

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

Two Important Verses About Benevolence

There are a couple of favorite 'proof texts' used by those who argue for the church to provide benevolence to all men. Careful study of both passages show that they are directed toward individual Christians, and not toward the church as a collective whole.

James 1:27 *Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.*

This verse is used to demonstrate that we have a definite responsibility towards orphans and widows – and we agree. However, the question is: whose responsibility is this, the church or the

individual? Some would go as far back in the context as verses 1 and 2 to show that this is a general epistle, addressed to a plurality of Christians. Thus it is argued that verse 27 is speaking of our joint duty carried out in the church. But this interpretation ignores the immediate context which begins at verse 21 – and here we see the clear indication of individual action. Notice the "keep himself" phrase within verse 27 which clearly shows that the individual is being spoken to, not the church as a collective whole.

Galatians 6:10 *As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.*

Again, a duty toward all men is stated. But who has this job, the church or the individual? Some want to go clear back to the first chapter to show that this letter was written to "the churches of Galatia" (1:2). And so they affirm that 6:10 refers to church responsibility. But look at the immediate context, that's where you have to find the true meaning. Beginning in verse one of the sixth chapter you can easily see that individual action is being discussed right through verse 10.

When needy saints are involved, the church has the duty to provide for their needs. Beyond that, individual Christians have the obligation to help and assist all men as opportunity and ability allow. This is God's simple plan.

- by Greg Gwin