

## **Why Christians should be theologically conservative and politically liberal**

Generally, conservatives tend to look backward, toward the ideas and values of the past, because they are worth *conserving*. Liberals, on the other hand, tend to look forward to new ideas and values, because they want to be *liberated* from the confining past. There are, of course, other definitions but this seems to me, from the meaning of the words “conservative” and “liberal” themselves, the key distinction.

Applying those definitions to the Christian world view, it seems obvious to me that Christians should be theologically conservative because Christianity is a *revealed* religion. Christians do not claim to have discovered their religion, or invented it, or derived it from elements of other religions, or worked it out from secret formulas, or anything like that.

Rather, the claim of Christians is that God took the initiative and broke into human history to reveal Himself, his character, and his plans. He did this in a number of ways, but mainly through inspiring the authors of the books of the Bible to give us a written disclosure about himself, and then by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to reveal in his person what the Heavenly Father is like. All this information comes to us from the past.

Therefore, we as Christians should obtain our knowledge about God and his ways by looking back, not ahead, and we can only do that if we *conserve* what has been revealed to us.

However, the Bible says nothing, directly at least, about how to design museums and parking lots, regulate banks and businesses, structure and staff universities, or control dangerous instrumentalities like motor vehicles and firearms. It is silent about new forms of communication, the problems of autism and dementia, and the best way to pay the costs of government. We cannot solve these current problems by going back to the biblical record (“What, we can’t charge interest on loans?” “The punishment for seducing a virgin is to marry her?” “Disputes have to be settled by the village

elders sitting at the gate?”).

When, then, should we do about these issues? The Bible teaches that God created everything and that He created human beings in his own image. Therefore we should be, among other things, creative. The Bible also says that we should love God with all of our *mind* as well as all of our heart and soul. I think this means we should exercise our creativity – use our minds – to devise new forms of government, new kinds of business structures, new ways of tackling old problems, and so on. Why should we who are living in post-industrial societies be shackled with the solutions of the past, just because they were appropriate in primitive, agrarian or industrial societies?

No, we need to be *liberated* from the strictures of the past to solve many social problems.

Such problems call for political solutions, using “political” in a broad sense to mean not just government, but the total complex of relations between humans in society. Or, to put it another way, many social problems cannot be solved by individuals acting alone, no matter how well motivated and highly principled. We need to work together, using insights from the various fields of science (including the “soft sciences” of economics, psychology, anthropology, political studies, etc.), to find the best solutions to these problems.

So, for knowledge of God and his ways, Christians should be *conservatives*; for solving many of today’s problems, we need to be *liberals*.

But, wait a minute. Isn’t that a bit oversimplified? Yes, it is, for at least one reason. The Bible does speak, albeit indirectly, about some of today’s problems. It is very hard to argue, for example, that the Bible is silent about the issue of homosexual marriage, even though it does not so much as mention the term from Genesis to Revelation. This is because the Bible describes the institution of marriage as a man (male) leaving his father and mother and joining himself to his wife (female), not to mention the fact that homosexual relations are severely punished in the Old Testa-

ment and clearly proscribed in the New Testament.

Christians differ about the impact of the biblical revelation on other current problems. Does the command “Thou shalt not kill” mean Christians should not be soldiers? Join the police force and carry a gun? Use lethal force in self-defense? Few Christians would argue that the command against killing is irrelevant today, but exactly how to apply it to today’s problems is not a simple matter. And there are many similar problems that are not open to easy answers from the Bible, although they must be considered in the light of what the Bible does teach.

But the fact that there is a gray area between my neat bifurcation of Christian thinking into theological conservatism and political liberalism does not render the concept invalid. It just means that we should not be hide-bound conservatives or woolly-eyed liberals, seeing only one approach to life’s problems. Instead, these borderline situations summon us to combine our *conserved* wisdom from the past with all the ideas our *liberated* minds can come up with in order to find the best solutions possible.