



Is Conservatism A Heresy?

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by David Thiele

IT WAS 1952. STORMS WERE BATTERING THE Netherlands, causing flooding. The police contacted the pastor of a rural parish of the Dutch Reformed Church. The area was so threatened by wind and wave that the dike had to be supported one Sunday if disaster was to be averted. The pastor was put in a quandary. He knew that the people there felt a deep obligation to strictly obey the commandments of God and to rigorously honor the "Lord's Day," as they considered it to be. He gathered his church council to discuss the issue, and the debate went back and forth.

Finally, the pastor said, "On occasion even the Lord disregarded the fourth commandment to meet human need; surely we can do the same." In response, one elderly member of the council rose to his feet and declared, "I have always been troubled, Pastor, by some-

thing I have never yet dared to say publicly. Now I must say it. I have always had the feeling that our Lord Jesus was just a bit of a liberal."

Ernest Kasemann, a New Testament theologian, tells the story to ask "Was Jesus a liberal?"¹ I want to ask a parallel question going in the opposite direction: "Is conservatism a heresy?"

At first, this appears a strange query. The church is well-known as a conservative institution. To oppose conservatism in such an environment is almost like being against motherhood! The Funk and Wagnalls Dictionary defines *conservative* as "inclined to preserve the existing order of things, opposed to change," and *conservatism* as "devotion to the existing order of things, opposition to change." It is easy to understand how conservatism manages consistently to claim the moral high ground. If something is working well, why tamper with it?

It is not difficult to find biblical support for this position. Paul admonished the Thes-

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salonians, "Test everything. *Hold on* to the good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).² His admonition is clear: Be conservative with good things. Similarly, the risen Christ directs the church at Ephesus to "*Remember* the height from which you have fallen! *Repent* and *do things you did at first*" (Revelation 2:5). His command is that both a conservative frame of mind and a conservative life-style be adopted! Clearly, conservatism cannot always be a heresy.

It comes as quite a shock then to discover that although the words *conservative* and *conservatism* occur in Ellen White's published writings some 30 times,³ they are always used in a negative sense! Notice the following examples:

Those temptations are most dangerous which come from the professed servants of God, and from our friends. When persons who are uniting with the world, yet claiming great piety and love, counsel the faithful workers for God to be less zealous and more *conservative*, our answer must be an appeal to the word of God.⁴

The true Christian will not become self-centered or *conservative* in his plans.⁵

Elder M, as president of the _____ Conference, you have shown by your general management that you are unworthy of the trust reposed in you. You have shown that you are *conservative* and that your ideas are narrow. You have not done one half what you might have done had you the true spirit of the work.⁶

But as real spiritual life declines, it has ever been the tendency to cease to advance in the knowledge of truth. Men rest satisfied with the light already received from God's word, and discourage any further investigation of the Scriptures. They become *conservative* and seek to avoid discussion.⁷

The reason for her negativity toward conservatism is more easily understood when we remember that early Adventism was a radical movement. Sabbath observance, health reform, soul sleep, and belief in the imminent

return of Jesus represented radical departures from long-held traditions. Conservative Christians were deeply offended by such smashing of traditions! Ellen White would have none of it. The question to her was not "Is it old or new?" but "Is it true?" So it should be with us all.

Although the New Testament promotes a certain conservatism, its characteristic tone is not conservatism but "newness." It speaks of the new Jerusalem, a new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:1, 2), a new covenant (Hebrews 8:8, 13), a new commandment (John 13:34), a new birth (John 3:3). Christianity is described as being like a new cloth that cannot be successfully sewn into an old garment and new wine that must be stored in new wineskins (Mark 2:21, 22). Those who are in Christ are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), part of a new humanity that transcends even the divisions between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:15). Christians enter God's sanctuary presence through "a new and living way," opened up by Jesus' sacrificial death (Hebrews 10:20). They are promised a new name (Revelation 2:17) and that they will sing a new song (Revelation 14:3). The church is admonished to purge the yeast of the old life and be, as it were, "a new batch [of dough]" (1 Corinthians 5:7). Its teachers bring out of the storehouse both old things and new (Matthew 13:52). The New Testament does acknowledge that there are those who say, "The old is better" (Luke 5:38), but this is the attitude of the enemies of Jesus, not his followers.⁸

This is precisely the danger of conservatism: it can make a person unwilling to accept God's new work because it seems different to what God has done in the past. It is obviously true that none of God's deeds is ultimately "new" because God is unchanging (Malachi 3:6). However, situations, circumstances, and times change, creating the need for new expressions and new methods. Isaiah's assur-

ance that God would deliver Jerusalem from her enemies (Isaiah 37:33-35) seems very different from Jeremiah's insistence a century later that God would give the city into the hands of her enemies (Jeremiah 22:6-10). However, the times and circumstances had changed, and the message from the unchangeable God had gone from being one of promise to one of threat.

We can see how this works out in the history of the church at several crucial points. For example, the opponents of Paul were clearly conservative in insisting that circumcision was an obligation that was still binding on God's people. That rite had been imposed by God and for 2,500 years it had been practiced by the devout. Paul was clearly an innovator in declaring that it was no longer necessary. Thus, conservatism was the first heresy of the church.⁹

The same phenomenon can be seen in Adventist history. The 1888 General Conference saw the young progressives, Waggoner and Jones, being opposed by the older traditionalists, including Uriah Smith and the (absent) General Conference President George I. Butler. The battle lines were drawn over issues as diverse as the identity of the ten kingdoms of Daniel 2 and the nature of the law in Galatians. Those who felt that what the church had said in the past settled these issues, tragically found themselves opposing the mighty work God was attempting to do through Waggoner and Jones. In this instance, Ellen White sided with the progressives and opposed the conservatives, even saying they were being used of the devil!¹⁰

What then is it that determines whether the conservatism of an individual or an organization is constructive or heretical? Everyone is, to some extent, conservative and, to some extent, everyone is also open to progress. The conservative element gives stability and strength and is thus of tremendous value. It might be compared to the keel of a ship. The progressive element keeps us relevant and brings growth. If conservatism is the keel, progressivism is the sail. Both elements are essential and must be well matched for optimum effectiveness. A small boat with a tiny sail is stable but stationary. A healthy church

will be composed mainly of moderates with some definite conservatives and some clear progressives. If it overbalances in either direction, problems will result.

We are living in a world of rapid change—the most rapid ever seen. It is staggering to realize that the world Ellen White was born into was, in many ways, more like that of Abraham than like ours! Technological changes

continue at a bewildering rate; social upheavals are common place; attention spans are shortening. It seems that, as the late, avant garde artist, Andy Warhol, predicted, many people become famous—but only for “15 minutes” before the attention of the crowd is drawn to some other spectacle.¹¹

This is not the time for the church and its members to be defending the ramparts of “How we did it (or said it) in the past.” It is time for every genuine Christian, every church organization to be prayerfully, thoughtfully, creatively exploring ways of making the gos-

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pel appear relevant to our contemporaries. We need to realize that methods born in 19th-century Protestant New England may be utterly unsuitable for 20th-century secular Australia and New Zealand.

Is conservatism heresy? It can be! If conservatism means we are so locked into the past that we cannot function in the present; if it means that we are ignoring those clamoring for answers now; if it means we repeat the mistakes of our predecessors rather than learning from them—then, clearly, conservatism is a heresy. In the context of the heretical conser-

vatism of the 1888 General Conference Session and its aftermath Ellen White wrote:

We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed.¹²

God help us, even as we “hold on to the good” to be willing to learn from the past and open to the future. That is orthodox conservatism!

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. E. Kasemann, *Jesus Means Freedom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), p. 16.

2. All scriptural citations are taken from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

3. Ellen G. White, *The Signs of the Times* (January 3, 1884; December 10, 1894). See also _____, *The Youth's Instructor* (May 4, 1893); _____, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (December 22, 1891; February 7, 1893; May 30, 1899; and May 21, 1914); _____, *Southern Watchman* (May 24, 1904); _____, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), Vol. 3, pp. 165, 312; Vol. 4, p. 636; Vol. 5, pp. 263, 370, 463, 706; _____, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1958), Book 1, p. 260; Book 3, p. 397; _____, *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1911), p. 99; _____, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1911), p. 289; _____, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1915), p. 297; _____, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville: Southern Publ. Assn., 1946), p. 38; _____, *Christian Service* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1947), p. 158; _____, *Christian Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1947), p. 73; _____, “The Health Reform and the Health

Institute” (pamphlet), p. 8; _____, “Testimony for the Physicians and Helpers of the Sanitarium” (pamphlet), p. 55; *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, p. 483;

4. *The Signs of the Times* (January 3, 1884), italics mine.

5. *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (May 30, 1899).

6. *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 5, p. 706 (italics mine).

7. *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 38 (italics mine).

8. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 279.

9. J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977), p. 266.

10. *Selected Messages*, Book 1, pp. 234, 235.

11. For an invaluable guide to the state of the world that we are to minister in, see L. Anderson, *Dying for Change* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany, 1990).

12. *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (July 26, 1892). This statement is more conveniently found in *Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 37; and *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1962), p. 30; *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 37; and *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, p. 991.