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Lesson 14
Korah's Rebellion
Numbers 16:1-35, 41-50

In our American culture today (and American culture is influencing the cultures of the world), one of the most hated words is "authority," and the next despised word is "submission." Some of the more popular words today are "revolution," "reactionary," "free spirit," "rebellion," and "subversive." Somehow it has become vogue to be an independent, uninhibited, free-thinker and free-actor in submission to no authority or little authority, doing one's own thing to the glory and pleasure of one's self. Yet we know that without authority, without divine law, and without submission, there can be no truly effective individual, organization, or society. Authority is despised in our society because our society is becoming more and more humanistic and less and less God-centered. Submission to God's sovereign authority and His ordained structures for the individual, society, and church is the real beginning of wisdom.

The lack of respect for authority has rubbed off on the Christian and the church in our American culture. Today, even among believers, there are far too many freelance Christians who have little respect for God-appointed authority and are doing their own thing apart from biblical norms. The Bible teaches submission to God, to Christ, to church leaders, to government, to husbands, to parents, and to one another. If Christians do not accept God's divine order of authority, then they will be ineffective Christians and will establish ineffective local churches.

In Numbers 16, we have one of the great chapters on what happens to those who buck God's ordained authority. This chapter should strike fear into every Christian's heart and cause him to bow to Christ's holy law as found in the Bible. You remember how the Jews had come to the border of Canaan, the Promised Land, and because of unbelief had failed to obey God and take possession of the land. God became angry with them, for they were guilty of apostasy, and He told them to go back out into the desert. God said He would destroy every adult twenty years old and up at the time of this great apostasy, but that every child twenty and under would be spared and would enter the land. For their unbelief, these Jews would wander in the desert for thirty-eight years, for the two years it took them to go from Egypt to Canaan are counted as part of the forty years. Most of these adult Jews were mere professors and not true believers at all. As they turned back out to the desert, sometime early in those thirty-eight years of silent wandering, Korah and his company of reactionaries rebelled against Moses, Aaron, and ultimately God.

REBELLION IN THE SPIRITUAL REALM - Numbers 16:1-11

"Now Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took action, and they rose up before Moses, together with some of the sons of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, chosen in the assembly, men of renown." There were three rival factions in this revolt against God-appointed authority--Korah, the ringleader, Dathan, Abiram, and On, who were co-leaders in this plot, and two hundred fifty renowned leaders in Israel. These two hundred fifty leaders may have been from the various tribes or from the tribe of Levi. Whatever, this rebellion was not from the mixed multitude or the rabble or the low and uneducated class in Israel. This was a rebellion from the affluent, powerful, and respected men in the nation of Israel. Korah masterminded this sedition, which ultimately involved thousands, if not millions, of Jews. Korah was a dynamic leader who was able to gather around him a large number of influential men. He undoubtedly had a charismatic personality--shrewd, clever, witty, scintillating, strong, and suave. He would have made any modern-day Christian "personality boy" look like greasy kid stuff. Externally, Korah had it all as a leader, but he had no heart for God. He was a master manipulator of crowds, an expert in mob psychology, and he knew how to fan a group of people into a mad frenzy, even to the point of revolt. Korah was a Levite who ministered around the tabernacle and taught the Word of

God, but that was not enough for him. He had a restless ambition and a strong power-lust, for he coveted the high priestly office of Aaron and the leadership office of Moses. He wanted to combine these offices into one and become the most powerful man in all Israel.

We shall later see that on the surface it did not look as though Korah wanted anything for himself and he was genuinely concerned for others, but Moses unmasked him for what he really was, a vain and ambitious man. Korah was not satisfied with ministering in the tabernacle, being a well-known Bible teacher, and highly respected among his colleagues. He wanted more. His ego could not be satisfied. He had to be top dog, and he was willing to risk revolt to get this position in Israel. So severe was Korah's rebellion that it is mentioned in the New Testament as an illustration of an apostate.

“Yet in the same manner these men, also by dreaming, defile the flesh, and reject authority, and revile angelic majesties. But these men revile the things which they do not understand; and the things which they know by instinct, like unreasoning animals, by these things they are destroyed. Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah” (Jude 8, 10-11).

In every local church or Christian organization there are always those fickle, dissatisfied and unhappy Christians, who can be acted upon to stir their bitterness to revolt. All they need is some dynamic leader, some mastermind, to become the catalyst for the rebellion. Once the standard of rebellion is raised, there are any numbers of people who will rally to the cause to resist the authorities that be. Usually the dissidents have different reasons for revolt, but they agree on their common dissatisfaction. That is why, if they are successful in overthrowing the powers that be, there is even more severe rebellion and anarchy, because they were never together philosophically except in discontent.

“And they assembled together against Moses and Aaron and said to them, ‘You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?’” These rebels challenged the right of Moses and Aaron to rule over the people. They charged them with being dictators over the people and lording it over the flock. How did Korah stir the people? He told the people their human rights were being violated. They charged that Moses and Aaron were taking away their God-given, inalienable rights by lording it over them, and he encouraged the people to revolt and be free from their authority and tyranny. They felt the stifling role of Moses and Aaron curtailed their liberty and infringed upon their rights. After all, they reasoned, all the congregation are as holy as Moses and Aaron, and therefore, are equal with Moses and Aaron in authority. They concluded that anyone had as much right to rule as Moses and Aaron, and this led to the false conclusion that all were as qualified as Moses and Aaron. Korah knew that every rebellion has to have a righteous cause, and he found it in human rights. Yet, these human rights were just a front or smokescreen to get his own selfish ends, which were the offices of both high priest and leader in Israel.

These rebels failed to understand that it was God who appointed Moses and Aaron to their offices, not men. These reactionaries were in rebellion to God, not just Moses and Aaron. They were restless and egocentric revolutionaries who were seeking to undermine God's appointed order. They felt they were just as qualified, just as capable, and just as intelligent, and certainly just as spiritual to run the nation as was Moses and Aaron, but how wrong they were. God distinctively put Moses and Aaron in their respective positions because they were God's men and the most qualified.

Today, God is still ruling His people, but not through one man. He rules in His church through Christ, the Head of the church, and Christ has delegated this authority to rule in the church to elders who are appointed to this office by God Himself.

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood”

(Acts 20:28).

“But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another” (1 Thess. 5:12- 13).

Elders are to rule according to the Word of God, not according to their personal whims or preferences. ***“And now I commend you (elders at Ephesus) to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified”*** (Acts 20:32). Elders are to be obeyed by the congregation. ***“Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you”*** (Heb. 13:17). There must always be an authority structure in the local church or there will be anarchy and total confusion with every man doing that, which is right in his own eyes. One of the dangers of the modern-day fundamentalist and independent movements in Christendom is a lack of respect for authority. How often I hear statements like: “You can’t tell me what to do, I’m a fundamentalist! I’m an independent! I have my rights!” This half-cocked attitude is unscriptural. The only rights a Christian has are within the bounds of Scripture. Scripture gives us an authority structure, and to obey that gives great blessing.

Are there ever reasons for challenging elders? Yes, whenever the elders are not acting Scripturally. If there is doctrinal or moral error, elders should be removed from office. If there is incompetency, elders should be released from their positions by the elders themselves. If our complaints against an elder or a session are a matter of personality conflict, personal preference, or disagreement over procedure, then there is never a reason to break with God’s ordained order. A person ought to think long and hard before he challenges God’s appointed authority within the local church or denomination, and if he does so, he must have a Scriptural reason to do so.

“When Moses heard this, he fell on his face . . .” When Moses saw this rebellion, he did not defend himself; he did not fight back; he did not start lopping off heads. No, he took it to the Lord. He turned the whole situation over to God, He saw immediately that the whole situation was too big for him, and God would have to work it out somehow. Moses knew the battle was the Lord’s, and he rested it in His hands.

“Cast your burden upon the LORD, and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken” (Psalm 55:22).

“...Casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7).

“Delight yourself in the LORD: and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it” (Psalm 37:4- 5).

Moses knew that there was absolutely no use in contending with restless and dissatisfied people. He could not stop their evil thinking or their rebellious actions, but he could pray for them, for he knew the Lord had said, ***“Vengeance is mine; I will repay!”***

Christian, if you live a solid Christian life, some people are going to hate the thought of you and detest the sight of you. ***“And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”*** (2 Tim. 3:12). When people gossip, malign, and even rebel, do not fight back. Pray. Put these dissidents in the Lord’s hands and keep them there. If they are wrong, God will discipline them. If you are wrong, God will show you.

We can learn from Moses how to act under pressure. Moses’ life was in danger. He was about to

be wiped out. Yet he was calm, cool and collected and relaxed in God's sovereign will for his life. He was laid back in His God. C.H. McIntosh, in his *Commentary on Numbers*, says,

“This (prayer) was a very good way to meet rebels. We have seen this beloved servant of God on his face when he ought to have been on his feet (Ex. xiv.), but here it was about the best and safest thing he could do. There is never much use in contending with restless and disaffected people; better far leave them in the Lord's hands; for with Him, in reality, is their controversy. If God sets a man in a certain position, and gives him a certain work to do, and his fellows think it proper to quarrel with him, simply on the score of his doing that work, and filling that position, then is their quarrel really with God, who knows how to settle it, and will do it in His own way. The assurance of this gives holy calmness and moral elevation to the Lord's servant in moments when envious and turbulent spirits rise up against him. It is hardly possible for any one to occupy a prominent place of service, or to be preeminently used of God, without, at some time or another, having to encounter the attacks of certain radical and discontented men, who cannot bear to see any one more honored than themselves. But the true way to meet such is to take the place of utter prostration and nothingness, and allow the tide of disaffection to roll over one.”

“...And he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, ‘Tomorrow morning the LORD will show who is His, and who is holy, and will bring him near to Himself; even the one whom He will choose, He will bring near to Himself. Do this: take censers for yourselves, Korah and all your company, and put fire in them, and lay incense upon them in the presence of the Lord tomorrow; and the man whom the LORD chooses shall be the one who is holy. You have gone far enough, you Sons of Levi!’” Moses told Korah and his company of rebels they had gone too far. There was a power struggle, and Moses was going to let the Lord decide who was right and who was wrong.

“Then Moses said to Korah, ‘Hear now, you sons of Levi, is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the service of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to minister to them; and that He has brought you near, Korah, and all your brothers, Sons of Levi, with you? And are you seeking for the priesthood also?’” Moses laid right into Korah and his company for he saw right through his false front of human rights. Korah was not content with being a Levite who ministered in the tabernacle and taught the Word to the people. No, he wanted to overthrow the priesthood and install himself as high priest in the place of Aaron. Only a blind, egotistical, arrogant, power-seeker would ever try such a bold and blasphemous move.

“Therefore you and all your company are gathered together against the LORD; but as for Aaron, who is he that you grumble against him?” In attempting to overthrow Aaron as high priest, they were actually rebelling against the Lord, because God had appointed Aaron to this office. There is spiritual humor in this verse. What kind of person was Aaron? Aaron was a very weak personality and not a good leader. Aaron was led by Miriam, Moses' sister, to be a part of a rebellion against Moses. He was a compromiser and yielded to the will of the people in the golden calf incident. Aaron could speak well and had the gifts for service as high priest, but he apparently had a poor personality. Korah, on the other hand, was a good leader with a charismatic personality, but Korah was not God's man for the office of high priest. Aaron was God's man in spite of his weak personality. Korah thought, “I'm a better leader, better organizer, better personality than Aaron. I should have Aaron's position for I could do it much better than he.” Korah failed to see Aaron was God's appointed man, and regardless of personality, God put him in that office. Korah was driven on by jealousy and bitterness of soul. He became angry when he saw Moses leading the people. He despised the sight of Aaron in his office with all of his priestly garb. He was eaten up with jealousy and it was destroying his life.

There are some tremendous lessons for us to learn as Christians from this verse. First, God has

given us an authority structure in the local church (rule by elders) in order to assure the communication of God's Word, and to make sure that every one does not do that which is right in his own eyes and everything is done Scripturally. Second, God gives some men the office of elder that do not have the strongest personalities. Sometimes there will be personality conflicts with elders, but each Christian must divorce divine appointment by God from personality. You may not like the elder's personality, but is he a spiritual man? There is a difference between personality and responsibility, for the real question is whether this appointed elder is acting responsibly upon the Word of God for his own life and the life of the church? The average person was attracted to Korah because he was intelligent, outwardly attractive, and a natural leader, but he had no heart for God. God does not look on the outward appearance, but on the heart. One of the marks of a mature Christian is that he can overlook personality differences and realize that God has given the elder his position. The mature Christian sees spirituality and commitment to the Lord as more important than personality in an elder, and the mature Christian is willing to submit to an elder because God has placed him in that position. If an elder is not doing his ministry well, God will discipline him and somehow remove him from the eldership. Third, it is a very subtle sin when one thinks he can do a ministry better than someone else and begins to worm his way into that position under the guise of spirituality. God always deals with this kind of attitude. Fourth, by rebellion to God-ordained authority, Christians are putting themselves into direct opposition to God and placing themselves in direct line for divine discipline.

When I was in graduate school in seminary, I was teaching a Sunday school class of about three hundred people at a large Bible church. The pastor was an excellent scholar and fine preacher. Previous to my teaching this Sunday school class, there had been some trouble at the church. Apparently a group of people wanted to put the pastor out of the church and put in dynamic young men, who was then the assistant pastor. When this problem blew over, I took the class. In my innocence I tried to help people who were in rebellion to get their attitudes straight, but it did not help them. The more I talked with them, the more I fell into their negative pattern. I remember thinking to myself one day, "I think I should take the pastor's place. I could do the ministry as well as he can." What arrogance! No human being ever knew I thought this thought, but God knew it, and it was rebellion to established authority. Out of a clear blue sky, the elders of the church took me out of my teaching position, for they feared the dissidents would follow me. Humanly there was no reason why they should have removed me, for there was never any external move to subvert the pastor's ministry. However, there was a divine reason, for God knew that one fleeting moment of rebellion in my own heart. I had secretly rebelled against God's appointed leadership, and God took care of me in loving discipline.

REBELLION IN THE POLITICAL REALM - Numbers 16:12-15

"Then Moses sent a summons to Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab; but they said, 'We will not come up.'" As God's appointed head of Israel, Moses told Dathan and Abiram to come and talk with him, but they refused to go. What is this but more stiff-necked rebellion? These two men became so hardened to spiritual realities that they refused to act biblically.

"Is it not enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, but you would also lord it over us?" These folks had become so hardened and out of it spiritually that they called Egypt a land flowing with milk and honey when it was a place of bondage, slavery, and misery. Obsessed with jealousy, these people could not think straight. They accused Moses of lording it over them (a dictator or tyrant) but in the same breath they accused him of trying to kill them. What inconsistency! You can't lord it over dead people. These rebels were so far out of it that everything that was said was twisted or perverted to destroy Moses' reputation, calling him an autocrat or a murderer.

According to the New Testament, the elder should never lord it over the flock, but should lead by example through the Word of God.

“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow-elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:1-3).

“Indeed, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor have you given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Would you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up!” These Jews blamed Moses for not getting them into the land of Canaan, but it was not Moses’ fault. It was their fault. Their own unbelief and disobedience was the cause for not going into the Promised Land. They tried to make Moses their scapegoat, but the problem was their own dry, dead, unbelieving hearts that hated God’s authority over them in any realm. These rebels began to imagine all kinds of things that were not true and they began to believe them even though they were contrary to the facts. They said Moses would poke out their eyes if they appeared before him, but that was pure fantasy. They again replied, ***“We will not come up!”*** What is this but pure, unadulterated rebellion?

“Then Moses became very angry and said to the LORD, ‘Do not regard their offering! I have not taken a single donkey from them, nor have I done harm to any of them.’” Moses displayed righteous indignation towards these Jews and their charges, and, believe it or not, they added one more. Apparently they thought Moses had too many material things and his salary was too much, and they gave the reason for that to be corruption in office. They charged him with stealing animals to acquire wealth.

Christian, everyone who has a position of authority and is moving forward for Christ will catch a lot of flak. Rumors, half-truths, and lies always come to God’s servants, and all the servant of the Lord can do is ignore these things and keep his eyes on the Lord, trusting God to take care of his critics. A true servant understands that most of the criticism that comes his way is due to Satanic opposition, and he is therefore to be patient with his critics.

“And the Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition; if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

REBELLIOUS LEADERS JUDGED BY GOD - Numbers 16:16-35

In verses 16-35, we see how God dealt with the rebellion of the leaders. He resolved the problem by bringing judgment on the leaders. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were swallowed up by the earth (16:31-34). The two hundred fifty leaders were also burned to death by fire from heaven (16:35). Think of it, two hundred fifty leaders in Israel were dead because of rebellion to divine, ordained authority.

Whenever there is serious rebellion to God’s appointed order of authority, it takes severe discipline to clean up the whole mess. It may not be physical death but some other strict form of discipline may be applied. It is such a serious matter for Christians to be involved in subversive activities in the local church or any Christian organization. God will not tolerate this kind of activity among His people.

REBELLIOUS PEOPLE JUDGED - Numbers 16:41-50

In 16:41 we read, ***“But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘You are the ones who have caused the death of the Lord’s people.’”*** The day after the people saw the judgment of two hundred fifty-three key leaders in Israel and were

sacred at the time, they began to grumble against Moses and Aaron. Oh, the depravity of the human heart! These persons who were out of it spiritually could not think straight, for they said Moses and Aaron killed these leaders, but it was God who had done it because of their wicked, subversive activities. Furthermore, they were messed up in their reasoning processes because they called these rebels “the Lord’s people.” Most, if not all, were probably apostates, mere professors, with hardened hearts to spiritual realities. The masses were attracted to these “personality boys” but their hearts were rotten before God. There was nothing spiritually lovely about these rebels, and now their jealousy, hatred, hostility, envy, and bitterness had rubbed off on many of the children of Israel.

In 16:49 we read, ***“But those who died in the plague were 14,700 besides those who died on account of Korah.”*** A total of 14,700 fell in line with Korah and his rebellion. They, too, died by a plague. What did they do? They challenged God’s appointed leadership and sought to overthrow Moses and Aaron.

What was true of the sons of Israel in Moses’ day is just as true for us today. If we seek to overthrow God’s appointed leadership, God shall discipline us. God hates spiritual subversion and has His own ways of taking care of those who would challenge God’s appointed order for authority in the church. Think twice, Christian, before you choose to rebel against God’s appointed leaders!

CONCLUSION

Authority is a very big issue in Christianity and submission to authority is basic to real Christian living. No one can ever truly submit to any human institution until he has first submitted to God. God is the supreme authority and He has sent His Son Jesus Christ to die for rebellious sinners. Those who bow to Christ as Lord and Savior have taken the first step towards submission to the almighty, sovereign God of the universe in every area of life.

Have you bowed to Christ? Have you seen Him as your Savior? Have you subjected yourself to Him as a true follower of Christ? Have you submitted to His Lordship? When you receive Christ as Lord and Savior, then you will be able, in a more free way, to subject yourself to other God-ordained institutions, fellow-Christians, and church leaders. As you come to experience divine authority through Christ, you will not be put into bondage but will be set free to be a voluntary slave of God. Jesus said, “. . . ***And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed***” (John 8:32, 36).