

A Biblical Church

By Jeff Neuman-Lee 01/2012

In a recent issue of the our denomination's magazine *Messenger*, we saw a couple of letters to the editor naming the Church of the Brethren as a "conservative" church. This is interesting; I thought that we called ourselves a "Biblical" church. There is a real difference. Many political and/or culturally conservative people see themselves as Biblical people. In fact, that they are Biblical is, for them, a marker of their conservatism. On the other hand there are some political and/or culturally liberal people who see themselves as Biblical people. Again, for them, their understanding of the Bible is a marker of their liberalism. (Something similar might be said for others who would refuse either the conservative or liberal label.)

The issue hinges on this question: in which direction does our Biblical interpretation go? Does it go from us to the Scripture or from the Scripture to us? Do we cherry pick from the scripture to affirm our politically and/or culturally based conservatism or our politically and/or culturally based liberality? Or, do we become either conservative or liberal from our reading of the scripture? The second alternative is, ideally, what happens in a Biblical church. That is, the Bible guides us to see Jesus and to know his message and to live in his life and we change who we are accordingly.

If only it were this easy. We always bring ourselves to the book and it is through our eyes that we see what we see. In spite of our best intentions we can only see what we can see. The initial scope of our vision is pre-determined by our political and/or cultural differences. It is inescapable. We can see this limitation of vision as some of the "sin" that simply follows from our finite, created being.

When Paul is describing the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Corinthians, he is attempting to help that congregation to understand why everyone can be so different, and, as the gifts are used in Christ for the common good, that it is God's will. This variety of perspectives and interpretive frameworks represented by the different gifts has always been an issue in Christ's church. These tensions are natural and endemic. In our world we can look around us and see some cultures which teach their members to be conservative or liberal from birth. We can also see that even within cultures, or even within families, individuals naturally develop different temperaments. We all know of families where there is the "black sheep" who is either conservative or liberal (or something else) contrary to the rest of the family.

As a student of the Scripture who believes that we should view it literally, it is clear that the Scripture literally has tensions within it. One can literally find justification for conservative positions and one can literally find justification for liberal positions. This does not mean that one may find just anything within the Bible. There is clearly a direction in which God's message is moving, there are clearly things which are right or wrong, but not everything is clear, nor is it meant to be utterly clear. That is literally true. The Scriptures must be interpreted when humans read them and we believers must bring the Holy Spirit into our hearts for the interpretation.

The most important verse for me in understanding the Bible is this: John 5:39 "you search the scriptures seeking eternal life, but it is they that refer to me, and, yet, you refuse to come to me." The scriptures point to Jesus, they point to a lived relationship that we can have with Jesus