

Why "Liberal" and "Conservative" Churches of Christ?

During the past three decades many have asked this question. Some sincere brethren who have been caught up in one stream or another never fully understood, and many who were too young before have now grown to adulthood wondering why. It is therefore a good question worthy of repeated investigation. Labels of "liberal" and "institutional" versus "anti" and "conservative" have been used by some as a prejudicial tool to halt further investigation. Labels used as prejudicial clubs are to be condemned; yet the terms "liberal" and "conservative" are proper when used as adjectives to describe a difference in attitude toward Bible authority, and consequently, a difference in practices. As the years go by, the attitude underlying the division becomes more apparent. We are not separated because one group believes in benevolence and the other does not, nor because of jealousy and envy. We have divided over a basic attitude toward the Bible. A liberal attitude justifies any activity that seems to be a "good work" under the concept, "We do a lot of things for which we have no Bible authority." A conservative attitude makes a plea to have Bible authority (either generic or specific) for all we do - therefore refraining from involving the church in activities alien to that of the church in the New Testament. Briefly, the walls of innovations which have divided us are built in three areas:

WHO? Who is to do the work of the church? The church? Or a human institution? The church has a God-given work to do, and the Lord made the church sufficient to do its own work. Within the framework of elders and deacons, a local church is the only organization necessary to fulfill its mission of evangelism, edification, and benevolence (Eph. 3:10-11; 4:11-16; 1 Tim. 3:15). However, a wedge was driven when some began to reason that the church may build and maintain a separate institution - a different WHO to do the work of the church. This separate institution is human in origin and control. It is not a church nor governed by the church - yet it receives financial maintenance from the church. Human institutions so arranged (such as benevolent homes, hospitals, colleges or missionary societies) may be doing a good work. But when they become leeches on the church, they deny its independence and all-sufficiency and make a "fund-raising house" of God's church.

HOW? How is the work of the church to be overseen? On a local basis with separate, autonomous congregations? Or may several local churches work as a unit through a sponsoring eldership? The organization of the New Testament church was local in nature, with elders limited to oversight of the work of the flock among them (Acts 14:23; 1 Pet. 5:2; Acts 20:28). We are divided by those who promote "brotherhood works" through a plan of inter-congregational effort with centralized oversight - an unscriptural HOW.

WHAT? What is the mission of the church? Spiritual, or also social? It is in this area that the loose attitude toward the Scriptures is becoming more apparent. Though wholesome activities are needed for all, the Lord died for a higher and holier mission than food, fun, and frolic. Let the church be free to spend its energy and resources in spiritual purposes (1 Pet. 2:5; Rom. 14:17) and let the home be busy in providing social needs (1 Cor. 11:22,34).

- by Robert Harkrider

Owe No One Anything

In this modern age credit has exploded. Most everyone has a wallet full of charge cards, from banks, department stores and oil companies. There is nothing inherently immoral about this, and yet to many those little plastic devils are a grave temptation that enable their discontentment and addiction to things.

Paul wrote the Romans to "Owe no one anything except to love one another" (13:8). This passage is not outlawing all debt, for other passages seem to regulate the practice. As Clinton Hamilton writes in his commentary on Romans, "One may have incurred a debt which if due in the present must be paid because that is the appointed time for it to be paid. Until that point, it is not due. One must not be in arrears in the payment of a debt" (Romans, page 725).

Paul is telling us not to get in situations in which we cannot pay a debt when it is due. Credit cards, mortgages and car loans have the potential to get people in exactly that situation. The

answer to credit trouble, unfortunately, is usually more credit. Carry the balance, take out a second mortgage, whatever it takes. Revolving credit can be a bottomless pit.

The over-extension of credit often leads to bankruptcy, in which a man's creditors are usually paid only a small percentage of what they are owed. This is immoral and a violation of Romans 13:8. Yet the vile seeds were sown long before, when we thought we could be happy if we only had more things.

The problem is more fundamental than a lack of possessions; it is a lack of contentment. Learn how to enjoy life with what you can afford and when more comes, you will appreciate it better (Phil. 4:11). Credit is not always bad, but if it is a substitute for godly contentment, you will regret it all the way to hell.

- by J.S. Smith

'Traditional', 'Contemporary', or Scriptural?

A nearby denomination advertises that it has two worship services each Sunday morning. One is "traditional" and the other is called "contemporary." While we have not visited either one, we suspect that these distinctions indicate that the first follows the routine patterns that have been observed in that denomination for many years. The "contemporary" service, on the other hand, likely breaks those long standing practices and seeks to attract a younger, more religiously 'liberated' crowd.

The whole notion of choice in this matter of worship is what deserves our attention. Choice is good, even preferable in many realms. We would be upset if we had no freedom to choose houses, cars, clothes, food, etc. In these areas we have a preference, and we act upon it. We allow that others may choose differently, and that is okay. "To each his own," we say.

But, men have mistakenly concluded that we are also free to choose what we like in worship specifically, and in religion generally. The "church of your choice" was a popular slogan many years ago. We don't hear that phrase much any more, but we certainly see that the concept has taken root. The denominations are full of people who have sought and found what appeals to them. What God wants -- what He has commanded and authorized -- seems to be of little concern.

Jesus taught that "God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). This important verse emphasizes two key aspects of acceptable worship. It must be "in spirit" -- indicating that the Father expects a sincere, heart-felt service. Without it, He is not pleased (Matthew 15:8). But our worship must also be "in truth," that is, in accordance with the commands of the Scripture. Those who do not submit to the authority of God's law will not be saved (Matthew 7:21-23).

"Traditional" or "contemporary" is the choice offered by men, but the only right choice is to serve God according to the truth of Scriptures. Anything else is an eternal mistake. Think!

- by Greg Gwin