

## LEGALISM, LIBERALISM AND CONSERVATISM # 3

### Int.

1. Aim: To show what it means to be conservative.
2. Deut. 5:32 **"Ye shall observe to do therefore as the LORD your God hath commanded you: ye shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left."**
  - a. Do as the Lord hath commanded - Moses speaking to people of Israel
  - b. Do not turn to the right or the left - either extreme is wrong !
    - i. Turning to the right is legalism - binding or making laws that God did not make.
    - ii. Turning to the left is liberalism - ignoring God's laws
    - iii. In matters of faith, I am a conservative.
3. I am not a legalist. I do not want to see the church restricted by opinions of men that are viewed as matters of faith.
4. I am not a liberal who wants to see the church move to the left to the drumbeat of permissiveness that would disregard the will of God.
5. I am a conservative.
  - a. The church belongs to Christ and He alone determines its faith and practice (Matt. 16:18; Acts 20:28; Eph. 1:22,23)
  - b. Through the Holy Spirit God's will for the church has been revealed (John 14:26; John 16:13; Jude 3)
  - c. Just as the first Christians faithfully followed these teachings (Acts 2:42), we are exhorted to do (1 Cor. 16:13; Phil. 4:1; Phil. 1:22).
6. As a conservative, I must be able to distinguish between the teachings (traditions) of Christ (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15; 2 Thess. 3:6), and the teachings (traditions) of men (Matt. 15:6; Col. 2:8).

## Discussion

### I. **DEFINITIONS**

- A. Conserve – "to keep in a safe or sound state, to avoid wasteful or destructive use of
- B. Conservative -- "tending or disposed to maintain existing views, conditions, or institutions; traditional; moderate; cautious."
- C. Conservatism -- "The tendency to prefer an existing situation to change" (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 8th ed.)
- D. Conservatism. This is the disposition to preserve and adhere to existing conditions, institutions, laws, etc., and to oppose change.
  - 1. One who wants to follow Bible teaching can be called a conservative.
  - 2. By the close of the first century A.D., "the faith" had been "once for all delivered unto the saints," and the scriptures admonish us to "contend earnestly" for it (Jude 3).
  - 3. New Testament Christianity is to be preserved throughout all time.
- E. Illustration - What is a conservative?
  - 1. There was a TV program in which a well known conservative politician was asked questions by students about his political views.
  - 2. One of the questions was: "What is a conservative?"
  - 3. His answer: "I nstead of being called a conservative, I would prefer the word conservationist." A conservationist is one who is dedicated to the preservation of natural beauty, environment and resources of this country. In the political sense a conservationist is one who is dedicated to the preservation of the Constitution of the United States and the rights and privileges guaranteed therein..

4. Application: In the religious sense the conservative is one who can also be called a conservationist. He is dedicated to the preservation of the Gospel of Christ and the doctrines and practices which are found in the gospel. He is firmly opposed to any theory or trend which would weaken or dilute and change the gospel of Christ.

## **II. The Battles to Maintain Conservatism over the Past 125 Years.**

- A. Twin issues in the late 1800's were the missionary society and the mechanical instruments of music.
1. These were liberal issues, going beyond what is authorized in God's Word.
  2. Churches across the country, especially in the North and in the cities, digressed. The Disciples of Christ and the Independent Christian Churches are the products of these liberal teachings.
  3. Because of the strong stand for truth, a conservative spirit preserved our heritage in Churches of Christ.
- B. In the early decades of the 1900's, several issues to the right troubled the churches.
1. These included the anti-Sunday school, the anti-Christian college, the anti-located preacher and the one-cup groups.
  2. While these issues were not promoted at the same time, nor necessarily together, they were all restrictive and legalistic stands to the right. Each one attempted to make an opinion of man as a matter of faith.
  3. Because of the stand taken by faithful brethren, our conservative heritage was again maintained. The spirit of conservatism resists the too permissive teachings of the left as well as the too restrictive teachings of the right.

- C. It was during the decade of the 1930's that the subject of premillennialism occupied front stage in our brotherhood.
1. Premillennialism promoted false teachings regarding the second coming of our Lord. It teaches that Christ will reign on this earth for 1,000 years.
  2. Once again, faithful men like brother Foy E. Wallace, Jr. led the way in exposing these false teachings. As a result of their stand, the truth continued to be taught in the majority of churches and the spirit of conservatism was maintained.
- D. The assault upon the faith of men in the late 1940's and the decade of the 1950's came over the issues of orphan's homes and cooperative efforts, such as the Herald of Truth.
1. There were efforts to bind the opinions of men in these matters. These were attempts to bind or restrict where God has not bound nor restricted.
  2. As in the past, faithful men desiring to conserve God's will, opposed these teachings and today we are the products of this conservative spirit.
- E. False teachings about the Holy Spirit abounded in the decade of the 1960's.
1. These liberal teachings advocated denominational, rather than biblical stands.
  2. Faithful brethren desiring to maintain a conservative spirit regarding God's Word again opposed these false teachings.
- F. In the decades of the 1970's and the 1980's false teachings facing the church included the following:
1. The A.D. 70 doctrine on the coming of Christ advocated by Max King.
    - a. This false doctrine gives spiritual and figurative explanations to passages leading to wrong interpretations. They teach that Christ came in 70 AD.
    - b. Faithful brethren have arisen who have effectively exposed the errors and conserved truth in most churches of Christ.

2. During these decades much attention was given to false teachings originating in the Crossroads church and the Boston church.
  - a. False teaching on evangelism, prayer partners, organization, etc. were heard.
  - b. But faithful men wanting to conserve the biblical teachings, stood firmly to refute these teachings.
  - c. We thank God that the elders of the Crossroad church have acknowledged error and the desire to change.
3. Another troublesome issue during this time came from the Unity Movement.
  - a. This threat came from the liberal left and sought to form a union between the churches of Christ and the Independent Christian Churches; thereby, considering the instrumental music question one of opinion, not of faith.
  - b. Once again, faithful brethren who wanted to conserve acceptable worship opposed the unscriptural efforts.
4. The New Hermeneutic issue demanded the attention of our brotherhood in the closing years of the last decade.
  - a. Those espousing a New Hermeneutic find fault with an interpretation of the Bible that uses commands, examples and necessary inferences; they question, and often reject, the validity of the Restoration Movement; they embrace a denominational form of grace, etc.
  - b. Thanks be to God that once again the voices of faithful brethren have been heard to oppose the New Hermeneutic.

#### G. 21<sup>st</sup> Century

1. The battle is still raging
2. Liberalism is spreading like wildfire

### **III. THE BATTLES TO MAINTAIN CONSERVATISM MUST CONTINUE**

- A. 1 Cor. 16:13 **"Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong."**  
 NKJV **"Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong."**
- B. Battles will have to be fought against
1. Efforts to impose matters of opinion as matters of faith. It is vital that we understand what is of faith and what is man's opinion. [Legalism]
  2. The plan to treat matters of faith as matters of opinion [Liberalism]
  3. Conservatism is a preservation of the Gospel of Christ.
- C. The main battle at the present time is with Liberalism:
1. Baptism = That it is not necessary for one to understand that baptism is for the remission of sins.
  2. Worship - make it more entertaining
  3. Role of Women = That women should be used in public worship and in places of leadership in the church.
  4. Open fellowship = That we can fellowship with all religious groups !
  5. Reject restoration plea -
  6. Grace alone - That grace rules out all law and commands today.
  7. Divorce = fornication is not the only scriptural reason for divorce and remarriage.
  8. That the Lord's Supper may be eaten on any day of the week.
  9. Tongue speaking
  10. Virgin Birth
  11. New Hermeneutic
  12. That mechanical instruments of music in worship is a matter of opinion, not of faith.
  13. That members of the church need to restudy commonly held views on such issues as abortion, euthanasia, suicide, homosexuality, fornication, etc.

D. It is being suggested by some that the church needs to be reshaped in order to appeal to the Baby Boomers.

1. Brother Rubel Shelly wrote in *The Tennessean* (7/22/91) under the heading "God never alters -- but the church must change" stating that the Baby Boomers had dropped out of church and would not return until changes have been made. He represents a growing number of people calling for change. In view of a number of questionable and highly controversial statements that brother Shelly has made in recent years, there are multitudes of Christians who would not trust him to determine the teachings and practices of the church in the 90's.
2. The Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, is a church designed to appeal to Baby Boomers. In 1975, Bill Hybels, preacher, and a group of men surveyed their community, a Chicago suburb, to determine why people were not attending church. "It's boring and predictable," "It's not relevant to my life," and "They bug me for money" were the three top answers.
  - a. So, they set out to structure a church that would appeal to Baby Boomers. What is it like? Here is a description of Sunday services: "At non-denominational Willow Creek, that means a slick, show-biz service where drama and soft rock are served upon a stage washed in pink and blue spotlights. A soft-sell sermon is delivered by Hybels from a Lucite lectern."
  - b. There are "12 big-screen TVs showing close-ups of action on stage, just like at rock concerts." A production of this kind "requires 1,000 volunteers and 13 planning meetings. Beyond sheer numbers, Willow Creek's service depends on being able to draw on a pool of musical and dramatic talent." Hybels states that the Baby Boomers do not have loyalties to the churches they grew

up in and tend to go wherever they find what pleases them. He said, "The 45-and-under generation has a consumer oriented mind-set. They patronize the restaurants and stores they like, and they'll attend a church for the same reason." Attendance at Willow Creek averages 24,500 weekly (USA Weekend, April 13-15, 1990).

3. I assume all of us are aware there are faults in the church that need to be righted, but are we really willing to design the Lord's church in order to appeal to a selfish generation? I think not (Gal. 1:10; Acts 4:19; Acts 5:29).

E. May we learn lessons from history.

1. More than 100 years ago the use of instrumental music in worship was defended by "the rapidly changing world ... New standards were arising, and consequently, society was raising its requirements" (Earl West, Search for the Ancient Order, Vol. 11, p. 83).
2. Agonizing over the adoption of music in worship, brother J. W. McGarvey wrote in the Apostolic Times, April 22, 1869, these words: "We are moving; we are progressing; at least some among us are advancing. Whether you think the movement forward or backward depends very much upon the way you are going yourself" (Ibid, p. 83).

### **Conclusion**

1. Josh. 23:6 **"Be ye therefore very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, that ye turn not aside therefrom [to] the right hand or [to] the left;"**

- a. God set certain boundary lines for Joshua
  - i. He was told not to go the right nor the left of God's law.
  - ii. He had to be satisfied with the requirements as given by God.
  - iii. He could not add anything to them, and he could not subtract anything from them.
- b. Two possible departures from God's laws have always been promoted by the devil. It involves our attitude toward God and his authority or laws.
  - i. Men are not allowed the liberty of becoming so conservative that they disallow what God allows... or
  - ii. We are not allowed the liberty of allowing what God disallows
- c. How do we avoid either of these extremes? We must know what the Bible teaches. If we are informed about the truth the we can recognize any extreme as being error.

Rev. 22:14-19

2. Our forefathers waged battles against permissive liberalism to the left and against restrictive legalism on the right in order to conserve "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1:3) and leave for us a marvelous heritage. **"Beloved, while I was giving all diligence to write unto you of our common salvation, I was constrained to write unto you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints."**
3. Let us, by His grace and power, be equally diligent to maintain the spirit of conservatism for generations yet to come.
4. Prov. 23:23 **"Buy the truth, and sell [it] not; [also] wisdom, and instruction, and understanding."**
5. Let us conserve the truth.

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