

Is This the Gospel? An Evaluation of the Legalism Present in Churches in a Tegucigalpa Barrio

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This article is based on an ethnographic study of evangelical churches in a Honduran barrio. It reveals the legalism present and analyzes how this legalism affects the people themselves, how it affects their relations with others, and how it affects their concept of God. The article demonstrates that churches officially state a doctrine of grace, but live out a theology of works righteousness. This situation calls us to ask what went wrong and to evaluate our own preaching and teaching. The final section begins to explore what we can learn from this study and how we can address the problems described.

In the middle of a workshop on how to study the Bible, a woman raised her hand and asked: "My friend told me that I have lost my salvation since I cut my hair. Is that true?" That question led me to return to give further workshops and eventually to do an ethnographic investigation of the evangelical churches in Las Mesetas, a Tegucigalpa neighborhood.¹ This article is a product of that study.² The article seeks to demonstrate that in many ways the Christianity lived out in this barrio is a contradiction to the gospel. The article's purpose is not simply to critique those who preach in this barrio, but to use this description as a tool that will prod us to ask what went wrong and to evaluate our own preaching and teaching.

Las Mesetas, with a population of over 13,000, is one of the numerous poor neighborhoods that have sprung up on the hills surrounding Tegucigalpa in the past 15 years. There are ten evangelical churches in Las Mesetas. Half of the churches are affiliated with denominations; eight of the ten churches are pentecostal.

One of the goals of the ethnographic study of these churches was to explore the extent of the legalistic attitude similar to that exhibited by the friend of the woman who cut her hair. Although many social scientists list strict legalism as a characteristic of evangelicals in Latin America, more attention is given to their supposed escapist mentality. When sociologists and anthropologists do write about evangelicals' rules, they usually discuss the causes of the huge numerical growth of evangelicalism in Latin America (the appeal of a strict system of rules in a state of anomie).

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A few scholars have also written about the positive concrete impact of these rules in the lives of church members.³

My ethnographic research focused on different aspects of legalism than the studies presently available to make a contribution to a weak area in the field. I also, however, set up the ethnographic research the way I did for theological reasons. My definition of legalism refers not just to strict or literal conformity to a code of rules, but includes the sense that conformity to these rules is required for salvation or acceptance by God. The goal of the study was to understand better how this rigorous approach to rules of behavior affected the people themselves, how it affected their relations with others, and especially how it affected their concept of God.⁴

The analysis and evaluation at the end of the article focus on these three issues. The article does not seek to evaluate the rules themselves and determine which specific rules are appropriate and which are not. Rather it explores general attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about rules.

Rules

The decision to become a Christian is not a joyous one. Rather the step is taken with a sense of resignation. Knowing what will be demanded, one becomes a Christian and then must decide which one of the ten evangelical "paths" to join. (an active member of one of the ten evangelical churches in Las Mesetas)

In Las Mesetas, evangelicals are best known for their strict observance of rules such as no drinking, no dancing, no drugs, and no smoking. Members are required to tithе their earnings and to attend all church services—six or seven nights a week in most churches. Churches will not baptize anyone in a common-law marriage (the status of 38 percent of the households in Las Mesetas). Some churches prohibit men from wearing blue jeans or shorts.⁵ Most churches do not allow women to wear pants, shorts, or short skirts. They also prohibit women from wearing jewelry, using makeup, or cutting their hair. A number of the churches require women to wear head coverings in church.⁶

This list is overwhelming for many people living in Las Mesetas. One woman who had been attending an evangelical church for about a year was asked what she thought of the church. She replied, "Many requirements." Another woman who attends church occasionally but had gone faithfully for a year mentioned that the church emphasized good behavior. I asked her what some of the rules were. She replied, "There are a lot of rules" (*un montón*).

This is not to say people think negatively of evangelicals. A number of non-evangelicals acknowledged the concrete positive effects of people not drinking. In general, evangelicals are seen as people who do not cause problems in the *barrio*.⁷ This study will not focus, however, on evaluating the outward behavioral changes the rules produce. Rather, it will center on how the rules are communicated and how the emphasis on rules affects the nature of the churches. My interest is in how people respond to the rules and how the rules themselves, not the obedience to the rules, affect their lives.

Rules and the People's Concept of a Good Christian

What does one need to do to be an evangelical believer? According to a woman who goes to church occasionally, but who had gone faithfully for a year, "One must have a clean state with God: be faithful, behave well, and obey the rules."

Norms are important to any group for defining expected behavior and for separating those in the group from the rest of society. Behavioral norms, however, seem especially important to evangelical Christians in Las Mesetas because changed behavior is central to people's understanding of what it means to be a *creyente*.⁸

When asked to finish the phrase "A Christian is someone who. . .," all the church members I interviewed included the idea of putting into practice what the Bible says or following the example of Jesus. For many that is all they said.⁹ Their concept of Christianity focuses especially on the person's behavior. Only three church members mentioned belief in Christ or forgiveness of sins in their answer.

Although all of these people focused on behavior in defining who a Christian is, they gave a different answer when asked what one had to do to become a Christian. They gave answers that included the traditional evangelical emphasis on grace and forgiveness of sin.

The evangelicals in Las Mesetas would argue strongly for the doctrine that a person is saved not by his or her deeds, but by the grace of God. All that is required is to admit that one is a sinner and believe that through Jesus Christ there is forgiveness. These evangelicals gave a doctrinally correct answer to this question about salvation. These moments of grace, however, are fleeting. When it comes to staying in the church, a person's works become the priority. As one church member stated, "The way it is here, a person accepts Christ one day, and the next day the church leaders arrive with the machete to tell the person what to do and what not to do."

This emphasis on behavior defining who is and who is not a *creyente* affects the way non-evangelicals think about evangelical Christianity. When I asked Catholics and people on the fringes of evangelicalism what one needed to do to become a *creyente evangélico*, all except one spoke of behavior and obeying rules.¹⁰ The evangelical emphasis on rules has apparently overwhelmed the doctrine of grace. Clearly, outside the church and as we will later see, inside the church as well, people think that evangelicals teach that one must be good to be a Christian and go to heaven. Non-evangelicals tend to think they must straighten out their lives to become evangelical Christians. A woman who liked to visit evangelical churches said, "I almost accepted Jesus Christ last night." When I asked why she did not, she explained she could not accept Jesus because she was a sinner. For her, accepting Jesus and complying with the rules of the church were the same thing. For various reasons she could not marry her common-law husband, and therefore, from her perspective she could not become an evangelical Christian.¹¹

If asked specifically, the members of the church she visited, like the ones I interviewed, would probably say that putting one's life in order comes *after* accepting Jesus Christ as Savior. Yet they have communicated something quite different to this woman and others like her. Or, at least, they have not done enough to correct her mistaken view.

Although there is plenty of talk about God in the churches, one senses that the

most important “doctrines” are the ones that deal with behavior. This is one more example of how rules about behavior are central to the evangelical’s identity. When I asked *creyentes* how their church differed from the other churches in Las Mesetas, they usually would first mention how the Central American Church, La Mizpa, did not clap their hands and had much mellower times of worship. Then people would say there were some doctrinal differences with other churches. When I asked for examples, they usually mentioned “doctrines,” such as, “the women in our church do not wear head coverings,” or “we do not believe in remarriage after divorce.” They equated rules to doctrine and rarely mentioned a difference between churches that actually related to doctrinal or theological belief.

How Rules Are Communicated

People often gave vague answers when asked how their church communicated rules to new members. Although some churches give new members classes in which they go over the doctrines and rules of the church, and although the churches that are part of a denomination have printed versions of the church’s beliefs and regulations, the fact is that people often know the common rules even before they go to the church.¹² Rules they do not know are learned quickly by observation and by hearing the church leaders motivating the members to continue to obey a certain rule.

A few church members complained that little explanation came with the rules. They wished there was more emphasis given to explaining why certain things were harmful. They simply had been told not to do certain things and usually given a verse from the Bible to back up the command. Any explanation did not go much beyond the principle that Christians must differentiate themselves from the world.

Motivation to Obey the Rules

Privileges

I wanted to go up front to lead the songs and preach. That motivated me to attend faithfully and obey the rules. (a 19-year-old woman recalling what she thought when she was 15) Because of my studies I started to only go to church on Saturday and Sunday. No one ever came and told me that I lost my privileges, but they stopped asking me to lead any part of the church service. (a woman who eventually left that church)

Only baptized church members in good standing (those who keep the rules) have the privilege of having positions of leadership in the church and of being able to preach, lead singing, or sing solos during a church service. Just as the prospect of obtaining privileges motivates people to begin to comply with the rules, the threat of losing privileges deters people from breaking the rules. If they do not comply with a rule, people are placed in *disciplina* for a period of time—losing their privileges.

Gaining or losing privileges is the main means of rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior. In addition, since many Hondurans view God as a figure who rewards good behavior and punishes bad, churches often link God’s actions directly to the behavior of the individual Christians. While preaching about healing, one speaker said, “When we want to receive something from God, we must first do what God asks us to do.”¹³ In one church when a man stopped attending, the pastor prayed that God would cause him to lose his job to show him the error of his ways. Those

listening to the prayer would have to wonder what punishment the pastor would seek if they left the church.

Obeying to Avoid Shame

When I had first stopped going to church every day, I felt fine. I thought my studies were an appropriate reason not to go. Then one time when I was in church, a woman came over to me and said, “Aren’t you going to go up to the altar and become reconciled with God?” I replied, “Why?” But then I realized that since I had not been coming every day, this woman equated this with backsliding. From her perspective I had a problem. I needed to work out with God. Her question made me feel very bad. I began to go to church less and less and got to the point that I really was out of relationship with God. Eventually I stopped going to church at all. (a woman who eventually left the church)

One time the church sent us out to evangelize. They did not train us, and I had never gone before. They paired me with a teenage boy who had some experience. I talked with the woman at the first house we went to. She said she was a Catholic and commented, “So I did not push her, and we left very soon. Out in the street, the boy said to me, ‘You are nothing of a Christian if you cannot convince a Catholic. A Christian knows how to conquer someone for Christ. Let’s go back. I’ll show you how.’ I was embarrassed and felt like a failure. I’ve never gone evangelizing since then. (a teenage woman who is an active church member)

The phrase “Ella no anda bien con Dios” (literally: She does not walk well with God) marks failure for those aspiring to holiness. They know these words will be applied to them if they do not maintain their obedience. Desiring to avoid shame motivates them to continue. The same shame, however, can cause them to drop out totally if they do stumble. One woman reported that to be at peace with others in the church, to feel comfortable in relation to them, one must obey the rules. As Rubem Alves writes, “[The *creyente*] is confronted with the terrible certainty that he or she will be accepted by the community only if he or she does not transgress the limits of the permissible” (1985:147).

Scolding the Creyentes

I had invited a friend to the Saturday night young people’s church service. In the middle of his sermon, the speaker covered a glass with mud. He asked, “Can God live in such a dirty glass? Can God manifest himself through such a dirty glass? Those who use makeup are like this muddy glass.” My friend was the only person in the room with makeup on. She never returned. (a woman in her 20s recalling an incident from the church she used to attend)

Sermons that condemn and scold are common. They are seen as a tool to maintain the resolve of the faithful and to move those who do not comply to do so. For instance, preachers will say that those who do not tithe are stealing from God. Those who do not attend all the church services are dishonoring God and also run the risk of losing their faith.¹⁴ As in this last case, this style of sermon often plays on the fears of the people.

Affraid Not to Obey

A friend told me that I have lost my salvation because I cut my hair. Is that true? (a woman asked this in 1992 during a seminar in Las Mesetas on how to interpret the Bible)

Many evangelicals use the threat of hell to bring people into the church and to keep them in line once in the church. One man, who is now a pastor, recalls that he stopped drinking mostly because he heard preachers say that drunks went to hell.¹⁵

People's fear leads them to respond to these rules in different ways. One man who goes to Catholic services every week explained that he did not feel capable of being an evangelical. He said, "I am afraid that if I become an evangelical, and later find I cannot do all that is demanded and go astray, I will feel bad with myself, with God, and with others."

How People Feel in Relation to These Rules

There were a couple years when I was pretty tense about all these rules. There were times when I wondered if I was saved. If I missed a few days of church I'd be afraid of God. (a man in his 40s)

The pastor would say, "Tomorrow there is a fast." I did not want to fast, but then I would think, "God might punish me if I don't." So I'd fast. Or I might think, "I want to be a leader. I'd better do this." In that church I found an oppressive environment, not one of understanding. I think many people have spiritual problems, but they keep them hidden. They have a terrible fear of what others would say and the scolding they would get. So they don't tell anyone. This happened to me. I did something wrong, but told no one. . . . I once did an experiment in the church I go to now. I was assigned to preach, but I did not preach in the normal way. I had a discussion with the people. I said, "I would like to belong to a church where I could feel like I was in my family. Where if I had economic needs, I could ask others for help. Where I could live honestly without having to pretend that I am perfect." People, even those who never talk in church, said, "That would be beautiful." (a man in his early 30s)

It is hard to know how people feel about these rules. A few people, like the two quoted above, talked to me about their feelings about the rules. Most did not. Although these few were critical, it is noteworthy how positively another woman spoke of a sermon in which a guest speaker scolded them strongly (*nos dio duro*). There was no hint that she had any negative feelings about the rules.

If one obeys the rules, these churches are a good place to be. The successful rule keeper is given affirmation and status. There is not, however, much emotional space to fail. Because of this, it appears it is to everyone's advantage to emphasize the rules as they do. Although they are certainly demanding, they are achievable and measurable. There was very little talk about character qualities, such as patience, love, and unselfishness, which are harder to achieve and measure. The rules on marriage offer a good example.

Rules about Marriage

They are more concerned with what I wear than what I am like as a wife. (a married woman referring to the leaders in her church)

One question I asked was, "What does someone need to do to become an official member of your church?" Everyone who answered that question mentioned baptism as a prerequisite. Then they added that if a person had a husband or a wife, they had to be married before they could be baptized. A legal marriage is a very important stepping stone, or road block, for many in evangelical churches.

On the one hand, one could argue that this is a socially constructive rule. Non-Christian women's organizations also work to encourage people in common-law relationships to marry. They see it as a way to give some legal protection to women and to force men to be more responsible. Especially when combined with the church's emphasis on sexual fidelity, this rule makes a significant step toward stabilizing families in Honduras.¹⁶

On the other hand, this rule highlights the weakness of an external rules' orientation. One interview made this quite clear. The woman is married, baptized, and a member of her church. Yet her husband does not live with her,¹⁷ and she admits they have a very poor relationship. She said, "There is much lacking on both sides." But according to the rules, she is fine, a member in good standing.

With the focus on rules, it is too easy for people to deal only with relatively superficial issues.¹⁸ Also making rules the priority too easily allows the church to pronounce right or wrong without acknowledging the complexity of the situations. For instance, if a man married someone when he was young, left her without getting a divorce, later started living with someone else with whom he had children, and then became a *creyente*, many churches would demand that he leave his present family and return to his original wife. They would demand this even if he had been living with his current spouse for 20 years, and even if the previous wife had also united with someone else. The man could never be baptized and become a member unless he did this. Although this may appear as an extreme example, it is not a rare situation. One man reported that he knew three people who had left churches for this exact reason.

The much more common example is when one partner, usually the woman, is a *creyente* and wants to get married, but the other partner does not. Theoretically, these people could be in the church for years, fulfilling every other requirement, but they would never be baptized, become members, lead a song, preach, or participate in the Lord's Supper.¹⁹

It appears that this rule's mentality lends itself to placing people in cut-and-dried categories. Most interviewees did not use the term that I am using, a "common-law" relationship. Instead they spoke of those who were married and those "living in adultery." One wonders what it would feel like to be one of those *creyente* women who has been faithful to her common-law husband for many years, and yet hear someone else talk about women in her situation as adulteresses because they do not have a legal document saying they are married. One also wonders how many women and men leave the church after a year or two, frustrated and shamed because they feel like second-class citizens. These questions point to issues discussed in the next section: boundaries and divisions in the church.

Distinctions and Boundary Lines

Almost everyone reported that in their church people treated the members and non-members, and even those under discipline, in the same manner. That is to say, they greet and talk with all people in the church in the same way, regardless of their

status in the church. However, the rules and membership privileges are clearly delineated. It is inevitable that divisions of status are felt in spite of the superficially equal treatment. For instance, when a pastor in one church states publicly that only those who pray loudly are truly filled with the Holy Spirit, he has set up an elite group in the church.²⁰

Whether the people with privileges in the church actually feel superior is difficult to know. That some of those without privileges feel they are second-class is easier to show. One woman told me she viewed the leaders in her church as superior to the rest. She had the sense that only they would go to heaven. She felt discriminated against because only the leaders went to seminars and conferences sponsored by the denomination. She thought that unless she crossed the boundary line into this elite group, she would not grow and advance as a Christian.

The lines drawn between churches and the differing treatments and attitudes between *creyentes* and non-*creyentes* are more obvious and more readily admitted. In spite of their differences, however, there is a general spirit of unity among the evangelical churches in Las Mesetas. They cooperate in joint evangelistic campaigns, visit each other's meetings,²¹ and usually greet each other by saying, "God bless you, sister (or brother)."²² This, however, is not universally true. One woman stated that now that she has started wearing pants, people from other churches, specifically the one she used to attend, address her as *aniga*—no longer as *sister* even though she addresses them as *sister* or *brother*.

Although they claim to accept people and treat them equally on both an internal and an external level, the priority given to rules of behavior leads evangelicals to make distinctions and draw boundary lines between people and groups. Once the lines are drawn, some inevitably feel inferior and even rejected. Like any group, these churches need some identity boundaries to clarify how they differ from those not in the group. Their present lines serve that function, but their rules are also counterproductive and sometimes destructive.

Analysis

The legalistic code that sets evangelical Christians apart from others also brings them together. They have a common task and a common experience of being different from those around them. Rules create community by defining clearly who is "in" and who is "out," but they also cause divisions and create elite groups within the churches. Feelings of self-righteousness, inferiority, and unnecessary experiences of shame are a common by-product of legalism. Sharing the task of striving to meet the standards bonds *creyentes* into a community. Yet the serious consequences of not meeting the standards of behavior also decrease the quality of community the evangelicals experience. *Creyentes* find it hard to express their struggles honestly for fear of what others may think of them and for fear of losing their standing in the church. Although a church has a corporate identity and corporate tasks, the high priority given to a code of individual morality makes the church most of all a collection of people individually attempting to meet the same set of rules.

This study has shown that legalism produces mixed results at the level of behavioral consequences as well. Although legalism facilitates some change, such as less drinking, it also fails to encourage change that cannot be easily measured. The main goal of this investigation, however, was not to evaluate behavioral results. Rather the

investigation sought to understand better how the legalism in the churches in Las Mesetas influenced peoples' concept of God.

Las Mesetas' evangelical churches officially state a doctrine of grace, but live out a theology of works righteousness. Human actions are foremost on the minds of the *creyentes* of Las Mesetas. They focus on behavior when defining who is a Christian and when defining differences between the churches. Naturally, by implication, they think that God's foremost concern is also individual morality, and although they make statements of God's love and grace, most live as if God's attitude and actions toward humans are dependent on how humans behave. This understanding is stated explicitly in sermons. God's blessing is used to motivate believers to good behavior. God's punishment in this life and the one to come is used as a threat against those who do not fulfill the legalistic standards. Slade concludes that a main reason people go to church is to attempt to satisfy a strict and distant God who demands their worship. "God may be good, but He's definitely going to punish any lack of loyalty to the activities of the church" (1994:137).

The Christianity lived out and preached in Las Mesetas produces a distorted concept of God that for many reduces God's goodness to the notion that God will not punish us as much as we deserve.²³ The Christianity lived out in these churches also displays a distorted concept of ethics and sin that treats sin as a taboo or a demerit. Little explanation is given for why certain things are included in the legalistic codes. The consequences are not inherent in the action itself. Instead, it seems that if one breaks a rule or accumulates enough demerits in the heavenly ledger book, something bad will happen. It is best to keep the rules and hence to avoid the shameful experience of feeling the accusing eyes of other *creyentes* in Las Mesetas and the angry response of the God of the big accusing eye.

Conclusion

The title of this article asks: "Is this the gospel?" Clearly it is not. I have not, however, described the churches in this barrio simply so we could critique their expression of the gospel. My purpose for sharing their stories is motivated by an evangelistic burden and rooted in a missionary spirit. I desire that these people, and others like them, truly experience the good news.

Although most who read this may not literally go to preach and to teach in a barrio, many readers will train others who will go. This article, however, is not simply about going. We have already gone to Honduras, and the evangelical churches in this barrio are directly or indirectly a product of our efforts. Before we train people who will go to this barrio, teach in Bible institutes, or write theological education by extension materials, we must first ask: "What went wrong?" "How can we learn from our mistakes?" Then we ask what we should now preach and teach.

This article primarily seeks to provide the motivation to ask those questions, not to provide the answers. I will, however, briefly offer a few reflections in response to these questions.

We have failed to take seriously enough the human propensity to think we must earn God's love and acceptance. The fact that people can correctly repeat the doctrine of salvation by grace does not mean they live its reality.²⁴

In part, people confuse the significance of human action versus God's action because evangelical preachers tend to talk much more about what humans ought to

do than about what God has done. Among the reasons for this, one is that many of us are most concerned about morality and human behavior; therefore, we talk about it the most. Certainly a loving concern for individuals and the community will lead us to talk about issues of human behavior. The problem, however, is that our rage for goodness can blind us to tragedies produced or aggravated by our focus on morality. Pastors of the churches in this barrio seemed unconcerned or unaware that some people saw God as primarily an angry accusing figure; they seemed unconcerned or unaware of the burden of shame and inferiority that some in their churches carried.

People have the propensity to think that the love of God and the acceptance of others are conditional, that they depend on correct behavior. They need to be constantly reminded that God's love is unconditional. What, however, do they hear most often? They hear talk about human behavior. That too easily reinforces their misconception of God's love.

As demonstrated in this study, some people intentionally use the image of an angry God to scare people into compliance with the rules. Behind this use of fear is the drive for success in the area of morality. This concern for success causes a number of other problems—even if not as severe.²⁵ To feel successful at moral living, one needs rules that are easy to define, relatively easy to comply with, and easy to judge. Having a list of clear-cut rules and communicating that following them means one has arrived at holiness foster problems described in this article. On the one hand, this legalism causes some to carry a sense of shame and condemnation. On the other hand, it allows some to think they are saints when they are far from sainthood.

Perhaps some of the resistance to Paul's preaching was caused because it sounded less effective in motivating people to good works.²⁶ The gospel could lead someone to ask, "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" (Romans 6:1, New Revised Standard Version). Paul responds with a clear "No." Perhaps, however, we are not preaching the same gospel Paul did if no one asks us that question. The gospel is scandalous.

We would do well to imitate Paul. For example, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul confronts those who confuse the role human actions play in our salvation. He offers a model of teaching that provides a corrective to the errors I have listed above.²⁷

Paul begins and ends the letter proclaiming what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:6; 6:14-15). He states clearly that what others teach is not the gospel and points to the negative consequences of this so-called gospel (Galatians 1:6-7; 13-14; 2:4; 11-14; 4:1-11; 5:2). In a variety of ways, he emphasizes that it is God's action, not human efforts, that provides justification, the gift of the Spirit, miracles, adoption into the family of God, etc. After making this point repeatedly, he addresses the issue of human behavior. He does not provide a list of easily measured or achieved rules; he continues the emphasis on God's action by contrasting the *works* of the flesh with the *fruit* of the Spirit.

In Paul's teaching, God's initiative provides humans the opportunity of relationship and freedom. Human actions are produced by and are a response to God's love. This is illustrated below by the arrow originating with God.



In contrast, although the churches in this barrio correctly state that salvation is a gift of God at other times, implicitly or explicitly, they communicate an inverted or muddled understanding of the relationship between God's action and human actions. This is represented by the arrow beginning with humans. It implies that God loves and acts because humans have earned God's response.



Let us respond with the same intensity and loving concern of Paul and bring a message of God's love to these people at the same time we evaluate which of our teachings and practices have contributed to this distortion of the gospel.

Notes

1. Las Mesetas is a fictitious name for an actual place. *Colonia* is the word used in Tegucigalpa to describe the various sections of the city. The literal translation of *barrio* (neighborhood) makes more sense in English than the literal translation of *colonia* (colony), but in Tegucigalpa *barrio* is used to refer to a much smaller unit. *Colonias* like Las Mesetas are large; many have more than 15,000 residents.

2. I did the ethnographic research in July and August of 1994. I interviewed 24 people from ten evangelical churches. I did participant observation in three churches, and I interviewed four community leaders. The research was not focused solely on legalism. The complete results of the study are published (see Baker 1995). Donations, administered by Trek Inc., from individuals and churches in the United States and a travel grant from the Tinker Foundation helped make this research possible.

3. For instance, Brusco (1995), Burdick (1993), Gill (1990).

4. Some Latin American evangelical theologians who critique the present state of the evangelical church explicitly point to the problem of legalism (René Padilla is an example [1986:90-91]). But Stanley Slade (1994), a Baptist theologian writing in *El Salvador*, is the only one I have encountered who investigates explicitly the connection between Latin American evangelicals' legalism and their view of God. This article does not seek to contest what he has written, but rather to pursue his observations in a more in-depth way.

5. These rules, and the rules for women's dress, are for daily life, not just while in church. 6. Although people would occasionally mention the importance of honesty, love, good relationships with neighbors, or avoiding envy, the above, more easily measured list of things is what both evangelicals and non-evangelicals talk about when asked about the norms of conduct in evangelical churches.

7. Christian Lalive d'Epimay's research in Chile led him to a similar conclusion. He states that almost everyone agrees that a positive contribution of pentecostalism is its success in getting people to stop drinking (1969:151).

8. Evangelicals will say, "I became a Christian three years ago," and understand that as referring to the time when they converted. For them, to be a Christian and to be an evangelist are synonymous. However, because Catholics also call themselves Christians, in this article I will use the Spanish word *creyente* (believer) to refer to evangelical Christians. This word or the phrase *creyente evangelico* are used by both evangelicals and non-evangelicals to refer to evangelical Christians.

9. Two examples: "A Christian is someone who does the will of God and obeys and practices what is in the Bible." "A Christian is someone who not only walks around with a Bible, but someone who by his actions gives testimony to the fact that he is a Christian."

10. The one exception said, "One needs to know and understand the things of God." If I had worded the question differently, such as, "What do you need to do to accept Jesus as your

Savior?" the person may have given different answers. I purposely did not do that because I wanted to see what was foremost in his or her mind in regards to the issue of becoming an evangelical.

11. This woman's understanding is not unique. In Santiago, Chile, David Dixon observed that, "evangelicals reported changing their lives of sin to lives of righteousness before they started going to church" (cited in Stoll 1993:4).

12. One woman while telling me how her non-evangelical neighbors respected her said, "For instance, they've never invited me to a party." Her neighbors did not have to join a church to know that evangelicals do not drink or dance. Another woman explained that when she told her family she had become a *creyente*, they said, "*Ya te armaniste*" (literally: Now you've ruined yourself). "Aren't you going to miss dancing?" They knew what it meant to become an evangelical.

13. Churches present their lists of rules, not as a human list, but as God's commands taken from the Bible. For instance, when I asked one pastor what rules of behavior his church had, he replied, "We do not have any; just those that are stipulated in the Bible." I knew from talking to former members of his church that they had a number of very strict rules, including some which are mentioned only indirectly in the Bible and others which are not mentioned at all (rules against dancing, makeup, movies, and men in shorts). Stanley Slade has observed a similar attitude in evangelicals in El Salvador. They have the idea that God only responds to those who pay their dues, so God "only takes care of those who make the sacrifice to attend all the worship services, the vigils and the fasts" (1994:138). See also Gill (1990:713).

14. Apparently, most church members do not think that just because they did not go to church every day they would directly lose their salvation. Instead, they felt they needed to go to church every day so they could maintain a good relationship with God and, hence, keep from doing things that could cause them to lose their salvation.

15. This individual is very glad he stopped drinking. He sees that as a good thing, but he will not preach that sermon himself. He wishes the preachers would have preached more about the negativity of drinking itself. I encountered another example of this threat in relation to makeup and earrings. Two teenage sisters were told they were being wayward (*andian mal*) and were going to hell because they started using makeup and earrings.

16. Elizabeth Brusco's (1995) and Lesley Gill's (1990) work challenges us not to overlook the positive changes that can happen to men who become *creyentes*—both by following these rules and, perhaps most significantly by not drinking. Brusco and Gill both argue that women allow a certain amount of male domination in pentecostal churches—because they recognize the great benefits women receive by having men involved in the church. The implication is that if the women pushed for more equality in the churches, they might also push the men out. A number of women and men in Las Mesetas did comment on how the situation in their homes had changed for the better when they became evangelicals. Others, although not denying these positive changes, communicated the need for more improvement in the home.

17. They cannot afford their own house. She refuses to live with his family, and he refuses to live with hers. So he lives with his mother on the other side of the city, and she and the children live with her mother.

18. Not all marriages among evangelicals remain at that level. Many spoke of significant changes in their relationships.

19. This is not only an evangelical issue. The Catholic Church will not allow couples with only common-law relationships to participate in the Eucharist. Some evangelical churches in Las Mesetas have opened up some space in this area; they will allow people in this category to have minor privileges, such as taking up the offering. One church has taken the step of allowing them to lead singing.

20. A woman told me of a similar and quite common example. She visited a church for six months, but eventually left and has not gone to any other church. She said that they were

constantly pushing her to be baptized in the Holy Spirit and to speak in tongues. She did not. She got tired of being pushed and experiencing the sense of not being part of the "in" group in the church who had spoken in tongues.

21. Entire churches will go visit others. Most churches, however, do not look positively on individual members visiting another church.

22. People, however, commented that certain churches were less friendly than others. A number of people said to me, "I always greet them as brother or sister and say 'God bless you,' but I don't sense they are too interested in talking to me, and I wonder if they would greet me, if I did not greet them."

23. Because of so much emphasis on threatened punishment, it is easy for people to understand salvation as avoiding the wrath of an angry God rather than as being brought into relationship with a loving God. God's love can too easily come to mean restrained anger. Besides the legalistic emphasis that focuses on human behavior, sermons that talk of God in these terms foster this view of God. Yive Avila, a popular Puerto Rican evangelist who is on the radio in Honduras, preached: "The judgment of God is about to fall upon you. Earthquakes will come, and floods are about to break loose over you. Most humans will perish. All those who are in sin will die and go to hell [pause]. Smile because God loves you! Repent and escape the tragedy that is about to fall upon the earth!" (Sermon in Quito, Ecuador, October 1986, in Estrada and Muñoz 1987:66, translation mine.)

24. On this point, Jesus' confrontations with the Pharisees offer us a warning. E. P. Sanders and others have recently emphasized that the Pharisees' written theology was not the legalistic works righteousness that we have assumed it was. Sanders argues that they had sound theology. From the accounts in the Gospels, however, it would not appear so. This demonstrates that having sound theology in official documents does not guarantee that theology will be lived out (Sanders 1977:180, 419-428).

25. Both leaders and lay people desire success. They want the church to be successful, and they desire personal success.

26. This also may have been part of the reason that Pharisees and others responded so negatively to Jesus' actions of demonstrating love and acceptance of "sinners."

27. For a fully developed study of Galatians on the issues discussed in this article, see my dissertation (Baker 1996).

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Vernacular Christianity among the Muliá Dani **An Ethnography of Religious Belief** **among the Western Dani of Irian Jaya, Indonesia**

By Douglas James Hayward

This book is about religious change, particularly about changes made when Christianity was introduced to a tribal group in the remote highlands now called Irian Jaya, Indonesia. This tribe, the Western Dani, shared in a process called "indigenizing Christianity," "inculturation of Christianity," or "contextualizing Christianity." Hayward calls it "vernacular Christianity" to emphasize the study's anthropological perspective and the socio-cultural processes that transpire when two belief systems meet. Through ethnographical methodology, the study tries to understand what the Dani do and what they believe in their religious perspectives. The book records their pre-Christian beliefs and their vernacular Christianity. It represents the position of the missionaries and cites their records at length. Chapter topics include Dani cosmology, myths, religious rituals, sacred paraphernalia, religious specialists, and cargoism in socio-religious change.

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