

WHAT IS LIBERALISM?

Ron Halbrook

I have been asked to explain the meaning of the term “liberalism” as it has been used to describe problems and issues among churches of Christ since the 1950s. We are always glad to receive and answer questions from those who are “*searching the scriptures daily, whether those things were so*” (Acts 17:11; 1 Pet. 3:15).

TWO ATTITUDES: CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL. “Conservative” and “liberal” may be used to describe basic attitudes toward any law, document, or standard of authority. Conservative means a commitment to strictly follow, protect, or preserve the standard without changing its instructions, which is the spirit of Philippians 1:17 (“*set for the defense of the gospel*”), Jude 3 (“*earnestly contend for the faith, which was once delivered unto the saints*”), and Revelation 22:18-19 (not to “*add unto*” or “*take away from the words*” revealed). Liberal means not strictly following the message or pattern of teaching, but allowing unauthorized changes to be made.

“Liberal” and “conservative” can have many applications. In the period 1875-1925, liberal thinking infiltrated the restoration movement, which allowed

instrumental music to be added to the worship and missionary-society centralization to be added to the organization of the church. In the 1950s, liberal thinking again infiltrated churches of Christ, which had four basic applications.

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES. 1. In the New Testament, the work of the church was limited to evangelism, worship (to glorify God and edify saints), and benevolence to destitute saints (1 Tim. 3:15-16; Acts 2:42; 20:7; 2 Cor. 9:1). In the 1950s, churches began to provide social activities such as social meals, parties, and ball games. Then, churches began to add to the church building special rooms called “fellowship halls” which were actually kitchens and dining rooms. Now, some of the big rich churches even build gymnasiums. Such social and recreational work is not the proper work of the church. This is one form of liberalism.

CENTRALIZED ORGANIZATION. 2. In the New Testament, each church sent directly to preachers in the field and also sent benevolent help directly to destitute churches (Phil. 4:15-17; 2 Cor. 11:8; Acts 11:27-30). There was no centralized board, bureau, or agency of any kind. In the 1950s, the “sponsoring church” arrangement provided a plan for many churches to send

donations to a large church, which in turn oversaw the funds to send and support gospel preachers into the world and to send benevolent help to destitute churches. This has the effect of transforming a local eldership into a board of directors to oversee the work of many churches. This human plan of centralizing the work of many churches under one eldership is liberalism, reflecting the centralization found in denominationalism and Catholicism.

3. In the New Testament, each church did its work of evangelism and benevolence without building and sustaining human institutions to do the work for the churches (Phil. 4:15-17; Acts 6:1-7; 11:27-30). In the 1950s, human institutions such as colleges, summer camps, childcare agencies, medical clinics, and retirement centers obtained donations from the treasuries of the churches. These became church supported institutions. This is the same principle violated by the missionary society, centralizing the work of the churches through a human institution. This is a form of liberalism, reflecting the same centralization found in denominationalism and Catholicism.

CHURCH BENEVOLENCE TO SINNERS. 4. In the New

Testament, local churches gave benevolent help from the treasury to needy saints, but not to sinners in the world (Acts 6:1-7; 2 Cor. 9:1). In the 1950s, some brethren advocated the church should give benevolent help from the treasury to sinners in the world. This is another form of liberalism.

SPIRIT OF COMPROMISE.

Liberalism also has a spirit of compromise rather than a spirit of warfare against sin and error (2 Cor. 10:3-5). Many liberal churches try to preach a “positive” gospel setting forth the true plan of salvation and worship, but they avoid exposing false doctrines, false religions, and false teachers by name as was done in Bible days (Mt. 16:12; 2 Tim. 2:16-18). Some of these liberal churches try to preach a “positive” gospel about the need to live a pure and godly life, but they do not openly fight against worldliness and expose the sinfulness of social drinking, smoking, gambling, immodest dress, profanity, dancing, fornication, adultery, unscriptural divorce and remarriage, “*and such like*” (Gal. 5:19-21). Such churches do not practice discipline or

withdrawal from unfaithful members (1 Cor. 5; 2 Th. 3). This “positive” approach gradually allows the leaven of sin and error to work among God’s people. Less and less direct teaching is done on more and more Bible principles. Fewer and fewer warnings are given against more and more forms of sin and error. The church becomes weaker, softer, and more open to false teaching and sinful conduct in many forms. Such churches will gradually lose more and more distinctive marks of New Testament Christianity and become more and more like modern denominations.

Brethren who embrace this liberal spirit of compromise are highly offended and embarrassed by strong gospel preaching which deals directly with sin, error, and false teachers. Such brethren become agitated against and alienated from strong preachers and plain preaching. In this way, Satan builds a wall which protects the liberal-minded church from hearing the full truth of the gospel. Those who “*will not endure sound doctrine*” turn to teachers who will tickle their ears with smooth, sweet, soft

preaching — just as Paul warned in 2 Timothy 4:1-5.

In order to avoid liberalism in every form, we must preach “*all the counsel of God*” and “*fight the good fight of faith*” against every form of sin and error (Acts 20:27; 1 Tim. 6:12).

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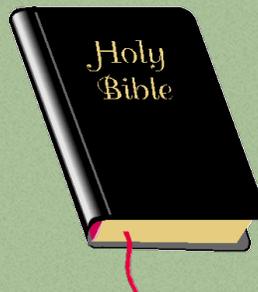
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