Springfield and took my sister and me to dinner. Sitting in a booth at Pizza Hut, crusts and cheese shavings littering the table, we started talking about movies, and I told him of the offer I had turned down. To my surprise, his twinkling brown eyes looked straight into mine, and he said, “Diane, I would hope that at 21-years-old you could decide for yourself whether or not to go to a movie.” What!? Were restrictions of my childhood not absolute?

Soon after that conversation, some friends volunteered to take me to my first movie: *The Jazz Singer* with Neil Diamond and Luci Arnez. I imagined that I would feel all the guilt, paranoia, and claustrophobia I had heard preachers report they felt when they sneaked into movies against their parents’ wishes. I was nothing but fascinated. Long having loved good stories, character development, and music, I found the entire experience underwhelming from a spiritual standpoint. “Is this all there is to it? What was the big deal? Why would anyone think this experience could be harmful to my mortal soul?”

I took in a half dozen or more movies before I encountered one that finally explained the vehemence with which many Christians opposed the movie industry. As my movie-going became more frequent, so did the incidents of nudity, sexual promiscuity, and violence. The desensitizing process had begun, and eventually I was grateful for the censorship of my youth. I would not have wanted to deal with the flagrant promiscuity of *An Officer and a Gentleman* or the emotional moral dilemma of *Sophie's Choice* before I was mature enough to process them.

My college friends and I were planning the final week of our college career. We wanted to do something special for our parents to show our appreciation for their support—emotional and financial—during our four years at Evangel College, a small, private liberal-arts college run by the Assemblies of God. My friends and I shared not only good memories of our time together but also a cultural heritage from our childhood in Assemblies of God churches, youth groups, and summer camps. I was the only Kansan in our group. Tammy, Lisa, Judy, Rebecca, and Ray were from the Minneapolis area, while my roommate, Sheri, was from Illinois, and Ron was from Springfield, Missouri. We thought and thought about how to demonstrate to our parents how college had changed us—for the better.

Finally, we hit upon an idea. A slide show! Let's take pictures of ourselves at all our favorite places, and give our parents a tour of our lives over the last four years. For today's selfie-obsessed generation, this project would be simple. In 1982, we had to locate a camera, slide film, a processor, a slide projector, and a screen. We drove to our favorite restaurants, the churches we attended, the library, and other key locations. When we landed at the mall with the movie theater, I had a problem. Even though I had my father's tacit permission to go to movies, I hadn't really mentioned my decision to either of my parents. So the slide show at graduation was the first they would have really heard of it. For the slide show, my friends and I lined up at the ticket window at the mall movie theater, one of us wearing a bag over her head in case her parents disapproved.

The restriction against movie-going illustrates a paradox of unexamined lifestyle restrictions among some Pentecostals, an example of one danger of legalism. As video and DVD technologies evolved, the prohibition against the movie theater itself did not immediately disappear. Instead, it became warped. A few early Pentecostals may have mistakenly objected to the movie theater itself, but most recognized that the building was not the issue. It was just the delivery mechanism. As the delivery mechanism migrated from bricks and mortar to DVDs, those who did not think about their lifestyle restrictions maintained the letter of the law while regularly breaking the spirit of the law. They adopted the new media without reflecting on the original purpose of the restriction against movie-going. They wouldn't pay to go to the theatre to watch a movie in public, but they would rent and even buy videos to view at home in private, completely by-passing the point of the anti-movie-going position in the first place. Instead of learning to choose good movies, they simply abandoned the restriction against movies altogether and watched whatever they wanted at home. The rule against movie-*going* had become the point of the restriction. The intention to maintain purity of heart and mind had been missed.

1099

To the Pure, All Things Are Mostly Impure: Legalism

6 Food and Drink

Another instance of the dichotomous practices created by legalism occurred in the realm of food and drink. Although food was a central part of almost every Pentecostal gathering, alcohol was never allowed or even considered. In Kansas, Carry A. Nation's temperance movement and the rise of Pentecostalism are closely linked. In 1900, Nation received her first call to "smash" the strongholds of Satan known as saloons. Too many families had felt the destruction caused by alcoholic fathers. Life on the prairie was hard, and resources were few. Deliverance for many came at the bottom of a bottle. For others, like my grandfather, however, it came at the end of a church service.

Charles Parham began his Bible school in Topeka, Kansas, in October 1900. During the New Year's Eve prayer vigil that year, Agnes Ozman received the Baptism in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues on January 1, 1901. I think it would be hard to separate the message of prohibition from the call of the Holy Spirit in early Pentecostalism. My own grandfather was instantly delivered from alcohol upon conversion to faith. On one occasion he rejoined his old drinking buddies, and later he told my grandmother that even the smell of spirits turned his stomach. God had completely taken away the attraction or desire to drink. Such a deliverance indicated to him that God disapproved of all forms of alcohol for everyone.

People can live long and happy lives without alcoholic beverages, so it's easy to restrict them. Everyone needs to eat to survive, so it's harder to set clear boundaries around food. I have heard many sermons against drinking, but I have yet to hear even a simple sermon on gluttony. A paradox in Pentecostalism, and other holiness traditions, lies in its willingness to condemn all forms of potential for excess in alcohol use while ignoring the many ways in which food is abused. This black-and-white thinking created a condition in which people were consistently sober but fat. The message: Eating to excess is okay, but drinking, even a little bit, is sin.

This practice betrays a fault-line running through Pentecostal thinking. A missionary friend of mine calls it “building a dam to plug a hole.” If we can draw a clear line between behavior A and behavior B, then we will. But then if we see even a little loophole for people to crawl through, we raise the specter of punishment for sin (the dam) to make sure no one else takes advantage of the loophole. If we can’t draw clear lines, however, we’ll ignore the issue. We built a dam called abstinence or prohibition against alcohol because we could, and at least for the first generation of Pentecostals, it was a socially acceptable line to draw—prohibition was in the air of the larger culture. We can’t make such clear and sweeping declarations against gluttony, so we fail to address it at all. Either-or. Black-and-white. What you will, it’s faulty thinking. Laziness even. It’s a way of creating easy criteria for judging who is in or out. But it denies reality and human nature. In some cases, it defies logic. And most of the time it oversimplifies the teaching of Scripture. 800

To the Pure, All Things Are Mostly Impure: Legalism

7 Innocence vs. Virtue

When I was young, legalistic cultural separation weakened the call of the crowd—a good thing. I quickly became used to “being different” among non-Pentecostals. But this consciousness of distinction cultivated arrogance as well. We were like a group of people in the woods on a dark, cold night. We build a fire over which we roast hot dogs and marshmallows and keep ourselves warm. We chatter familiarly in the flickering light and celebrate our good luck for having found such a cozy place to wait out the night.

Meanwhile behind us, out in the woods, people are suffering, freezing, starving, dying even, but the group at the fire sits shoulder to shoulder, linking arms and blocking both light and heat from outsiders. The more noise we hear behind us, the closer we huddle and the less light gets through. This image came to me one night during a youth service in which the leader’s message was overtly self-congratulatory.

“The people in the world don’t know what they’re missing!” he declared. “They think they are having fun! They think they are living the high-life! They think that money, sex, drugs, music, and entertainment are going to bring them satisfaction. But they are wrong!”

His gravelly voice gets louder and raspier as he stresses the last syllable dragging out the guttural ending to emphasize his point.

“We know they are wrong because we have the light of Jesus! We have the love of Jesus! We have the hope of eternal salvation!”

Now he is spitting “S’s.”

“And no amount of wealth, fame, or power can compare to his matchless love. Turn your backs on the world! Turn a deaf ear to the call of the crowd! You have Jesus, and He’s all you need!”

Metaphorically, our attitude toward the unsaved in the world was antagonistic rather than welcoming. We were happy we had found the fire, eaten cooked food in its warmth, and shared life in the light. We had disdain for those who had not yet found the light.

Instead, I came to see, we should stand with our backs to the fire, spread out as far as we can without losing contact with each other, facing out into the darkness, not toward the light, beckoning “whosoever will” to join us in the circle and be warmed and well fed. The further apart we spread, the brighter the light from the fire would shine into the woods and light the way for others. Our dilemma between caring for the lost and keeping our holiness required a delicate balance.

Too often our legalistic worldview pushed us to self-protection. We often exhibited an “us vs. them” mentality. We were the obedient ones, the “found,” the saved. And sometimes like the brother of the Prodigal Son in the parable, we grumbled when the lost were found and joined our ranks.

Writing against censorship, John Milton in *Areopagitica* argues that innocence untested is not virtue but just innocence. His point is that the pre-fall Adam and Eve were merely innocent, and their temptation was an opportunity for them to prove their virtue. They failed. In the post-fall Christian world, he argues, our job is not to preserve children in innocence but to teach them to choose virtue. Banning books, for example, protects their innocence, but it does not help them choose for themselves the best books. Legalistic rule-following, banning books—or dances, or movies, or certain kinds of clothing—may protect children before they are ready to make good decisions, but in adulthood, legalism stunts Christians’ ability to grow into “the mature body of him who is the head” (Eph. 4:15) or to discipline themselves to “conform to the image” of Christ (Romans 8). Children who have only faced inward toward the light may have trouble seeing in the dark when they face the thicket of adulthood.

To outsiders, the legalistic lifestyle may be the first thing they notice about Pentecostalism. To some, we were the church of the “Thou shalt nots.” We didn’t smoke, drink, or chew, but we also didn’t wear shorts, we limited make-up and jewelry, we didn’t go to bowling alleys, skating rinks, or movie theaters. And we never, ever danced.

I hardly noticed the inconvenience of these restrictions in my own life. We led a happy and busy life centered on church and family. My school activities were always second to the priorities of home and church.

The rules against movies and much of television delayed Hollywood’s assault on my imagination. Instead, I retreated into books, reveling in the characters, settings, and plots of Laura Ingalls Wilder, Grace Livingston Hill, Arthurian legends, Victorian novelists, and, once or twice, Shakespeare. On one of our family trips across the country, headed to General Council in Florida, I reread an abridged version of *The Count of Monte Cristo* for the eighth time. As we meandered through the Everglades—my first and only visit to that enchanting ecosystem—my mother had to pry the book out of my thirteen-year-old hands and remind me to look out the window at the heavy, dark trees, hanging parasites, and marshy ground. No wonder that on a survey in my high school sociology class, I was the only student who checked “reading a classic novel” as adolescent rather than adult behavior. No movies and very little TV meant I fulfilled my need for stories through reading.

While my friends graduated from high school and went to a state university, I entered the shelter of a Christian college. We had little in common to catch up on during breaks. They talked about sorority dances, meeting guys at clubs and bars on the weekend, or experimenting with alcohol beyond the 3.2 beer they could drink at age 18. By contrast, my social life in college often included heated discussions about predestination and free will, the role of women in church leadership, or the best approach to evangelism in the third world but it did not include alcohol, dancing, or sexual experimentation.

By the time I got to graduate school and felt free to meet people at a bar after school for drinks and conversation, I was puzzled by the experience. The music was deafening, and the conversations decreased in coherence as the alcohol consumption increased. Peer pressure to drink was intense only because, as the only sober person at the table, I was bored by the drunken babbling that surrounded me. It became a kind of “you had to be there” experience—only “there” wasn’t a place, it was a condition.

My reluctance to indulge in socially accepted alcohol consumption spared me a lot of meaningless conversations and potentially dangerous hook-ups by rendering the college bar scene dull. Experimentation and excess, however, are part of being human and provide people the opportunity for development.

Our proscribed behaviors, however, created unreasonable judgments of people in the world that God so loved. An example of this attitude cropped up in me as early as 10 years old, in the world before electronic distractions. Often when riding in the back seat of my parents’ car, looking at the drivers in the cars around us, I would make up stories or pick out favorites—people I might like to meet one day.

On one of our trips across town (probably to church), one driver particularly caught my eye: A well-groomed man with wavy brown hair and a clean-shaven face. I began to make up stories to myself about his work (he carried a briefcase), his family (a pretty, petite blonde wife and at least one 10-year-old daughter with blue eyes like mine), his personal life (he played with his children, he respected his wife, he was an upstanding citizen, and Jesus approved of him)—until he raised his hand to his mouth to take a drag on a cigarette. My fantasy dropped instantly into little fragments around my feet as flames rose around him in my imagination.

“That man is going to hell,” I thought, “because he smokes.” Instantly, the good feelings I had toward him were replaced with disdain. Judgment comes easily when the lines are stark.

People who smoke (substitute *drink, cuss, wear short skirts, too much make-up, or go to movies*) don't love Jesus and Jesus doesn't love them.

I carried some of these unreflective assumptions about other people with me to graduate school. After four years at a Christian college, challenges to my assumptions were nearly forgotten. Over lunch one day with some fellow grad students, I made an off-hand comment about not drinking beer because I was a Christian.

"Whoa! Not so fast," Karen reacted. "I'm a Christian, and I love beer!"

"So am I," said Cheryl, who, I knew, was also living with her boyfriend, another taboo.

"Well, uh, I mean," I began to stutter. A change of tactic was called for. "Uh, what church do you attend?"

"I go to the Christian Church on Walnut," Karen said. "Sometimes." Whew, my assumption wasn't far from wrong in her case. In my experience, everyone knew that most mainline Christian Churches were not serious about following Jesus. They were too busy doing politics.

"I used to be Southern Baptist," said Cheryl quietly, "but now I'm Catholic."

I had never heard of anyone who took their faith seriously moving from a fundamentalist church like the Southern Baptists to Catholicism. I had been taught that Catholics were merely "nominal" Christians—Christians in name only but not actively pursuing a relationship with God.

"Why Catholic?" I asked, dumbfounded. "How can you believe all that about Mary and the Pope and stuff?"

"Because," she said patiently and with deep sincerity, "I decided it takes a lot more faith to believe that the bread and the wine become the body and blood of Christ than it does to believe that they are mere symbols." That was it. Simple. It demanded more faith from her than her previous church experience.

In some ways, I could dismiss her by pointing out that she was saying that the more outrageous the theology the better she liked it. And what about the living with her boyfriend?

What about that heinous violation of behavior codes? I mentally decided she was deluded, but her assertion of her status as a Christian and the clear offense she took at my assumption that she wasn't, was a lesson I never forgot. Even if I couldn't fit her self-perception as a Christian into my deeply entrenched definition of one, my relationship with Christ required that I respect her claim and encourage her in the faith. Until then I had mostly only met Christians like me, protected from the world, scrupulous in obeying the rules, and I had connected the keeping the rules with salvation.

I watched Cheryl over the next few months before she graduated and left the University. She remained in constant violation of the codes and signals I was brought up to use to determine one's salvation status. She still lived with her boyfriend, she still went bra-less now and then, she still drank with her friends, and she still used crass language on occasion. On the other hand, she took meticulous care of other graduate students, spreading the word when someone fell ill and needed food, or was falling behind in class and needed encouragement. Once she borrowed some books from me. When she returned them, they sat neatly on my desk with a little post-it note attached, "Thanks, Cheryl." That kind little note of gratitude demonstrated to me the value of good will in a community.

Cheryl never to my knowledge held my absurd judgment of her spirituality against me. Six or seven years later, during my second stint in grad school, I was sitting in the library reference room when she walked by pushing a baby stroller. She greeted me warmly as one welcomes a happy memory. "Who's this?" I asked, pointing to the stroller. "This is my youngest," she answered. She and her live-in boyfriend had married soon after they left school. They were still together and had two little girls. It appeared that her pursuit of inner essentials eventually led her to the outer realities upon whose absence I had judged her.

1985

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8 Marriage

Probably the most powerful message in my legalistic upbringing, one that still defines a cultural chasm in American culture, came in the absolute rejection of “free love” or sex outside of marriage. Maybe I was too literal in my understanding of the warnings my Sunday School teachers and parents made concerning the hidden lure of sex, but I took very seriously the boundaries they placed on sexual behaviors. Of course, it helped that none of the non-A/G boys at my school seemed inclined to figure out what to do on a date with a girl who couldn’t go to movies. They didn’t even bother to ask. But there were boys in my church youth groups, and I probably had a crush on every one of them at one time or another. Because I knew I most likely didn’t want to marry any of them (or at least not many of them), my attraction to them remained theoretical. Somehow I got the message that unless you were interested in a long-term commitment, you should just be friends. Therefore, I lived most of my young life unaware of the power inherent in my own sexuality.

Many years later, my husband David and I were punting on the Cam in Cambridge, England, with a couple we had met at the C. S. Lewis conference in 1998. Leron and Linda were Christian and Missionary Alliance pastors from northern California. During the two-week Oxbridge conference, we had shared meals and stories from our lives. Now we were lazily drifting along the river through the dappled shade of the trees along the riverbank, a Cambridge student guiding the boat with her pole. Relaxing opposite us in the punt as it gently rocked in the water, Leron shared his childhood memories of Pentecostals.

“When we were boys at CMA summer camp,” he said, “we used to sneak away and swim the lake to the other side where the Pentecostal church camp was.”

“Why?” I ask. I can’t imagine anything about a Pentecostal church camp that would interest teen-aged CMA boys.

“Because,” Leron answered, “everyone knows that Pentecostal girls are hot!”

I laughed out loud at this response, while my husband's elbow found my rib-cage.

Pentecostal girls are hot? Ha. When I was a teenager, I was not allowed to wear shorts or bikinis, or go to movies, or dances, or bowling alleys, or skating rinks. I couldn't even consider dating until I was 16 and by then, my school friends knew all the restrictions around my social life. No one ever asked me to dances or school outings for any reason. At church, the young people ran in a pack. Of course, we were interested in boys, but we had been warned about sex so much, it was hard to imagine actually being alone with one.

I came of dating age well before books like purity rings and dates with daddy became popular. Instead, I got the "keep yourself pure until marriage" message through the "six-inch" rule at camp (boys and girls must keep at least six inches of space between themselves at all time), and the separate swimming times for boys and girls, my mom's complete lack of interest in promoting "boyfriend/girlfriend" talk at home or among my friends, and the severe tones my Sunday School teachers used when talking about dating.

If putting marriage on such a pedestal at a young age worked against the "natural" development of my romantic instincts, then reading Grace Livingston Hill novels increased my unrealistic expectations. The girl was always reserved, aloof, and self-contained. Only after great encouragement and several tests of a man's integrity was she willing to consider the handsome and mysterious man who had fallen deeply in love with her. Marriage was a grand and holy enterprise and should not be entered into lightly or without some spectacular metaphysical sign from God.

My parents' marriage helped solidify for me the awe-inspiring sacredness of this union. Until I was old enough to know what parents did in their room at night after they closed the door, I assumed that that was when my parents fought. I never heard a cross word from them toward each other in daylight, but I knew other people's parents' argued, and TV parents often fought, so my parents must too. At night. In their room. With the door closed. Because sometimes I heard voices from there when I was supposed to be asleep.

My parents' absolute commitment to peace in the family and their loving support of one another, actually may have made it more difficult for me to navigate the human realities of male-female relationships in my dating years. A little like a character in *Seinfeld*, I found this boy's laugh a little annoying, I found that one's jokes a little too crass, I found this boy's hands too chubby or that boy's eyes a little more roving than I thought appropriate. It was easy to point out faults in young men whose characters and personalities were still forming when I compared them to my more mature, fun-loving, and wise father.

My notions of the sacredness of marriage gained biblical support from my college professors, Jim and Twyla Edwards. The mutuality of their love was well-known on campus. The image I eventually developed of them was of Twyla, a short, no-nonsense woman with cropped graying hair and twinkling blue eyes, standing with legs apart for support, holding Jim—tall, thin, wiry, and energetic—by the ankles, to keep him from floating off into the atmosphere. Jim's idealism kept his head in the clouds, thinking important thoughts about life, love, and the liberal arts. Twyla, every bit as committed to language, literature, and love, kept Jim tethered to reality. Together, they were formidable advocates for intelligent Christian living.

Twyla began to open my mind to equality in marriage in my first course at Evangel, Basic Christianity. The class introduced young Pentecostals to the notion of worldview and encouraged self-reflection. During the course of study, she taught that Ephesians 5:21 – 25 contained an expectation of equality rather than hierarchy in marriage. As she spoke, I recognized the inner workings of my parents' marriage in her lesson. The passage begins with "submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God," an activity I regularly observed in my parents as I grew up in their home. My father loved and respected my mother's mind and gifts. My mother supported my father's ambitions and decisions. They were a mutual admiration society.

Driving down a Kansas highway in the dark, my parents and I returned from an evening service one summer Sunday night. I was home from college and travelling with them across Kansas

as they visited churches and performed the work of the ministry among their people. I asked “How did you know you should get married?” Instead of giving me a long narrative about their engagement, my dad turned the conversation to what mattered more.

“The secret to our marriage, Diane, is that your mother lets me be myself. She hasn’t tried to change me, and she has always supported my decisions without criticizing me.”

I caught my mother whispering under her breath, “There’s never been anything to criticize.”

Louder, however, her addition to his advice was that she married someone smarter than herself. “After all, he chose me and I chose him!” Exactly the kind of joke my father loved.

The only other explicit advice about marriage I ever received from my parents was on another long road trip when my mother told me “if it’s not fun, don’t do it.” To them, it seemed so simple. Be yourself, enjoy life, serve God together.

For me, the path was more circuitous. In high school, when I finally developed enough courage to consider the whole dating thing, I discovered a deep-seated fear. My Sunday School teachers and camp counselors had insisted on boundaries of behavior, but they had not specified what those boundaries were. I wasn’t as naïve as Dona, a girl I knew in junior high, who believed the “bad boys” when they told her she could get pregnant if she let them touch her elbows. (Personally, I’m not sure she believed them, but she let them think she did, because then they chased her all over school trying to touch her elbows.) The dark hints and vague circumlocutions of Sunday School teachers, however, left a chasm of fear and lack of understanding in my mind. To the pure, all things are pure—or maybe they are mostly impure. Therefore, I didn’t know what I didn’t know, and I feared crossing “a line” I couldn’t see.

I don’t remember how Jim (DF) and I got to be friends. I think at one point he offered me a ride in his Dodge Dart to the Pizza Inn where the whole congregation gathered for fellowship after church. One night we never made it to the restaurant. We started talking about something of intense importance to 16-year-old church kids. He leaned against the window on the driver’s side,

and I leaned against the window on the passenger side, a long stretch of bench seat between us, and we began to solve the problems of the world as we knew it. Before we realized it, we were too late to head to the restaurant, and people began to wonder.

Eventually, this habit became a ritual. If we were both going to pizza after church, we would go in his car, but sometimes, we just wouldn't make it to the restaurant. One cold night, we were huddled in his car, he on the driver's side, me on the passenger side bundled under my coat, filling the space between us with ideas about God, about the future, about our families and ourselves. I don't remember any topic we couldn't discuss, including the dating exploits of our friends, our plans for life after high school, the construction of the universe, God's expectation of us as his children, even poetry.

Out of nowhere, someone rapped on the window, causing us both to jump. As we dragged ourselves from the world we were creating with words back to the cold parking lot where we were sitting, we were startled to see that the windows had completely fogged up on the inside of the car. I was so naïve, I didn't understand that the man who rapped on the window probably thought he was breaking up a make-out session in the church parking lot.

My relationship with Jim never "went anywhere," as people may have believed. He treated me with respect—mind and body—and taught me the value of friendship with a guy. Our bond wasn't as brother-sister-like as my relationships with other guys in the youth group. We always felt a little sexual tension, a little excitement in being with each other. We even went through times when one or the other of us wanted more than just talk, but desire for physical intimacy never really overtook our mutual respect for the friendship we had developed.

My view of a good relationship was forged in those joyful hours of mutual mental exploration and discussion, of mutual attraction and self-restraint based on our shared commitment to a code of purity. They set a high standard for the kind of intellectual affinity I came to expect in a relationship. A few years later, when I encountered John Donne's "Valediction:

Forbidding Mourning," I recognized an element of my relationship with Jim in it. The speaker in Donne's poem bids his love farewell before a long journey from which he plans to return. In one section, he compares their attraction to that of less exalted lovers:

Dull sublunary lovers' love / (Whose soul is sense) cannot admit / Absence, because it doth
remove / Those things which elemented it. / But we by a love so much refined, / That
ourselves know not what it is, / Inter-assured of the mind, / Care less, eyes, lips, and hands
to miss.

As Professor John Roberts points out, "It's not that they don't care at all about being separated physically, but that they care 'less' than others do because their relationship is built on more than mere physical proximity." Being sheltered from the physical and sexual aspects of teen-age love made room in my psyche for the development of a workable Platonic scale of desire. 2071

To the Pure, All Things Are Mostly Impure: Legalism

9 Sex

But again, Milton says that innocence untested is merely innocence, not virtue. Following the rules in high school was easy while the whole church was watching and I knew I was returning to my parents' house at night. What protection did all that teaching on holiness, separation, and purity of heart offer when the blood was hot and the opportunity presented itself? I found out my second year of grad school when I met Brad Reeder. (DB) He was a new Ph.D. candidate in the English Department at the University of Missouri. Tall, dark, and bearded to disguise his Elvis-like good looks, Brad was hard to miss as I walked down the hallway to my TA office the week before school started. He was in the department for orientation and teaching assistant information.

Later that week, we ran into each other on the way out of the building, heading to the bookstore. Quickly we discovered similarities in our upbringing and worldviews. He had been raised a very conservative Church of Christ—had even been ordained and served for some time on the staff of a local congregation. But his deep love for literature had eventually led him to the University for an advanced degree. He was leaving the ministry for good and seeking a new profession in academia. Having spent several years in Springfield, Missouri, he knew intuitively some of the quirks of my upbringing in the Assemblies of God. I felt instantly comfortable with a fellow seeker from a conservative church who had not completely abandoned his search for God.

Later that week, Brad stopped by my desk to invite me to his apartment for dinner with a couple of other students. He wanted to start a reading group with fellow Christians in the department. The other two invitees, were Steve and Rick. Steve had also grown up in the Assemblies of God, and I had known him a little in Springfield while I was an undergrad at Evangel and he was at Southwest Missouri State. The fourth member of our group was Rick, another Church of Christ member who had recently graduated from Ouachita Baptist in Oklahoma.

When I walked into Brad's small apartment, something happened to me. Before we even reached the door, we could hear Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* in the hallway. We knocked on the door, confident we had the right apartment, "Door's open!" came the deep voice from within. The minute I entered the room, I knew. I knew that no matter who this man was or what he had done, I loved him.

My eyes roved across the book-lined living room—a small room, maybe 10 feet by 12 feet—two of the four walls covered from floor to ceiling with double-shelved books. Down the hall, a glimpse into the back bedroom showed more bookshelves lined up and filled. In the front window, the regular lines of the shelves were broken by a full-sized, dark walnut teacher's desk covered with more books and papers. To the right of the desk was a low couch under a pass-through window to the galley-style kitchen. A floor lamp spread ambient light over the desk and one end of the couch. Brad sat in his desk chair, his seat tilted back toward the shelf behind him. The mid-spaces of the room were heavy with the creamy, smoky vanilla scent drifting from his pipe, creating a kind of womb-like experience of being surrounded by great writers and thinkers, smells and sounds.

A few weeks before this encounter, I had done something very uncharacteristic for me. I had prayed about my dating life. For the most part, I had had one serious relationship in college, and a lot of random dates with nice guys who didn't keep my attention. I had never really seen the point of dating for the sake of dating, and my high school relationship with Jim had shown me the depths of friendship beyond the shallows of romance.

Up to this point, I was still friends with every guy I had ever gone out with. In fact, I was rooming with the soon-to-be-wife of my college boyfriend. I had begun to joke to my friends that if a guy wanted to get married, he should date me first, because every guy I dated wound up married to the next girl he went out with. I was getting a little tired of training men for other women. Time, I thought, for me to get serious about dating. So I did what any good Pentecostal girl would do. I prayed specifically for a relationship.

All my life, my Sunday School teachers had been telling me I should make my future spouse a matter of prayer. But at the same time, they sent dire warnings against desire and romance. The contradictions so confused me that I decided early on that if God wanted me married, he would bring it about miraculously, and until then, I should just be myself. In fact, given all the needs in the world I could pray about, dating seemed a luxury on my prayer list, not a necessity. My life was extraordinarily blessed. Praying about marriage seemed to me to be asking for icing on an already sweet cake.

A few weeks before I met Brad, however, I felt so moved to pray about my dating life, that I actually went into my room, closed the door, and knelt by the bed. Then I spelled out specifically the kind of relationship I wanted. “Lord, I want the fairy tale romance. I want to be swept off my feet. I want to meet someone who understands me, who doesn’t bore me.” Normally, when I prayed, I was vague so that God could do what he wanted. I had been carefully taught to think, if not explicitly express, “not my will, but Thine” in any petitionary prayer. It was okay to tell God what you would like, but don’t expect Him to always do it—because His will always trumps yours.

In this prayer, I ignored that advice and asked for what I wanted. True love. Deep romance. Absolute compatibility. The unlikely fairy tale. But I forgot to ask for the fairy-tale ending. I didn’t specifically mention marriage. I got everything I asked for and nothing that I didn’t.

That first night in Brad’s apartment, I discovered that loving him was completely outside the boundaries of anything I had ever been taught to look for in a partner. His pipe smoking broke an obvious taboo. His being non-Pentecostal came close to breaking another. Being 10 years my senior could have been another problem, but when I pulled a book off the shelf and flipped through its pages, all these previous red flags fluttered to the floor. The name plate read, “Brad and Sara Reeder.” There was a “Sara Reeder”? Where? The apartment was clearly too small for two people. Shaken, but undaunted, I quietly returned the book to the shelf as if I had seen nothing. Maybe she had died. Maybe she had left him. I began concocting ridiculous scenarios to avoid the truth right in front of me.

Eventually, the story came out. He had been married for over ten years to a woman he had known in his church. They had been actively involved in ministry together, a kind of golden couple in their denomination. But once they married, they had rapidly drifted apart. Now they had separated; she living in Illinois with her parents and their baby daughter and he in Missouri.

At any other time in my life, my guards would have been up, and I would have quickly moved away from the flame. Not this time. My heart knew what my heart knew, and I felt not only helpless to resist, but justified in my choice. Hadn't I prayed specifically for this depth and magnitude of love? Wasn't Brad intellectually and spiritually all I had prayed for? What was God playing at, putting the absolute answer to my prayer in my life and then attaching strings to him?

For at least six weeks I didn't care. We met for lunch every day. We went to dinner every night and hung out at his apartment whenever we could. Brad had read more literature than anyone I had ever met. He could talk equally well about literature, theology, philosophy and history. He respected my opinions and asked my opinion of his writing. Through the reading group, with Rick and Steve, I began to grow intellectually as Brad chose short stories and other films I had never encountered at my Christian college: Flaubert and Dostoyevsky, "Brother Sun and Sister Moon" along with "A Clockwork Orange." Always the discussion centered on where the message of Christ intersected the ideas and positions presented in the stories and films we digested. Discussions with Brad stretched my mind, challenged my theology, and deepened my confidence in my abilities.

When we were alone, he expressed wry amusement at my instinctive attempts at self-protection, until one night he discovered that we did not share basic assumptions about the ultimate end of our relationship. I was a virginal, inexperienced 23-year-old, with strong convictions about sex outside of marriage. He was a 33-year-old married man whose interpretations of purity had been recently flouted by Christians he had trusted and his illusions of marriage tarnished by mundane reality.

Sensing my resistance to his advances, he asked, “What was it like when you were with your college boyfriend?”

What was what like, I wondered? Ah ha! Understanding dawned.

“I wasn’t with him like that.” I replied.

He moved to the other side of the room. “You mean you haven’t—?” He rubbed his face and ruffled his hair. “I just assumed. . . I mean, you’re 23. You’re living on your own. You’re in a college town, I just assumed . . . I’m sorry. This changes everything!”

Defining the boundaries of our physical life did little to change our situation. We still saw each other every day in a haze of life-changing joy and mutual adoration. One night when we were alone in his apartment, the phone rang. I picked up a book to study while he talked, and I couldn’t help but overhear. It was his estranged wife. The baby was sick and she had called to update him on what the doctor had said. I couldn’t hear her specific words, but I heard the anxiety in her voice amplified by the phone.

In the six weeks or so since I had first stepped into Brad’s apartment, I had given little thought to our situation. Every day was an adventure. Brad was full of surprises; he was a master at secret messages and symbolic gestures meant only for me. I lived in the whirlwind of an indescribably idyllic Romance. Reality reasserted itself through the voice on the phone. He and Sar were still married. He had a daughter and a responsibility to other lives outside our little utopia.

My first thought was that she loved him. She must have loved him to have married him and then had a child with him. *What if that were me? If she loves him half as much as I do, I thought, her heart is broken.* And for the first time, the reality of my situation dawned on me. Sex or no sex, “I’m the other woman!” *Oh, God. How did I get here?* How could it be that the first time I pray about dating, the guy I fall for in what seems like a direct answer to that prayer is *married* and a *father*? How could I be so happy when so many things were wrong with this picture?

For the first time in my life, right and good were at odds. Nothing about the black and white world of my upbringing provided answers for this dilemma. Knowing Brad Reeder made me a better person—a better woman, a better teacher, and better thinker, even a better lover of God. But it was wrong, wrong, wrong for me to be with him. Maybe if the divorce were final, it would a little different—but at that point in my life, divorce was as much taboo in my culture as sex outside of marriage. Why was I so adamantly opposed to the latter while I had been so obstinately overlooking the former?

In the weeks following this revelation, I began asking Brad more about his marriage and his relationship with Sara. Why had they not immediately divorced? What were the stress points that caused the break up? How long did he expect to maintain this untenable situation?

By Christmas, it became clear that in order for my love for him to continue, I would have to give him up. In order for him to be the man I thought he was, he would have to return to his marriage and his baby girl. The goal was very clear to me, but the path to achieve it was less easy to see. In the spring semester, we stopped seeing each other except at school—we taught across the hall from each other and spent one long afternoon a week in seminar avoiding eye contact—but we continued to talk periodically on the phone.

Finally, one night he called to let me know that he and Sara had come to an agreement. She would be moving in with him next summer, and they would be trying a reconciliation.

“How are you feeling about that?” I asked.

“I guess I think that if you and I can’t make it, I should stay with her. I’m going to be kind and take care of her and the baby the best I can,” he replied, “and see if it lasts.”

“No!” I exploded. “I’m giving up too much for you to ‘make do.’ In order for you to be the man I think you are, you need to embrace this move completely, and love them both without an escape plan. If *she* walks out that’s one thing, but I can’t be the ‘plan B’ in the back of your mind that keeps you from honestly trying to reconcile.” Her right trumped my good.

I carried the pain of this testing of my innocence for many years after Brad and Sara reconciled. Virtue, like grace, is costly. But the experience had exposed a weakness in the legalistic thinking of my childhood. Dichotomies of “right and wrong,” “good and bad,” “black and white” were too simplistic to be useful. I had experienced a good that was not based on that which was right. Many people reject Christianity because they experience good in things that are not within the boundaries of “right” Christian teaching. The danger comes in equating good and right, assuming that if it is good, it is also right. At Creation, God pronounced everything He made as “good,” but even surrounded by goods, Adam and Eve managed to fail at what was “right.”

Eventually, I believe, if Brad and I had pursued our relationship without reference to the prior claims of wife and child, the “good” in our relationship would have become tainted because we had ignored what was right. If I had walked out of Brad’s life the minute I learned of his marriage (which a strict understanding of “doing the right thing” would have required), I would have been spared several years of longing, loss, and pain. On the other hand, my staying in the relationship with purity of heart for as long as it took to work out the inconsistencies of our position, produced remarkable growth in both Brad and me.

The mental habit of insistence on purity—of action, of motivation, of rules following—eventually reasserted itself in my heart, helped restore a marriage, and spared me a life of self-recrimination and second-guessing. I believe that for the good to be sustained over time it must be built on the right foundation, and that when forced to choose, we should opt for the right and the good will follow.

If *right* and *good* are not synonyms, neither are *hard* and *bad*. Giving up Brad was hard, but it was not necessarily bad for either of us. Good came of it, much as good had come from us being together, for which I have long been grateful. He and Sara remained together for another thirty years before his death, finding a place of influence and ministry in academics, raising two beautiful and talented children. And I found my own life love in another story.

2767

To the Pure, All Things Are Mostly Impure: Legalism

10 Dialect-shifting

For many years, I sensed that the cultural withdrawal of Pentecostalism resulted in a quiriness in my development as a social being. In high school I was the girl no one could ask out because they couldn't figure out where to take me. I was baffled by conversations about music or movies. My friend Cindy used to tease me that I thought every male voice on the radio was Elton John because I wasn't allowed to listen to pop music at home, so I couldn't distinguish one singer from another. I had a certain imperviousness to doing things just because everyone else does them.

In a linguistics class, I learned that people who move from a singular dialect region to a culturally diverse area often learn to dialect shift—to move rapidly in and out of their native dialect into their adopted dialect depending on the conversational context. “That’s me,” I thought. I move back and forth from the “Christianese” of my childhood and the embedded codes of Pentecostalism to the secular language and discourse of my non-Christian, non-Pentecostal friends from high school and later, the university. For years I defined this ability to dialect shift as a kind of verbal schizophrenia. One day, talking with Gary, a theater major at the University of Missouri, I shared my embarrassment at this multiple-personality lifestyle I felt I had to live.

“I don’t see it that way at all,” he said. “Think of it instead as the two ends of a shoelace. Both sides of the lace entwine to make you who you are. Sometimes you have to pull harder on one side to keep things together. Sometimes you have to pull harder on the other. But both sides are a part of the whole.” I’m not sure I have ever achieved such a positive view of my inner world, but the new metaphor helped me see the unity in what had until then seemed an irreconcilable difference.

The Pentecostal practice of cultural separation developed my ability to dialect shift among a variety of worlds, which in turn taught me to look at my faith from the outside-in as well as the inside-out. Having recognized that I was raised in a well-defined sub-culture with clearly marked boundaries and expectations taught me to listen to the conversations of others, looking for their

assumptions about how the world is structured. I discovered that most people operate within a pretty narrow set of suppositions. The difference between my world and that of most non-religious people, and many non-Pentecostal Christians, is that the givens in my world were so radically different from the givens in theirs that they were easier for them to spot.

Most people don't think about the boundaries they operate within or where those expectations come from. Many people just absorb the expectations of the culture around them—from TV, news, music, and entertainment. They have learned them from parents, college professors or books they have read. And the contrast between what they think they have concluded on their own and what they have accepted without thinking is not very great. The contrast between what I was taught as a child and what I saw in the secular world around me was so stark that I learned to pay attention to which set of assumptions I was working from. The comparison, I believe, increased my capacity to relate to people from a variety of worldviews.

One of my friends in my master's program was a Ph.D. candidate in American literature. She was a few years older than I, artistic, empathetic, and worldly. Early in our friendship she told me that when she was four or five years old, her parents had sent her to a Presbyterian church on the bus. After Sunday School, the teacher delivered her back to her parents and asked them not to bring her back. She had asked too many questions. Rejected by a Sunday School teacher, she decided that if God didn't need her, then she didn't need Him. From that point on, she had followed her own path. "Still," she admitted, "sometimes I sense a need for God, but when I visit a church, I feel so much guilt and condemnation from the pulpit, I give up. I know I've done wrong. I don't need to be reminded how bad I am." She had a point.

Ruthlessly independent, Brenda often seemed deeply lonely, searching for someone to love her. She was artistically free-spirited, but doggedly committed to finishing a research degree. Her lifestyle broke every rule I had ever been trained to believe God cared about. She said she liked to watch sex scenes in movies because when she engaged in sexual activity should could only see one

perspective, so watching lovers on the screen helped her imagine what her encounters looked like. Once, she told me, she had picked up a guy at a bar and taken him back to her apartment. From that first encounter, they had decided to know nothing of each other's outside lives. They met regularly for sex without strings for several months.

Her stories stretched my worldview. I tried to listen un-judgmentally to Brenda's sexual exploits, but mostly my upbringing was woefully inadequate to imagine the emotional and spiritual toll her open lifestyle must have been taking on her. My naiveté betrayed me in almost every conversation. For example, I told Brenda that the woman who lived above me had been making a considerable amount of noise in recent days. I had noticed that a huge white truck was often parked in front of our stair well next to her red sedan. When I told Brenda about how I was not sleeping as soundly because the neighbor seemed to be refinishing a lot of furniture upstairs in the middle of the night, she nearly split wide open, laughing.

"What makes you think they're refinishing furniture?" she asked.

"Because, the noise is a regular, squeaky sound like furniture makes when you're sanding it down or cleaning it vigorously," came my reply.

As you can imagine, I never heard the end of this one. She shared it in the coffee lounge and the teaching assistant offices, and turned it into new jokes when the opportunity arose. Her favorite occurred when her grandfather died and she inherited his antique bed; she hinted that she planned to do some refinishing on it in the near future, and everyone in the room knew what she meant.

Toward the end of my second year in my master's program, Brenda was struggling with an affair she had gotten involved in. It was getting messy and painful. Toward Easter, she surprised me by saying, "I'd like to go to church with you on Easter." In my world, "go to church with you" meant "go to your church." But she wanted to choose the church, so I said okay. "Sure. I'll go with you anywhere you choose." She chose Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church. So we went.

My first venture into a Catholic service, it was a neighborhood parish church on the west side of Columbia. The rectangular sanctuary included an altar banked by a couple of sculptures and a relatively simple set of the Stations of the Cross around the walls. Brenda wanted to sit toward the front (“If you’re going to go, you might as well get a good seat,” she reasoned). As we waited for church to start, Brenda leaned over and observed in a whisper, “Can you feel the anticipation? People really seem to expect something to happen here today.” So used to sitting in a church waiting for the service to start, I had not been attuned to the atmosphere in the room. She was right. There was a kind of hushed stillness, a waiting spirit. It felt different from the pre-service experience I was used to and it surprised me.

My assumption about Catholic churches was that people attended because they had to, because they believed that if they didn’t, they would go to hell. I imagined them passive participants in their religious life, letting the church dictate to them what to do and when. On the other hand, I had been trained to believe that our churches were full of people who wanted to be there because of what God had done in their lives, because they had willingly chosen salvation. I was partially wrong on both counts.

Soon after attending church together, Brenda and I were talking one night about faith. She said, “I think I’ll really would like to become a Christian, Diane, but I don’t want to be like those people on TV.” At this time, in the mid-1980s, “the people on the TV” were mostly Pentecostals—Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker, and Phil and Jan Crouch. I didn’t want to be like them either! But they shared my cultural religious tradition. How could I bear witness of the gospel to my friend without entangling her in the complexities of Pentecostal culture? I admitted to her that I didn’t admire those people either—or their brand of Christianity. Then an idea popped into my head, so I went with it.

“What if God is like an artist? You’ve painted many paintings, and yet you’re not one of your paintings.”

“True.”

“Yet, you love each of your paintings in its own way, and value each for what it says about your experience.”

“Right.”

“What if God is multifaceted like a prism? What if he deals with individuals from multiple perspectives, shining different colored lights on them from the different facets of his being? He is essentially the same, no matter which side you approach him from. Wouldn't that mean that your experience of God could differ somewhat from the experience of those on the television?”

“I see what you mean. I'll have to think about that.”

So will I, I thought. So will I.

Brenda and I lost touch with each other after I moved away from Columbia and she took a job in the West. But I celebrate that conversation with her as the first time I began to imagine God's ability to work in lives that hadn't been nurtured in the same spiritual and sociological environment that I had. There is hope, I realized, for people who may not have “kept all the rules from childhood.” Awareness of my legalistic alienation from traditional cultural expectations honed my ability to look for ways into the conversation about God that made sense from the perspective of the person I was actually talking to, not just the people in my head.

On the one hand, legalism was a kind of short-cut around the accepted pathways of human growth. In some cases, it stunted spiritual progress because it restricted the experiences that would lead to expanded understanding and free choice. On the other hand, the personal disciplines that legalism developed in me worked as a protection against having to make life-changing decisions before I was ready.

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