

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

Liberal or Conservative?

Joe R. Price

Earlier this week I was asked what is meant by “liberal” and “conservative” when describing Christians and churches of Christ. While the words “liberal” and “conservative” are not found in the Scriptures, they do describe a mindset toward the word of God (and its corresponding practices) that is found there.

One definition of “liberal” is to be broad-minded; to be “tolerant of different views and standards of behaviors in others” (Encarta Dictionary). The liberalism we address here describes going beyond the revealed pattern of God’s word; that is the standard of faith and practice we must follow (Matt. 7:21-23; Gal. 1:8-9; 2 Jn. 9). Liberalism describes a mindset that leads to practices that are not restricted by the standard of truth. Liberalism accepts and tolerates teaching and practice that violates the word of God.

Nadab and Abihu acted liberally, going beyond the word of God, when they offered “*strange fire*” that the Lord had not commanded (Lev. 10:1-2). Moses acted liberally, going beyond the word of God, by striking the rock for water when God told him to “*speak to the rock*” (Num. 20:8, 11). God said Moses had acted in unbelief (v. 12). King Saul acted liberally, rebelling against God, when he did not kill all of the Amalekites as God commanded him (1 Sam. 15:1-3, 7-9, 20-23). When a person does not do what God tells him to do, he sins. When a person changes what God says to do, he sins. When churches of Christ teach and do things the gospel of Christ does not teach, they sin.

“Conservative” is defined as “reluctant to accept change, in favor of preserving the status quo and traditional values and customs, and against abrupt change” (Encarta Dictionary). Here we are addressing a mindset that leads one to abide in the pattern of the New Testament (cf. 2 Tim. 1:13). The Lord has always called on His people to “*stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it*” (Jer. 6:16). But today, as in the days of Jeremiah, there are those who say, “*We will not walk in it*” (Jer. 6:16).

Many Christians have moved away from the Bible authority of what a local church has the right to do. This departure into liberalism has shown itself in different ways. When local churches support human organizations (like missionary societies) from the treasury of the local church, use instrumental music in worship, support orphan homes and other benevolent organizations from the treasury, provide recreational and social activities for members and arrange themselves as sponsoring churches, they show a liberalism toward the word of God that has taken them away from the revealed pattern of truth.

Christians who oppose these things are sometimes referred to as “conservatives.” Some even use the derogatory, prejudicial and uninformed term “anti” to describe those who will not participate in these things for which there is no Bible authority.

Today, as in the times of the New Testament, any church of Christ that does not follow the Bible pattern for its organization, its worship or its work, is showing a liberal attitude toward the word of God.

One way to understand the difference between a conservative and a liberal approach to the Bible has to do with the silence of the Scriptures. A conservative viewpoint says that when the Bible is silent (when it does not speak on a subject) we do not have the right to act. That is, silence restrains, it does not give consent. For example, we cannot say, “Because the Bible doesn't say ‘not to’ use instrumental music in our worship, therefore we can use instruments.” No, the Bible tells us what God wants – singing – so, in the absence of God’s word mandating it, instrumental music is not approved. We cannot add playing to singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Gal. 1:8-9).

A liberal viewpoint says that when the Bible is silent we are left to do what seems best to us (for example, play instruments as well as sing songs in worship). But the Bible says ***“there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death”*** (Prov. 14:12). We cannot go beyond what is written and please God (1 Cor. 4:6).

Here are some examples to help tell the difference between liberal and conservative churches of Christ:

1) The New Testament teaches the work of a local church is to preach the gospel (1 Thess. 1:8), edify its members in the faith (Acts 11:26), and relieve the needs of saints (Acts 4:34-35). We cannot add new works to this Bible pattern of the work of the local church – like medical missions, language schools or orphan homes – without adding to God’s word. Churches of Christ that do so are acting liberally by going beyond the word of God. Churches of Christ that do the work revealed in the Scriptures without adding to or taking away from the New Testament pattern are acting conservatively toward the work of the local church.

2) One church may not become a “sponsoring church” that solicits and receives money from other churches to fund its own work. The New Testament pattern for the organization of the local church is that each church is independent and autonomous, with oversight being limited to each local church by its own elders (Acts 14:23; 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). They did not assume work beyond their means and then solicit other churches to help them do their work. Churches of Christ that use the sponsoring church arrangement are acting liberally in the matter. They have gone beyond the word of God. Churches of Christ that maintain their independence and autonomy as it is revealed in the Scriptures, without added to it or taking away from it, are acting conservatively toward the organization of the church.

3) In the New Testament, churches sent financial support directly to the preacher they supported (Phil. 4:15-16; 2 Cor. 11:8). They did not send money to a church that in turn sent that money on to the preacher; such a pattern is not found in the Bible. Churches of Christ that send money to other churches who then send that money to preachers are acting liberally in this arrangement. They have gone beyond the word of God. Churches of Christ that send preacher support directly to the preacher are following the pattern; they are acting conservatively on how to support preachers of the gospel.

These are just some of the examples of liberalism among churches of Christ today. All of them have one thing in common: a wrong attitude toward and application of Bible authority that goes beyond what the Bible says. We must respect the silence of the Scriptures and not add to or change what has been written, (1 Cor. 4:6). Remember Nadab and Abihu, Moses and King Saul.

Are we wrong to use “liberal” and “conservative” when discussing mindsets and conduct among brethren? Jesus was not wrong to identify such sin and rebuke it (Matt. 15:1-14). Neither are we. – [*The Spirit’s Sword*](#), January 29, 2006. ■

Whose Orders?

By Robert Hines

Years ago I read a notice of a horrible train wreck in which many people died painfully amid the twisted, burning wreckage. The engineer was killed as well. But as he lay near death he showed those near a paper, saying, *“Take this. It will show I was given the wrong orders.”* And they were the wrong ones. He had been on the wrong track. Yet he was still dying. And many were already dead close by.

Friend, you have an eternal soul, entrusted to you by God to serve Him. What orders are you following? Are they His? or man’s idea of religion? Make sure, because sincerity is not enough. – *Collegueue Church of Christ Bulletin*, January 7, 2018. ■

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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