

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

SUMMER 2010 'ASK THE PASTOR SERIES'

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

JULY 25, 2010



For more sermons go to [www.wrcongchurch.org](http://www.wrcongchurch.org)

### 2 Timothy 1:3-14

### "Conservative?"

Today's question in our *Ask The Pastor* series is this: "Several weeks ago when mentioning in your sermon the several Congregational churches in Suffolk County, you defined our church as "conservative." How so? Most people in our church are conservative about some things and moderate about others. How do you define 'conservative'?"

Now I confess I thought and prayed long and hard over whether to answer this one! - for three reasons: I prefer to emphasize the things that unite rather than divide, in faith and in social issues; secondly, these labels are no longer very useful and often confusing; thirdly, because "conservative" has an political connotation, and I try to stay away from politics. However, it's a fair question and one that deserves an answer!

I will define four kinds of conservatism, and indicate (at least in part) where I stand on them, without suggesting that there is a "church position" on these matters. I fully agree with the questioner that there is great diversity in this church on all these matters, as you would expect from our very diverse church backgrounds, origins, and experiences.

*Conservatism*, by dictionary definition, is a preference for *preserving* what is best in the past, for maintaining traditions, respecting values handed down, sometimes for keeping

older institutions, and always showing caution about rapid change. But I want to distinguish four kinds of conservatism as they might apply to a church.

#### 1) Biblical Conservatism

First, what I will call "Biblical Conservatism." The word "conservative" does not appear in the Bible; the nearest you can get in the New Testament is a word like "guard," "preserve" "keep," "protect." You find it in e.g. 2 Timothy, where Paul writes: "keep the pattern of sound teaching... guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you."

I would defend Biblical conservatism: that the Bible is the Word of God, despite its evident human writing; that it is the rule of faith and conduct for all people at all times. In the New Testament I regard the four canonical Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - as all written within the 1<sup>st</sup> C. by people who were part of or had direct contact with the "Apostolic band" that surrounded Jesus. I believe the church made no mistake in including these four Gospels, and rejecting from the canon the 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> C. "Gnostic gospels" of Peter, Mary, Judas, etc.

I believe Jesus said and did the things the four Gospels say he did, and that the church of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> C. did not project these things back on him or put words in his mouth. I say

all this not because I am defending a traditional view, but because modern New Testament scholarship has convinced me that these things are eminently likely historically. I believe Paul was the first great theologian of the church, inspired to spin out the implications of the events of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension; that Paul did not distort the "simple teachings" of Jesus and create a new religion called Christianity.

In all this I am glad to be called a conservative on the Bible; and I suspect many (tho' not all) of you share these convictions. That indeed sets us off from churches for whom the Bible is an unreliable and no longer very relevant testimony to the "faith of ancient Israel and the early church." But that is why we can base not only our pulpit ministry, but also our Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Men's and Women's groups, weekday Bible studies, on the widely shared conviction that the Bible is the inspired Word of God that still speaks to us today.

## 2) *Theological Conservatism*

Secondly, I would defend what I will call "theological conservatism" - not quite the same as biblical conservatism, but of course related by interpretation. I believe the story of the Bible is about Creation, Fall and Redemption, and God's mighty work in all these areas.

I believe that "*in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,*" but I am not a fan of Young Earth Creationism or of Intelligent Design as currently presented. I believe the Incarnation of Jesus the Son was and is real, and has profound implications for all human life. I believe that Jesus' goal in becoming human was Atonement and the inauguration of the Kingdom of God. I believe atonement is a mystery that we shall never fully

comprehend, and that the Bible talks variously of Jesus' death as a substitution for us, as a victory over evil and death, and as an example; that all of these have meaning for us and for all people, but that substitution - "he died for us" - is the principal biblical category for understanding atonement.

I believe that Luke and Paul were the first great Christian theologians, and I admire the work of Augustine, some of Aquinas, some of Luther, most of Calvin, Edwards, Barth and Niebuhr. I do not follow "liberation theology," "black theology," or "feminist theology," and I believe that the classic "liberal theology" of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> C. got many things wrong, as well as some right. In modern Biblical scholarship, I side with Bishop N.T. Wright against Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan; and I think the wrong presuppositions and methodology of "the Jesus Seminar" led them inevitably to wrong conclusions about Jesus. At the popular level, I think the conspiracy theories of writers like Dan Brown are fiction, as is the LaHaye/Jenkins *Left Behind* series.

I suspect perhaps half of you would agree with me on these beliefs, and half of you already thoroughly disagree! As I said, there is no "church position" on these matters of theology/biblical interpretation! These are the topics that make for lively Bible studies!

## 3) *Social Conservatism*

Thirdly, let me move a step further in interpretation and application to "social conservatism." By this I mean ethics: the values, virtues, vices, social concerns that flow from Biblical teaching. You would predict that as we move along this line from the Bible itself to its modern application, there would be increasing diversity of views - and so it is.

But in areas of personal ethics, I would defend the long-standing Christian view of marriage - that it is intended by God to be between one man and one woman for life. I acknowledge with sorrow that it often falls far short of that goal, and that the growing incidence of divorce, unmarried cohabitation, births to unwed mothers, adultery, sexual exploitation of children, use of pornography, and gay marriage are causes for sadness and not celebration. I believe embryonic human life deserves respect and protection.

I believe personal morality should include integrity and truth-telling; not half-truth, propaganda, posturing or play-acting. I believe we are created as essentially social beings, and that communal life is more valuable than individual expression and fulfillment. I believe Christians and all civilized people should be generous, philanthropic, and should care for people in need, people with disabilities both mental and physical, the homeless, the hungry, the outcasts.

I believe that governments at every level have a role to play in creating and maintaining a just society, in which all people have the freedom and the protection to flourish; that communal action is essential to deal with the largest social issues including war and peace, care of the environment, criminal justice, education. So I am something of a "social conservative," but probably less than some of you imagine and more than some of you would approve! In all this I know some of you agree and some of you do not. These issues call for what used to be called "prudential judgment," which for all people is informed by their faith commitments, but can come out as widely different prescriptions for "the best way to do things."

#### 4) Political Conservatism

Which brings me to fourth issue: political conservatism. Here I will only say that there is no straight line from Biblical conservatism to big business, small government, fiscal restraint, strong military, or law and order conservatism. There is perhaps a closer link to "values conservatism" or "social conservatism."

It is worth remembering that the taken-for-granted connection in today's America between Biblical and political conservatism is not found in other countries, and was not so in American history until the 1970s. Abraham Lincoln classed himself as a conservative, and said that he "*adhered to the old and tried against the new and untried.*" But in the 1860s, the Industrial Revolution had not yet taken hold, and by 1900 "conservatism" meant "big business" conservatism - low taxes, no regulations - and that was what everyone meant by political conservatism until the 1960s and the decline of the so-called "Rockefeller Republicans."

The American South was biblically conservative, but voted solidly Democratic until the 1960s, when Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy" exploited Southern whites' resentment at the outcomes of the Civil Rights movement. From the 50s to the 70s, "movement conservatism" arose among intellectuals from Russell Kirk to William F. Buckley to Jeanne Kirkpatrick to Richard John Neuhaus. They found their political champion in Barry Goldwater, but he proved unelectable, and it was left to Ronald Reagan in the 1970s and 1980s to forge the modern coalition of "big business, small government" conservatives with the new "values voters," who were inspired to enter politics by the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision legalizing abortion, led by movements among Christians like Jerry Falwell's *Moral*

*Majority, Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, and James Dobson's Focus On The Family.*

So today most people inside and outside the "religious right" see this coalition as inevitable - "conservative in one area means being conservative in all." But as you and I know, that is not inevitable, and many Biblical and theological and even social conservatives are not conservative politically. I suspect God is - pretty much by definition! - an Independent, and that we should be too politically.

So is this a "conservative" church? In the sense of having had 50 years of steady Reformed and Evangelical preaching, and maintaining the presence of the Bible in our midst, I would say "Yes." Are we all agreed on social and political conservatism? By no means! Is that OK? Certainly! It teaches us how to live in harmony with people we disagree with - as Christians are called to do! Let us pray...