WHAT THE TERMS “LIBERAL” AND “CONSERVATIVE”

MEAN WITH REGARD TO CHURCHES OF CHRIST

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The purpose of the present article is to clarify basic reasons for disagreement among churches of Christ. The purpose is not to examine a detailed history of churches of Christ, nor is the purpose to enumerate theological differences between the church of Christ and modern denominational churches. (For a more detailed history of churches of Christ since the 1800’s, the reader is referred to books by David Edwin Harrell, Ph. D., a respected religious historian.)

The scope of the present article is limited to issues that have been sources of disagreement among churches of Christ since generally the 1950’s. These issues were hotly debated in the 1950’s and 1960’s; but debates have diminished significantly since the 1970’s. Churches of Christ separated into two general groups that came to be labelled by many as being either “conservative” or “liberal.” The terms “conservative” and “liberal” have little or nothing to do with political orientation. Rather, they have to do with one’s attitude toward scriptural authority. The primary difference between conservative and liberal churches was the attitude toward the need for specific scriptural authority for religious practices.

Liberal churches of Christ are sometimes described as “institutional” because these churches favor the use of church funds to support institutions such as schools, colleges and benevolent social agencies. They also commonly support the creation of organizations external to the church to which multiple congregations send money which is then distributed by the external organization for purposes of evangelism or benevolence. Members of conservative churches might not oppose the existence of the institutions supported and might even acknowledge that they accomplish a noble purpose. Nevertheless, they would oppose the use of church funds to support these institutions.

Unfortunately, the heated debates of the 1950’s and 1960’s often resulted in accusations and misrepresentations of each group by the other. For example, liberal churches were sometimes accused of not caring about Biblical authority, while conservative churches were sometimes accused of opposing so many religious practices that they were labelled “anti’s.” The term “anti“ was often used as a derogatory descriptor because members of conservative churches were anti- (i.e., against) the use of church funds to support human institutions. Ill will was sometimes more prevalent than profitable discussions.

The purpose of the present article is not to generate ill will, but to clarify basic differences between “liberal” (or institutional) churches of Christ and “conservative” (or noninstitutional) churches of Christ. Several generations of members of the church of Christ have grown up since the 1970’s and it is likely that many are not aware that there are differences among churches of Christ. It is probable that many New Testament Christians do not know the history of how such differences came about. Though not intended to be a history lesson, it is hoped that the present article will help Christians to understand the differences between the two groups. Then individual Christians can make their own religious decisions based on knowledge rather than hearsay.

Defining the Conservative and Liberal Positions

The terms “conservative” and “liberal” refer to the degree to which one conforms to the New Testament pattern as the **only** authority for religious organization and practice. Accurately defining the theological positions of Christians who would describe themselves as “liberal” or “conservative” in a way that pleases everybody is probably impossible. Nevertheless, the author has attempted to present below a fair representation of the most basic difference between the conservative and liberal positions:

Conservative position: Religious organization and practices must conform to the pattern presented in the New Testament and must not go beyond. Religious practices not authorized by scripture must not be implemented.

Liberal position: The New Testament contains a general pattern that should be followed, but some religious practices and organizations that accomplish good works are desirable and should be implemented, even though they are not specifically authorized in the New Testament.

Assertions Used to Support Liberal Positions

There are several assertions that have been used to support liberal positions toward the relationship between Biblical authority and religious practice. Four of the more common ones are presented below:

1. When there is no scriptural authority or pattern for a specific activity, it is permissible to exercise human judgement to implement practices that accomplish good results.
2. Unless specifically forbidden by scripture, a desirable result justifies the practices used to achieve that result.
3. As cultural changes occur, religious organizations and practices should change with them to remain relevant to the trends of contemporary society.
4. The primary message of the Bible is God’s love for mankind, and churches should not be unduly constrained by details concerning how that love can be shown to others.

Scriptures Relevant to the Relationship Between

Scriptural Authority and Religious Practice

Books could be written concerning the validity of each assertion presented above and such discussions are beyond the scope of the present article. Instead, New Testament passages that are relevant to the relationship between scriptural authority and religious practice are presented below. Each passage is preceded by a statement that summarizes the content of the passage. The passage (from the New American Standard translation of the Bible) is then presented in italics, followed by a brief discussion of the passage. The reader is encouraged to consider these passages, as well as any other relevant New Testament scriptures, to determine his/her own attitude toward the need for Biblical authority for religious practice.

Jesus told the apostles to teach what He taught them.

*(18) And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “****All authority has been given to Me*** *in heaven and on earth. (19) Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, (20)* ***teaching them to observe all that I commanded you****; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”*

*(Matthew 28:18-20).*

This passage teaches that all authority for religious practice originates from Jesus. He told the apostles to teach Christians “all that I commanded you.” The New Testament contains the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of the apostles as they spoke and wrote the books of the New Testament. From these verses we understand that Christians are to practice what Jesus and the apostles taught. A question arises as to whether the information we have in the New Testament is sufficient to teach us how to practice Christianity. In other words, do we have all the information we need to practice New Testament Christianity completely?

Paul told Timothy that the inspired scriptures equip the man of God “for every good work.”

*(16) All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; (17) that the man of God may be adequate,* ***equipped for every good work*** *(II Timothy 3:16-17).*

This passage contains Paul’s answer to the question of whether we have sufficient information to practice New Testament Christianity completely. His answer is that Christians can be “equipped for every good work” by studying the content provided in scripture. This leads to the conclusion that the authority for all religious practice is presented in scripture. Religious practices in addition to what is contained in scripture would be beyond “every good work.”

There was a body of teaching (sound doctrine) that was to be followed.

*In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of* ***the sound doctrine*** *which you have been following (I Timothy 4:6).*

In this passage, Paul acknowledges the existence of a body of teaching to which he refers as “sound doctrine.” Timothy knew what this doctrine was, and he followed it. He was also instructed to teach this sound doctrine to the brethren. Our only way to know the sound doctrine to which Paul referred is to read about it in the New Testament.

This body of teaching (the standard of sound words) was to be retained and followed.

***Retain the standard of sound words*** *which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus (II Timothy 1:13).*

In this passage, the body of teaching that Paul describes as “the standard of sound words” was to be retained by Timothy. Timothy knew about this body of teaching because he heard it from Paul. Timothy was to retain this body of teaching by practicing it and teaching it to others. The term “standard of sound words” indicates that this body of teaching is the standard by which all teaching will be evaluated. Any teaching differing from the standard would be erroneous.

Christians are to persevere in the body of teaching (the standard of sound words).

***Pay close attention*** *to yourself and* ***to your teaching; persevere in these things****; for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you (I Timothy 4:16).*

In this passage, Paul tells Timothy to persevere in his teaching (the standard of sound words). By following the body of teaching, Timothy would ensure, not only his own salvation, but the salvation of those who heard him and conformed to the standard of sound words. Again, any religious practice beyond the standard of sound words would be erroneous.

This body of teaching was to be taught to men who, in turn, would teach others.

*And* ***the things which you have heard from me*** *in the presence of many witnesses,* ***these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also*** *(II Timothy 2:2)****.***

Timothy was to teach to other faithful men the body of teaching that he had learned from Paul. The faithful men taught by Timothy would teach the standard of sound words to others. In this manner, the body of teaching that Timothy learned from Paul would be passed on from generation to generation of Christians. It is important to note that Paul told Timothy to continue to teach the sound doctrine to others who would also teach it. There is no indication that the sound doctrine would change over time. There is no indication that additional “doctrine” would be included or needed. The only way we can know what the sound doctrine described by Paul could be is to read about it in the New Testament.

No deviation from this body of teaching was to be accepted.

*But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you* ***a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you****, let him be* ***accursed*** *(Galatians 1:8).*

In this passage, Paul emphasizes the need for maintaining the purity of the gospel message. The standard of sound doctrine included instruction concerning how to obtain salvation as well as instruction concerning how to live the life of a Christian to “ensure salvation” (I Timothy 4:16). Any variation from that body of teaching was erroneous and anyone who preached a different doctrine was to be accursed.

Deviation from this body of teaching (sound doctrine) was predicted to occur.

*(3) For the time will come when* ***they will not endure sound doctrine****; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers* ***in accordance to their own desires****; (4) and* ***will turn away their ears from the truth****, and will turn aside to myths (II Timothy 4:3-4).*

In this passage, Paul tells Timothy that the time will come when men will not want to confine themselves to the teaching delivered by Paul and the other New Testament writers. Because of their own personal desires and preferences, they will look for other teachers who teach doctrines different from the doctrine taught in the New Testament. Paul says that they will turn away their ears from the truth and turn aside to myths. Once men turn away from the truth revealed in the New Testament and follow their own personal desires, it is only a short step to adopting religious practices that are not authorized by New Testament teaching or examples.

Sometimes men deviate from the commandments of God to follow other doctrines created by men or to follow traditions.

*(6) And He said to them, …”This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. (7) But in vain do they worship Me,* ***teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.” ….(9)…”You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition”***

*(Mark 7:6-9).*

In this passage, Jesus discusses people who give lip service to honoring Him, but their heart is far away from Him. If they truly honored Jesus, they would keep His commandments. As seen in earlier scriptures, if these doctrines generated by men are different from the teaching of Jesus and the New Testament writers, they are erroneous and false. Jesus says that some people would rather follow their favorite traditions, even if they differ from His teachings. He also says that, in honoring their own traditions, they are setting aside the commandment of God. The obvious application is that, even though we might practice honored traditions that have lasted for years, decades or centuries, if they deviate from New Testament teachings, they are wrong and should no longer be practiced.

If we go too far, and do not abide in the teaching of Christ, we do not have God.

*Anyone who* ***goes too far******and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God****; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son (II John 1:9).*

In this passage, John issues a warning about going beyond the teaching of Christ. Going beyond the teaching of Christ would include engaging in religious practices that are not authorized in the New Testament (where the teaching of Christ is found). John says that those who go beyond this teaching do not have God.

If we love God, we will keep His commandments

*For* ***this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments****, and His commandments are not burdensome (I John 5:3).*

In this passage, John teaches that the true test of our love for God is whether we keep His commandments. If we go beyond God’s commandments, as presented in the New Testament, John teaches that we are not demonstrating the love of God.

At the final judgement, those who have engaged in religious practices not authorized by God will be rejected.

*(21) Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord”* ***will enter the kingdom of heaven****; but* ***he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven****. (22) Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” (23) And I will declare to them, “I never knew you,* ***depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness****” (without law) (Matthew 7:21-23).*

In this passage, Jesus teaches that any religious practices that do not conform to the will of the Father will not be acceptable. The only way we can know the will of the Father is to read it from the pages of the New Testament. Religious practices based on personal preference or traditions will not be accepted if they do not conform to New Testament teaching. Jesus even addresses those who do good deeds in His name, but the manner in which the good deeds were accomplished did not conform to the will of the Father (i.e., sound doctrine). At the final judgement, those who practice good deeds, but in a manner that was not authorized in the New Testament, will be rejected by Jesus because they “practiced lawlessness.” It is apparent from this passage that Jesus cares about whether our religious practices conform to His will.

Summary

Perhaps the impact of what the scriptures teach about the importance of Biblical authority for religious practices can be enhanced by presenting the following sequential summary of the passages reviewed above:

Jesus told the apostles to teach what He taught them (Matthew 28:18-20).

Paul told Timothy that the inspired scriptures equip the man of God “for every good work”

(II Timothy 3:16-17).

There was a body of teaching (sound doctrine) that was to be followed. Our only way to know

the sound doctrine to which Paul referred is to read about it in the New Testament.

(I Timothy 4:6; II Timothy 3:16-17).

This body of teaching (the standard of sound words) was to be retained and followed

(II Timothy 1:13).

Christians are to persevere in the body of teaching (the standard of sound words)

(I Timothy 4:16).

This body of teaching was to be taught to men who, in turn, would teach others

(II Timothy 2:2).

No deviation from this body of teaching was to be accepted (Galatians 1:8).

Deviation from this body of teaching (sound doctrine) was predicted to occur (II Timothy 4:3-4).

Sometimes men deviate from the commandments of God to follow other doctrines created by

men or to follow traditions (Mark 7:6-9).

If we go too far, and do not abide in the teaching of Christ, we do not have God (II John 1:9).

If we love God, we will keep His commandments (I John 5:3).

At the final judgement, those who have engaged in religious practices not authorized by God

will be rejected (Matthew 7:21-23).

Which Position is Consistent with Biblical Teaching?

After considering the scriptural passages presented above, the reader is encouraged to make his/her own decision regarding the proper attitude toward the relationship between scriptural authority and religious practice and organization. The decision should be determined by which of the two attitudes toward religious authority is most consistent with Biblical teaching.

Conservative position: Religious organization and practices must conform to the pattern presented in the New Testament and must not go beyond. Practices not authorized by scripture must not be implemented.

Liberal position: The New Testament contains a general pattern that should be followed, but some religious practices and organizations that accomplish good works can be implemented, even though they are not specifically authorized in the New Testament.

Possible Practical Applications

Presented below are some possible practical applications of how members of liberal (institutional) churches of Christ and members of conservative (noninstitutional) churches of Christ might address various issues. It should be understood that not all members of a liberal church of Christ would assume the liberal position on all issues; nor, should it be presumed that all members of a conservative church of Christ would assume the conservative position on all issues. Some church members might take a liberal position on some issues and a conservative position on others. The applications are presented merely to demonstrate possible differences in attitude toward Biblical authority.

Congregational Autonomy

Conservative position: Congregations are to function as independent, autonomous units. There is no New Testament authority for churches to organize associations of churches to achieve a common purpose. Neither is there is New Testament authority to create institutions external to the church to which congregations send money to accomplish a noble purpose (such as evangelism). Gospel preachers were supported financially by Christians who sent money directly from the church to the evangelist (Philippians 4:15-16). Regarding benevolent work, churches in the New Testament met the needs of members of their own congregation who needed help (Acts 6:1-6). Sending financial contributions to needy Christians in other locations was accomplished by sending the money directly by the church to the people in need (Acts 11:28-30). There is no New Testament authority for churches to send money to an independent organization which then distributes the money to those in need.

Liberal position: Though not specifically authorized in the New Testament, multiple congregations can send funds to a separate organization (e. g., a missionary society or a benevolent organization) whose noble purpose is to teach others the gospel or to provide financial assistance to the poor. This arrangement is acceptable because it accomplishes a good work and is not specifically forbidden in the New Testament.

Mission of the Church

Conservative position: While individual members are encouraged to socialize (Acts 2:46-47), the authorized mission of the church is primarily spiritual rather than social. The spiritual work of the church involves activities such as assembling for worship together (Hebrews 10:25), encouraging and building up one another (I Thessalonians 5:11) and teaching and making disciples of others (Matthew 28:19).

Liberal position: Though not authorized in the New Testament, it is acceptable to use church funds to socialize and to bring others to Christ through food, recreation, schools and fellowship halls. These practices are acceptable because they facilitate Christians socializing with each other and they serve a good purpose by attracting people to the church who might not otherwise hear the gospel message.

Church Income

Conservative position: Individual giving on the first day of the week is the only method authorized in the New Testament for the church to acquire funds. (I Corinthians 16:1-2).

Liberal position: Churches can raise money through dinners, raffles, social events and church-owned businesses because they are not specifically forbidden in the New Testament and the money collected is used to accomplish good purposes.

Music in Worship

Conservative position: Only vocal music in worship is authorized in the New Testament and all music in the worship service should be without instrumental music.

(Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

Liberal position: Though not specifically authorized, instrumental music is acceptable in worship because it enhances the quality of worship, and it is not specifically forbidden in the New Testament.

Women Preachers and Teachers

Conservative position: Preaching and leadership roles in the church are to be occupied by men. In mixed gatherings of men and women, men are to be the ones who lead in prayer (I Timothy 2:8). Elders and deacons in the church are to be men (I Timothy 3:1-2; I Timothy 3:12). In the church, women are not to teach men nor exercise authority over men (I Timothy 2:12). Older women are to teach younger women (Titus 2:3-5); therefore, it is acceptable for women to teach a Bible class composed solely of other women or of children.

Liberal position: Society and customs have changed over time and women have assumed a more visible authoritative role in our culture. It is acceptable to have women preachers and teachers of mixed adult Bible classes (i.e., classes composed of males and females) to reflect the changes that have occurred in our culture. More women might be drawn to the church if they see that leadership positions are available to them.