

# *Spiritual Considerations...*

*Selected articles designed to assist in our Bible study and Christian walk.*

*No. 21*



## Conservative or Liberal?

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Well, which one are you?

Are you a conservative or a liberal?

Whether we are speaking of politics, managing our finances, or describing our faith, we often hear an individual speak of being “conservative” with pride. It’s considered the safe option - reliable. We know that conservatives do not take unnecessary risks. They stay with the road that is well traveled and familiar. New territory may offer excitement and thrills, but the possibility of straying from the path makes exploration ill advised.

I suppose the opposite of conservative is “liberal” – unless you are talking to a “liberal.” The term “progressive” has more appeal to him. It has a close kinship with open, accepting, growing. This type of person grows weary with the well-worn path. The routine has turned into a rut and that which was once joyful has turned mundane. Instead of going the same route time and again, a progressive is looking for something more exciting, a fresh approach that renews the excitement and touches the senses. A progressive might be willing to explore new avenues that may have been overlooked.

Which one is right? Which one is biblical? Are they mutually exclusive? To be sure, these are not the only labels. Other labels include moderns, post-modernists, dogmatists, radicals, rebels, fundamentalists, traditionalists and contemporary thinkers. There are as many labels as there are creative people who notice important common characteristics.

We do enjoy labels. They not only identify, they classify. We use labels when we are afraid of something new – or old. We are more comfortable when something is labeled. It gives us a feeling of control. For example, when men attending a seminar in Pennsylvania began to die unexpectedly, the media could not give us enough information regarding the problem. Documentaries, news bulletins, magazines articles detailed the plight of the attendees and the re-tracing of the final days in these men’s lives became important. The disease became known as “Legionnaires Disease.” Then, almost as suddenly, the news documentations ceased. It was as if we now had a handle on the problem. The same could be said for AIDS or the West Nile Virus.

But which is to be preferred – conservative or liberal? That’s the problem. If a label must be assigned, which should it be? The answer lies in what you mean by the terms you use.

Let’s begin with a liberal. The initial idea of liberal was actually a “label” originating in the 1800’s regarding one’s interpretation of the Bible. Some biblical scholars maintained that the world has changed since the time of the establishment of the church so that biblical terminology is incomprehensible to man today. They stated that all beliefs must be able to stand up against the tests of reason and experience – and they rejected the Bible as the absolute authority for their beliefs. In fact, the historical and traditional definition of the term “liberal” means one who has respect for and openness to

the views of others. This openness can lead to acceptance of the beliefs of anyone, with the result that no absolutes at all are possible.

Those that disagreed with “liberals” were referred to as fundamentalists or conservatives. They believed that the Bible was the authoritative revelation of God’s will and has within it the divine plan for God’s people. Numerous articles, books, and sermons were produced which took the liberal position of “openness” to task. The struggle over determining authority in the spiritual realm will never cease, nor will the sincere yearning for the accurate understanding of the scriptures.

Over the years, the labels we have assigned have been confused. Many of the more dogmatic representatives of Christian beliefs and practice have used the name of liberal – a name that originally designated extreme openness. Others have become dogmatic on issues not specifically discussed in the scriptures (either by direct teaching or implication) and have defended the position as the most conservative. Truly, labels can often be misleading or misapplied.

There is an ever-present danger of being so involved in assigning labels and arguing positions that we squander precious time that could be spent in productive study and service. In other words, we might be focusing more on accusations than Christian service.

What is the answer? Why not forget assigning the titles of conservative or liberal? Why not substitute a better descriptive label for a seeker of the truth? Why not just be biblical? If that makes one conservative, so be it. If he should be labeled a liberal – fine. It seems there are some meetings where participants might feel estranged because the “group-think” (another label) seems to take unjustifiable liberties with the biblical message and apply it to them. This is unacceptable. On the other hand, there are other meetings where opinions become laws and are applied to the church even though they cannot be found the Bible. Both settings are uncomfortable, unsettling and unscriptural.

Rather than try to modify one’s behavior to conform to the accepted behavior of any one group, why not just study our Bible and base our beliefs, teaching and preaching on those findings. The result will be an enormous relief from the pressure to conform. When we are no longer looking at one another and pointing fingers, we can join hands and look to God for guidance.

People have long enjoyed pointing fingers and assigning labels. It seems to me that was the true significance of a statement made in the city of Antioch by a group of bystanders who were watching a freshly formed group who seemed to be exalting one man above the others. The man they were exalting was Jesus. Luke, the physician says, “And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Just “Christians.” The label they assigned was not necessarily a complimentary term, but it did turn out to be descriptive. Sounds like a pretty good label. In fact, it sounds like the most biblical one I know.

A Christian? Count me in!

**In essentials – unity.**  
**In non-essentials - liberty.**  
**In all things – love.**  
(Peter Meiderlin – 1626)