

Spiritual Liberalism

12-7-14 AM

What Is "Liberalism"? Typical dictionary definitions say: "Not literal or strict: loose"; "Broad-minded; esp.: not bound by authoritarianism, orthodoxy, or traditional forms."; "Favorable to progress or reform". While the word is typically used in a political sense, our purpose is to see what it means in a spiritual sense. "Liberalism" is NOT a doctrine, but instead it refers to a view of doctrine. We want to say that in and of itself, "Liberalism" is not necessarily wrong; consider our commands towards liberality in Romans 12:8. "Liberalism" is not the problem, but a liberal approach to authority is the real issue.

Here is a definition of spiritual liberalism: *"Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other."* (I Corinthians 4:6)

While we often point to denominations in regards to "going too far", in fact this error is among believers as well. It is a reoccurring mindset found in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Nadab & Abihu (Leviticus 10), King Uzziah (II Chronicles 26), the Galatians (Galatians 1), and Diotrephes (III John) are all examples of Spiritual liberalism in going too far.

How do we identify "liberalism" among brethren? "Liberal" churches/Christians do not identify themselves as liberal, and often they reject "liberalism" emphatically. However, there are patterns of conduct and mindsets common to liberal churches that can be identified easily and avoided.

Liberal Identifications

1. Have social programs/agendas - many churches turn to reinventing themselves as social groups. They are big on celebrating Holidays or having fellowship halls. Paul utterly condemned such mindsets in I Corinthians 11:22.
2. Support institutions for church works - an institution in this case refers to any organization separate from the church that does a work for the church or with the church's enablement. Examples include Orphanages & homes for retired or disable persons; TV, radio and printed organizations; schools. Such are not things found in the scriptural pattern of the church, and necessarily are spiritually liberal because they "go too far" from what is written.
3. Teach weak or contrary to morality - many liberal brethren reject things such as institutionalism or social gospels, but are still in a liberal mindset because they refuse to teach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). They avoid speaking on hard subjects for fear of offending, and because of this many are weak or spiritually dead. As well, they may themselves teach falsely on doctrines of truth, and thereby "think beyond what is written"

4. Refuse to act as a church should - often churches refuse to enforce the Scriptural rules of membership in a local body. They will not act in discipline to those who are behaving disorderly. Paul rebuked the Corinthians in I Corinthians 5:5 for permitting a many living immorally to remain in their assembly. Such is an indicator of spiritual liberalism.

5. Obsession with titles and positions - Spiritual liberalism can be identified in Christians who are obsessed with titles. We find men who preach given a variety of titles such as "Youth Minister" or Pulpit Minister", or other such ideas. Jesus told His disciples, the apostles, that not even they were to accept or hold on to titles that implied prestige (Matthew 20:28). He condemned the leaders of his day for their love of titles (Matthew 23:8-11).

5. Unequal emphasis of church works - liberal churches tend to focus on particular church works above all others. It may be social, or it may even be works authorized by the church. Often liberal churches and brethren are overly focused on evangelism, when the Scriptures constantly emphasize congregational soundness before evangelism. The Pharisees were minded this way, focused on converting men to their doctrine, but failing to ascertain if that doctrine was sound (Matthew 23:15). The Corinthians were focuses on the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, when what they needed was prophecy, to know the mind of God (I Corinthians 14:1-5).

6. Focus on emotion over truth - there is yet another pattern of liberal thinking. It falsely believes that emotion equals spirituality. Thus, there is a great effort to invoke an emotional response from worshippers and to call it edification. On liberal brother recently proclaimed that "if I find peace in what I am doing, then I know God approves of it". Such is clearly going beyond what is written, and using the heart as a guide. Such is utterly and often condemned by the Bible (Deuteronomy 29:19, Proverbs 14:12, 16:25, Jeremiah 3:17)

7. Antagonism of "ultra conservatives" - many liberals, not wanting to identify themselves as such, are quick to chastise "ultra conservatives". Such a term means nothing, but indirectly condemns the speaker as liberal by implication.

There are terrible fruits of "Liberalism". Once it has begun, such digression continues far beyond the intended place of the instigator. Consider Manasseh in the Old Testament; in 2 Chronicles 33:9 we are told that ultimately he led Israel into error worse than the Canaanite nations God had destroyed. Liberal digression ultimately destroys all involved; "Can a man take fire to his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?" (Proverbs 6:27)