

Why I Left...

Liberalism in the churches of Christ

By Rodney Pitts

"Hold fast to the pattern of sound words" (2 Tim 1:13). The differences between liberal and conservative churches of Christ are widening every year. Once these differences would likely be perceived only by checking a church's budget to see if it supported certain human institutions to do the local church's work, such is not the case today. What began about 50 years ago as small departures in the areas of the organization and work of the local church has resulted in many liberal churches today being on the fast tract to all out apostasy from scriptural authority.

Although this may sound harsh, the proof is abundant. In recent years a very large number of "Churches of Christ" have begun building and maintaining gymnasiums, providing for all sorts of recreational activities for their members, discarding "traditional" worship and adding instrumental music to their services, having fellowship with denominations, and even denying the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins.

As these differences grow more apparent, you would expect members of "conservative" churches of Christ to be aware of these differences and their significance. Yet, with each passing year fewer and fewer have a clear understanding of these issues about biblical authority regulating and limiting the collective work of the church. "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col 3:17).

Because of the desperate need for a better understanding of these differences and because of my own departure from liberalism, I would like to explore some of the major reasons why I left liberalism.

1. Liberal churches of Christ are heavily involved in the Social Gospel.

One of the first issues I had to face was the question of whether the local church has biblical authority to provide social/recreational activities for its members and others. In looking back, I am convinced that this should be the first place to start any discussion with institutional brethren (Matt 21:25). For, if they cannot be convinced about this error, they are not likely to be convinced of any other.

I sought to defend church sponsored recreation by claiming it to be biblical "fellowship." I believed, like most of these brethren, that since fellowship is basically defined as "sharing," church recreation and social activities were authorized as a form of "sharing" among Christians.

There are, however, serious problems with this approach. For, the argument itself involves the error of reasoning from specific examples of "fellowship" back to a generic, howbeit unspoken, command for churches to "fellowship." And, once this "unspoken" generic command is assumed, the door is open for churches to apply it however they see fit, including church sponsored recreation.

Although the Holy Spirit used the word "fellowship" to describe the sharing, or oneness, that takes place in Christians' communion in worship (Acts 2:42), in the helping of needy saints (2 Cor 8:3-4), and in supporting the preaching of the gospel (Phil 4:16), this in no way allows us to reason back to some generic command to social "fellowship" that God never revealed. To reason this way would be like assuming that because the Greek word psallo, which means to "make melody," is used to describe what is to take place in the heart of Christians when they sing (Eph 5:19), we are at liberty, therefore, to assume that there is a "generic" command to psallo that we can apply as we see fit, including "making melody" on mechanical instruments of music in the worship of the church.

Fellowship, when found in relationship to the local church, is always spiritual. Nowhere is it used to refer to recreation or coffee and doughnuts. When this is coupled with the fact that there is no command, example, or necessary inference for the church to provide recreation for its members, we are left with the conclusion that to do so is to add to God's word, to act without authority, and to sin by presumption (1 Cor 4:6; Rev 22:18-19).

2. Liberal brethren do not acknowledge the Biblical distinction in the work of the individual and that of the local church.

When those in institutionalism seek to defend their many extra-biblical projects, it is commonly argued that "whatever the individual Christian can do, the local church can do." In other words, if God allows an individual Christian to do something, such as providing recreation for the family, etc, then the local church can provide it as well.

While this approach may sound reasonable, its logical and biblical errors are many. For, although the individual Christian is allowed to marry, go on vacation to Disneyland, pay for cable TV, buy sports cars, etc, a local church cannot use its treasury to provide such things for its members. Will anyone argue that I can just go to the local church and get funds for my vacation out of the treasury? If not, then what the individual is allowed to do says nothing about what the local church is authorized to do!

Others, however, realizing the problems with this approach, try to defend this lack of distinction by arguing that "whatever an individual Christian is commanded to do as a Christian, the local church can do." Now, this may seem more reasonable; but it is riddled with problems as well. For, the individual Christian is commanded to involve himself in some sort of profit-making enterprise so as to have something to give to the needy (Eph. 4:28). Simply because an individual Christian does in no way give authority to the local church to run a business to help the needy. The local church is only authorized to receive funds through free-will giving (1 Cor 16:1-4; Acts 4:32-35, etc).

In addition, this lack of distinction denies the plain teaching of 1 Timothy 5. Here Paul makes it clear that the individual Christian is to care for his/her widows so that the church may help "widows who are really widows" (5:1-4). He goes on to say that "if any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows" (5:16). If the local church can do whatever the individual Christian is commanded to do, this passage becomes meaningless! Thus, to deny this distinction is to deny the teaching of God's word.

3: Liberal churches of Christ pervert the role and limitations of elders.

God intends for every congregation to mature to the point of having its own eldership (Titus 1 :5ff.; Acts 14:23). I say "mature" because all who would be elders must "grow" to meet stringent, yet

divinely issued qualifications (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Once appointed, God has limited an eldership's oversight to the affairs of the "flock of God which is among [them]" (1 Pet. 5:1-4; Acts 20:28). In other words, elders are limited to overseeing the work of the church of which they are members.

Institutional churches, however, ignore the role and limitations of elders through their practice of the "sponsoring church." In this arrangement, an eldership moves from its God-given role of local oversight to act as a "board of directors" over a "multi-church" project. Such projects involve a team of churches united together under the oversight of the sponsoring "eldership" to accomplish a work far bigger than a local church's budget can afford and larger than any one church can accomplish. As such, the sponsoring church willingly becomes dependent on these "funding churches" to have enough money to complete this project, while the funding churches willingly submit to the oversight of the sponsoring eldership in relationship to this project.

The end results are twofold. First, there is an obvious compromising of God's limitations placed on elders to "shepherd the flock of God which is among you" (1 Pet 5:1-4). For, a sponsoring eldership oversees the work of a "team of churches," for which they have no biblical authority. Second, there is a loss of autonomy, or self-rule, in the area of this project by these "funding churches."

Some try to deny this loss of autonomy by arguing that churches willingly participate and can withdraw from this "team" at any time. Yet, this answer is insufficient. For, autonomy can only be given up "willingly." Consider the following illustration. When a boy chooses to join a baseball team, he is choosing to submit to the will of the

coach in that particular area of his life. Although he can quit the team at any time, as long as he continues to be part of the team, he willingly gives up a portion of his autonomy to the coach. Such is also the case for the "funding churches" in the sponsoring church arrangement.

Although there are many other reasons I could cite, it is my hope that these will suffice in calling attention to some of the serious problems of liberalism in churches of Christ. Although I continue to study these issues regularly, and I encourage all to do so, I am convinced that a great many practices of these churches are in contradiction to the plain and simple gospel of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it was necessary that I "come out from among them" that I might serve the Lord in purity and truth. And, I implore all who might read this to study these matters carefully and take the same stand for the truth of Christ. "If you abide in my Word, you are truly disciples of Mine" (John 8:32).