



The Reflector

Published and edited monthly in the interest of calling people back to the Bible
by Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

January 2008

Abuse of Power

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Modern society is plagued by a lack of respect for authority. No civilized society can last under those circumstances. Sooner or later, chaos will prevail.

God, in his wisdom, has formed society into under and over relationships. In the New Testament, the apostles and other writers made clear that Christians are to respect these relationships. The Apostle Paul, devoted a goodly part of two epistles to dealing with these relationships—Ephesians and Colossians. Those under authority must willingly submit themselves to that authority to please God. Likewise, those in authority must treat those under them with respect.

Parents should begin early to teach their children to respect authority in all aspects of their lives. It begins with respect for parental authority. It later extends to school authority, to government authority, and all other types of authority. A good mother, by example, can show her children how to act while under the authority of another—her husband. A good father, by example, can show them how to behave toward those under their authority. So, the children, when they leave the nest, and go out into society will have some concept of what authority is all about. They need this for the rest of their lives they are going to be both under authority and be in places of authority over others.

Those with authority have every right to expect that their authority be respected. But that is just half of the equation. Those under authority have the right to be respected by those who are over them. Each time the apostle Paul wrote concerning those who are under authority and their duty to respect those over them, he always accompanied that with a word of admonition to those who were over them. For example, when he told children to obey their parents in the Lord, he told their fathers to not provoke him to anger. One word of caution, not getting the respect that one should have does not give a him the right to rebel against those over them.

Let us now look at some examples of the abuse of power or authority:

Abusive Parents

We are aware that any reasonable discipline is considered by some as child abuse. For years, activists have tried to ban corporal punishment. They have succeeded in get it all but

abandoned in our public schools. Now they are working on getting it abandoned from our homes. This is not only a mistake, it is contrary to the will of God. The wise man wrote, “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes. (Proverbs 13: 24). Parents have every right to reasonably spank their children, yea the responsibility to do it.

Evidently, some interpret this as a license to abuse. It is to the point that we daily hear of injury and even the death of children caused by their parents or caretakers. No reasonable person would support such abuse of parental authority, but would want to see such abusers punished to the fullest extent of the law. Unruly children do not need unruly parents. However, this should not deter parents from using reasonable disciplinary measures. The worst kind of child abuse is to withhold needed discipline.

Abusive Husbands

The women’s Lib movement tries hard to convince women that they do not have to submit to anyone, much less their husbands. Never mind that the Bible says that women are to be in subjection to their husbands in everything (Ephesians 5: 23). The husband is the God appointed head of the household (Ephesians 5: 25). A God-fearing woman will submit to her husband as unto the Lord. (Ephesians 5: 22).

One of the qualifications of an elder is that he know how to rule his own house (1 Timothy 3). It does not merely say to rule, but that he know how to rule *well*. There is a difference. One does not rule well, whose rule is based on intimidation rather than honor and respect. Being the head does not give a man the right to treat his wife as a doormat. It does not to give him the right to physically or mentally abuse her. He is to love his wife as his own body. (Ephesians 5: 28). He is to treat her with honor as the weaker vessel (1 Peter 3: 7).

Abusive Government

The God ordained civil government, as his agency on earth to administer punishment to the evildoer and to facilitate an orderly society (Romans 13: 1-5). Christians are commanded to submit to their governments for conscience sake. This command was given at a time when Christians were living under the abusive Roman empire. In spite of the

abuse, they were still to honor those powers and pay their taxes, “render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.” (Romans 13: 7).

But, it is a shame how you can take a person and give him a badge or any position of authority and watch him transform himself into a tyrant. Millions today are living under such governments. There is little, a Christian can or should do about it, other than pray for those in authority that we may live a quiet and peaceable life under their reign (1 Timothy 2: 2). Since the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, we can only use teaching and moral persuasion to bring about change. New Testament Christians, neither collectively nor distributively, made it their mission to reform Rome. They saw themselves as strangers and pilgrims on their way to a better country. In the meantime, they submitted themselves “to every ordinance of man” for conscious and influence sake. They were confident that God would give them strength to bear the abuse.

Peter shows that the abuse of those over us is no excuse for our not fulfilling our duty to submit (1 Peter 2: 18). But those who abuse their position of authority in the home, in society or in the government will be held accountable to God in the day of judgment (Cf. 1Thess. 1: 6-9).

Abusive Elders

God, in his wisdom, ordained that Christians are to serve under elders in every church (Acts 14: 23). They are said to be “over you in the Lord.” (1 Thess. 5: 12). Congregations may function, and did function, at times without elders, but something was lacking. (Cf. Titus 1: 5). As soon as a plurality of men can be qualified, they should be appointed to this good work. Something is wrong when a sizable congregation goes for years without elders.

“Elders”, “bishops”, and “pastors” all refer to the same positions. They are to “feed” or “shepherd” the flock of God among them (1 Peter 5: 2). Their oversight is limited to the flock among them. Their work is to watch after the souls of the members of that congregation (Hebrews 13: 17). There’s no question that we are to “obey”, “submit,” and “honor,” these men. Men who meet the qualifications given in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and Titus chapter 1 and do the work assigned to them by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20: 28), are men who should be esteemed highly for their work’s sake. Their work is vital to the effective working of the congregation. (Ephesians 4: 11-16).

The idea that elders have *no* authority, but can *only* lead or rule by example is not taught in 1 Peter 5 or anywhere else in the New Testament, as some allege. The fact that others are to submit and obey suggests that they have some kind of authority that must be respected. The term, “overseer,” from the word, *episkopos*, also suggests authority. It carries the idea of being a superintendent. Thayer says that *episkopos* means,



“an overseer, a man charged with the duty of seeing that things done by others are done rightly, a *curator*, *guardian*, or *superintendent*.” So to summarize the work of elders; as “shepherds,” they are in charge of the feeding and safety of the flock; as “bishops,” they are in charge of overseeing the work of the congregation so that it may be done right; “elders” suggests they have the maturity and experience to do these things. To do this one must be “apt to teach” and able to convict the gainsayer (1 Tim. 3: 2; Titus 1: 9).

It is unfortunate that in the church today that elders are often appointed because of their social standing, popularity among the members, secular managerial skills, and/or political ability, rather than their knowledge of the word and their ability to apply to the needs of the church. They assume the role of a “corporate board” often with a dominant elder acting as Chairman of the Board – sometimes with the preacher acting as CEO. They see themselves with a business to run rather than a flock to shepherd. In keeping with the times, they build and maintain elaborate facilities. So the bulk of their time is spent on ways to keep the numbers and money needed to keep their corporate-like body afloat. It seems to escape them that their work is primarily spiritual and is that of taking care of the spiritual house of God (1 Tim. 3: 5). So, too many congregations are patterned after modern business corporations rather than the doctrine of Christ.

Peter makes it clear that the role of elders, is that of

overseers and shepherds and not as lords. The phrase, “not as being lords over God’s heritage,” qualifies the kind of oversight that elders are commanded to have. The eldership is not a lordship. Lordship is what Jesus warned his disciples against when they were arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God. (Luke 22: 25).

There is room in the church for just one Lord – He sits at the right hand of his Father on high. The elders have no authority of their own. They lead the church in its submission to the authority of the head, Jesus Christ. They see that the work and worship is done right. A part of the work of the church is to discipline unruly and ungodly members (1 Cor. 5; 2 Thess. 3). They lead and oversee in this as well.

The responsibility of elders is awesome. As it is in secular matters, the greater the responsibility and authority, the greater is the potential for abuse. There’s a difference between a lord and a shepherd. A lord is not too concerned about the feelings and concerns of those under him. His main interest is that those under him are under control.

A good shepherd’s primary interest is the welfare of the flock with which he has been entrusted. He must remember that it is God’s heritage that he is called on to oversee is not his and that he will give an account to the chief Shepherd for it, when He shall appear. (1 Peter 5: 4). While a good shepherd is not governed by the will of the sheep, still he governs by *leading* the sheep rather than *driving* them. The sheep know its voice and follow (John 10: 4) and they know that he has their best interest at heart. Often elders will sit in their “ivory tower” and make decisions that affect the whole congregation without communicating with the congregation as to how it might affect any plans or concerns they might have. That is acting more like autocratic lords than loving shepherds.

In the matter of church discipline, all too often the concern is for how it will affect their control over the membership. It is all but forgotten that scriptural church discipline is to save the soul of the offender and not to save the face of the church.

It is to purify the church (remove the leavening influence of sin - 1 Cor. 5) and not to rid the church of all dissent. There are cases where elderships take months and even years to deal with open flagrant sin, yet take only a few days to withdraw from those who dared to question their leadership decisions. That, my brother, is an abuse of power.

Elders like anyone else are subject to making unjust judgments and decisions. When that happens, are Christians automatically bound by these? I do not know if Diotrephes was an elder who was too big for his britches, as some suggest, or not (3 John 9). I do know that he was one who wielded considerable power in the church where he attended. He is a prime example of the kind of power that no man or group in the church should ever be allowed to have.

Back when the institutional issue became prominent, many justified their support of the institutions by pointing out that we must be subject to the elders and the elders have decided that this is good work. I heard a teacher in a Bible classroom of one of “our colleges,” answer the question: “What may the church spend its money on?”, by saying, “Anything that elders decide is a good work?” A student asked, “What if they decided to spend it on a piano?” The silence was deafening. But that kind of mentality has led to many of the unscriptural innovations of the past. When elders assume the role of lords, and the membership assumes the role of unconditional subjects – the church is setting itself up for apostasy.

Conclusion

Let us always be humble enough to submit to those whom the Lord expects us to and to always show honor and respect for those over us, in the home, in the state, and in the Lord. Let us not lightly challenge any decision that they might make because of the awesome responsibility that they have in their place in leadership. But there is a higher authority, whose word must be adhered to first (Acts 5: 29) edbragwell@gmail.com

The Train Just Rolls Away

(Some Lessons on Opportunity)

Martin Bragwell

I pass a town with no name
Seen through the window of a train
A boy and girl stand side by side
The train arrives, she kisses him goodbye
She turns away then steps on board
He thought he’d die but now he’s sure
But as he thinks of one last thing to say
The train just rolls away
from “Long Train Ride” by Lee Ben

We often suffer pain and sorrow in our lives from things that were never in our control. While that lack of control frustrates us, we somehow find the strength to persevere. However, no pain compares with that we

suffer because of our own missed opportunities. Our gracious Lord gives us multiple opportunities to positively affect our own souls and those of others. How often do we recognize and appreciate these opportunities after they’ve gone by, sometimes just barely too late to make a difference?

The quiet man who sits on the eighth pew has been visiting services for several weeks. He hears the gospel and learns that God loves him (John 3:16), that Jesus died for him and shed His blood for him (Heb. 9:14). He finds it astounding, but somehow almost believable, that the one who created him would leave the perfect perfection of heaven so that he, this quiet and uncertain

man, could see heaven's perfection as well. Yet, all that Creator asks of him is a few simple steps of obedience (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16). Sure, he realizes that this obedience will be followed by a constant commitment to change his life to the wishes of his Lord. That, too, seems a small price to pay for what he wants more than anything. So as he leaves to go home, he knows he wants to change his life. He knows he wants to escape his uncertainty. He knows he wants purpose in his life. He knows he wants to live without the fear he's always felt. He doesn't know that before the sun rises again, he'll be dead And the train just rolls away.

The Christian sees his neighbor across the fence. He notices his neighbor's hair is thinner than it was 5 years ago when they first moved in. He realizes that neither of them is getting any younger. He is glad that he remembered to "love his neighbor" (Rom 13:9) He remembers with satisfaction how he mowed his neighbors' yard following the latter's surgery and how sincerely grateful his neighbor was. He remembers the quiet summer evenings they sat on the patio and talked while the smoke drifted from the grill. He remembered how they joked about their wives selling everything they owned in the joint garage sale. He then realizes he's never talked to his neighbor about Christ. It shames him to know of those who "went into all the world" with the gospel (Mark 16:15-16), yet he never took it next door. He knows that has to change. He knows now that he can and must do it. He knows that he will do it even if it upsets his comfortable neighborhood. He just knows that the one person that will listen to him is his neighbor to whom he has gotten so close. He doesn't know that just a year ago his neighbor, after searching desperately for years for some higher purpose and finding only disappointment and disillusionment with religion, had decided to never try again. He doesn't know his neighbor has now shut the door of his heart with a vow to never open it again, a vow that will be kept the rest of his life. The Christian begins his efforts to teach, not knowing his opportunity has already passed. And the train just rolls away.

Christian parents, knowing they want to be godly parents, notice how hard it is to keep their children clothed and fed. They seem to be growing faster than their needs can be purchased. And lovely Children they are! Their teeth are straight, their bodies healthy, and their grades are good. These children are so comfortable in every social setting and excel at each of the dozens of activities afforded them.

What parents wouldn't thank God every day for them? But a troubling doubt lingers. They haven't always had time to be sure their kids learned the things of God that their own parents had taught them. (Eph. 6:4). Sometimes they really thought they should have been a little more restrictive with their children and disciplined

them more often, but just look how popular and happy they are. But still the doubt lingers until they can ignore it no more. Things must change! The Lord must come first in their lives and in the lives of their kids. They know they can still point their kids toward heaven and instill the priorities that will get them there. They know that their kids can make the Lord happy every day. They know they'll spend a wonderful eternity with these precious souls. They don't know that their children's foundation has already been so firmly laid that it would take 100 lifetimes to point them toward God again. A 100 lifetimes that no one has! And the train just rolls away.

A young woman's godly parents taught her the kind of man she should marry. (Eph. 5:23-25). They never seemed all that exciting to her. Her parent's idea of the perfect mate would have left her on the outside looking in. She would never have the house she wanted with things she wanted if she listened to them. She would never have the "right" circle of friends. She had decided to go her own path and have it all and still love her Lord. Then her best friend, from the little church in which she was raised, got married. Her friend's husband gave them all the things she herself longed for. But her friend wasn't as happy as before and it hurt her to see the sadness in her friend's eyes. She meets a young man, who thinks going to heaven is the most important thing on earth. She marries him although she knows she'll never have some of the things she once wanted so badly. She knows her parents were right, especially her daddy. She knows she should tell him so. She decides to thank her daddy just like she has thanked God for him a thousand times. Instead she thanks his grave. And the train just rolls away.

Two Christian friends are inseparable. They finish each other's sentences and are always on the same wavelength. They anticipate each other's every move, until one decides to leave the Lord. The one who remains faithful cannot believe the other has left and prays for his return. He asks everyone he knows to also pray. He doesn't know what he can say to bring his friend back. He keeps praying for months and months. After a couple of years, he realizes he must take more drastic personal action. (Gal. 6:1) He finally knows just the right words to say. He doesn't know that his friend kept expecting the doorbell to ring for months and was surprised when it didn't until he no longer cared. He doesn't know his delay has made even the right words useless. He doesn't know that the time when he, and only he, could make a difference has come and gone. He learns with tears. And the train just rolls away.

frogshair@bellsouth.net