

# Respect for Authority

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In every system there is a basic, core principle that largely determines the nature and operation of the whole. In the business world, the guiding principle is to turn a profit. In the sports world, winning is the principal thing. In politics, getting elected and remaining in office are paramount. And so it goes in every area of endeavor. In God's plan for man, the fundamental principle that overrides all others and that applies to all of our human endeavors is respect for and obedience to appropriate authority.

There have always been rebels. However, widespread rebellion against authority in modern times may be traced to the 1960s when the "flower child" and "hippie" cultures made their appearance, defying such things as conventional modes of dress and cleanliness and abandoning civilized moral standards. This period of rebellion climaxed in student riots on college campuses and demonstrations in the streets for various causes. The rebels marched to the slogan, "If it feels good, do it." There were many (and often violent) "peace" protests aimed at stopping the Vietnam War. Anti-authoritarianism and antinomianism captured the hearts of a large percentage of the young people of that generation.

The "sexual revolution" occurred in this period — one of the tragic symptoms of the rebellion against all previous norms of decency and sexual purity. This revolution became increasingly noticeable in the lyrics of the songs, especially from the rock culture. Theatre productions, movies, and TV programs began at first to dabble a bit in risqué and suggestive scenes and profanity beyond what had previously been allowed by the producers themselves. With this crack in the dam of decency and modesty, the flood was not long in coming. It has gradually grown ever wider, sweeping away practically all restrictions in its downward course. The movie and TV "rating" systems are some of the biggest jokes around. The PG movies of today would never have been allowed out of Hollywood fifty years ago, because they would have been deemed utterly indecent and prurient for adults, let alone children.

The break in the dam has grown far beyond a mere crack. It is now so wide that about the only arrests for pornography, of which one reads anymore, is an occasional bust of Internet viewers and/or traffickers. Otherwise, the several laws against pornography still on the books are generally ignored. The "adult" video and bookstore owners rest secure in plying their filthy and corrupting trade. What was once a business that had to stay largely underground and

under the counter is now a wide-open multibillion-dollar business, shoved in our faces almost everywhere we turn.

The roots of the rampant spiritual apostasy that characterizes so many in the church are not mysterious: They are easily traceable to the anti-authoritarianism that crept into the church in that same era.

All of these things (and there are many others) are symptomatic of the rebellion against authority that began in the early 1960's. When attacks upon authority are allowed to flourish unchecked, they have a way of growing in ever-widening circles. We can see it all about us in our beloved nation, to say nothing of the world at large: The widespread anti-God sentiment, the seemingly ever-increasing crime and divorce rates, the mushrooming cases of sexually transmitted diseases, the illicit drug traffic and usage, the cheating in corporate boardrooms involving billions of dollars, the selfish and power manic politicians, and on and on the list goes.

Surely, none can deny that there is a desperate need for a re-emphasis – followed by a constant emphasis – on the ultimate importance of respect for duly constituted authority. In its absence, civilization will be reduced to universal barbarianism.

### **God's Ultimate Authority**

Riding over all areas of our human life and behavior is the umbrella of the ultimate authority of the Godhead. He was not created, but is eternally self-sustaining. He created the material universe (Gen. 1:1; Rev. 4:11). Only in Him do we "live, and move, and have our being" because He sustains and upholds all things by the "word of his power" (Acts 17:28; Heb. 1:3). The same power that brought the universe into being from nothing will, at the coming of Christ, return it to nothingness with great noise and fervent heat (2 Pet. 3: 10).

The Son of God began His reign upon His ascension to the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:34-36). He will there reign till His return, at which time He will raise the dead and "deliver the kingdom up to the Father" (1 Cor. 15:22-24). From the beginning God has rightly demanded an obedient response to His authoritative will in every facet of our lives (Gen. 2:15-17; Deu. 6:5-6). Anything short of obedience He has labeled "sin" which, if not removed, will cause our eternal damnation (1 John 3:4; Rom. 6:23).

The Son of God exercises His authority over all men in this age through the New Testament portion of His inspired Word, (2 John 9), by which all who have lived since He shed

His sinless blood shall be judged at last (John 12:48). The Word of Christ sets forth God's authority for each sphere of behavior and relationships common to men.

### **Respect for God's Authority in the Church**

Fellowship with God and His Son is impossible outside of the church Jesus built and bought (Mat. 16:18; Acts 20:28). All of the saved (i.e., those who have come into fellowship with Deity) are in it, because the Lord has added them to it (Acts 2:41,47). Christ is the head of the church (Eph. 1:22-23; 5:23), and He exercises His headship through His Word, the written record of the oral teachings of Jesus and of the first-century apostles and prophets.

The means of entrance (i.e., the plan of salvation), its worship, its organization, its designations, and its destiny are all revealed in the Gospel. Christ alone has the right to dictate these because the church belongs to Him, not to us. Men dare not tamper with that Divine institution by ignoring Christ's authoritative Word. It contains numerous, frequent, and repeated warnings against departing from its teachings (Mat. 7: 15; Rom 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 4:17; Gal. 1:6-9; 2 Tim. 4:1-4; et al).

The change agent mentality that has moved many congregations steadily toward denominational status represents rebellion against the authority of Christ over His church. Those who practice things unauthorized and those who reject obligatory matters pertaining to the church have alike rejected the authority of its Head. Christ has delegated authority in local congregations to men (always a plurality) called "elders." Their chief functions are to lead, teach, and protect the church under their oversight (Acts 20:28).

### **Respect for God's Authority in the Home**

In the beginning God established the home as the basic unit of society when He created Adam and Eve for each other. He established a certain pattern of authority in the home and family. He made man the head of woman and the husband the head of his wife (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22-24). He is not thereby authorized to be a cruel tyrant but is to love and cherish his wife as himself (Eph. 5: 25, 28-29). God has placed parents over their children, commanding children to obey them, with the father taking the leading role (Eph. 6:1-4). The principal place of breakdown in the authority chain is in the home. Many modern parents obey their children (even two-year olds), allowing their offspring to speak to them with great disrespect and to flagrantly disobey them. If children at an early age are not taught respect for authority in the home, beginning with submission to their parents, they will likely have a most difficult time

learning it at all. When children learn to respect the authority of their parents, they will be more likely to learn respect for other authority figures.

### **Respect for God's Authority in the Workplace**

Even when we are at our places of employment, the Lord teaches us how we should behave. "Servants" (i.e., employees) are commanded to be obedient to their "masters" (i.e., employers) (Eph. 6:5-7). To do so with sincere service is to serve Christ. We are instructed to work "from the heart" with good will, as though we were working directly for the Lord. Mere "eye-service" (i.e., working hard only when the supervisor comes around) is unacceptable.

Employers also have Scriptural instructions. They are warned not to be mean, but to render to their employees just and equal treatment, remembering that they have a Heavenly Master (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1). A revolution would take place in the business and industrial world if every employer and employee alike respected the authority of Christ through His Word.

### **Respect for God's Authority in Civil Government**

God has ordained the existence of civil government and human rulers (Rom. 13:1). This fact does not mean that every specific ruler or form of government meets with God's approval, for many can be documented that did/do not. The **concept** of civil authority is what God has ordained, for the purpose of protecting those who are guilty and evil (Rom. 13:3-4). He has also ordained that men respect the **authority** of civil government (Mat. 22:21; Rom. 13:2; 1 Pet 2:13-14). To reject the authority of civil government is to reject the authority of God (Rom. 13:2, 5). This simply means that we must obey the laws of the land to be pleasing to God.

### **An Important Overriding Principle**

One essential principle applies to each of the latter four areas described above: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). The laws of those who are in places of authority (i.e., husbands, parents, employers, and rulers) sometimes contradict the law of God. In all such cases, as Peter boldly declared under threat of death, we must choose the higher authority – the superior authority of God. Our world would be much nearer perfect if all mankind would submit to the authority of God in every area of their lives: "And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17). Let us all dedicate ourselves to this challenging command and to its application in regard to authority.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an "Editorial Perspective" in the April 2003 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, of which I was editor at the time.]

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