



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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Must We Have Labels?

David Anguish

It's customary, we know. And so easy to do. But despite the ease with which it is done, we need to question the tendency to deal with differences in understanding and practice by assigning labels.

The problem is not new, of course. The sects Jesus encountered are examples. For instance, it is generally understood that Pharisees were those who were determined to remain loyal to the ancient traditions. They opposed compromise with Greco-Roman innovations. They believed in supernatural doctrines such as the resurrection and existence of angels. Sadducees, on the other hand, were open to some Greek ways. They rejected the supernaturalism of the Pharisees as well as their oral law. They tended to be pragmatic politicians who used their skills to retain control of the temple and Sanhedrin.

Today, many think of the Pharisees as "conservatives" and the Sadducees as "liberals." But not so fast. The Sadducees believed that the inspired word of God was restricted to the five books of Moses. They believed that the Pharisees, who not only accepted Joshua through Malachi, but also scores of oral traditions never recorded in Scripture, had in fact relaxed God's standards. If restrictive thought equals conservatism, then who were the conservatives and the liberals in ancient Judea?

Don't concern yourself too much with that question. Jesus apparently didn't. In fact, it is instructive that He offended both groups. When the Sadducees tried to trap Him with a stock resurrection dilemma, He minced no words: "You are greatly mistaken," He said (Mark 12:27). When the Pharisees criticized Him for ignoring their traditions, He pointed them to the burdens their customs had become and rebuked their hypocrisy (cf. Matt 23). The sects measured by the wrong standard. For Jesus, the issue was not whether a person wore the correct label, but whether he stood with God.

In truth, labels serve little positive purpose. Oh, they give us a convenient way to line people up so that we'll know where they fit in our systems. But that's exactly the problem. Labels make us more likely to focus on our ways, not God's. Once we begin to label, it's an easy slide to a habit which thinks in terms of labels first. To start thinking so much about issues that we lose sight of people and just how complex they can be. To miss the fact that Jesus was

doubtless thought too “liberal” by some (e.g., the Sadducees who took issue with His view on resurrection) and too “conservative” by others (e.g., the disciples of Hillel who would not accept His view on divorce). To work so hard at trying to determine whether someone is “conservative” or “liberal,” “traditional” or “progressive” that the either-or of Jesus’ definition of discipleship gets lost in the clamor.

We should raise questions any time we find people professing a commitment to speak where the Bible speaks clinging to labels about which the Bible knows nothing. Jesus called us to follow Him, not line up with the correct group. Those who are more restrictive than He is have presumed on His authority. So have those who grant permission where He has not. Standing with God may at times be too “conservative” for some and too “liberal” for others who have missed this point. So be it. For what really matters is what God thinks and whether we do in fact stand with Him.

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www.davidanguish.com