

OBEDIENCE TO CONTROVERSIAL RULES, COMMANDS or ORDERS¹

INTRODUCTION: These thoughts and illustrations were originally compiled and shared with two young men who were high school seniors [i.e. *Form 5*] who came to me as the “designated representatives and spokesmen” of the Senior High youth group at the church where I had only recently been called as youth pastor in 1975. It was my first ministry experience and I had only been there a few short weeks. The young men said that the youth wished to protest our church’s dress policy in regard to an upcoming youth activity.

By way of background and explanation, the specific issue that prompted the issue in among our youth was a dress standard for our girls who wished to attend an upcoming youth activity. We were going to go to an amusement park. As I recall we told the girls they could wear either slacks/jeans, culottes or shorts, but if they chose to wear shorts, they had to be knee length. That did not go down well with some of the girls who then said they would not participate if we didn’t change that policy!

So these two spokesmen for the youth came in and gave me an ultimatum: If I as the youth pastor didn’t change the rule, the young people had decided that they would not attend i.e. they would boycott the activity (Note: The church had never had a full time youth pastor prior to my arrival. However concerned adults and parents of the young people had done an admirable job of running the youth programme. And while I had not established the policy that the young people didn’t like, I felt it was a good one and was in full agreement with it).

During the discussion, the Lord almost immediately brought these four thoughts to my mind to share with those two young men. More than thirty-five years later I still find them helpful, including for my own personal life, since during the ensuing years I have encountered many more rules and policies that I too haven’t always agreed with or liked.

First of all I told the two young men that the church dress code would not be changed and that I thought it was a good one and I hoped they would reconsider. I also made it clear that anyone who showed up on Saturday in violation of the church’s dress policy would not be allowed to go. Frankly, I fully anticipated a complete disaster when Saturday arrived. Instead, to my complete surprise, virtually the entire youth group showed up, everyone was dressed appropriately, and we went and had a great time at the activity that day!

Caving in to the desires and cravings of young people, instead of holding to a godly, biblical standard may seem like the way to go in order to be liked by your youth. However I believe it will end in disaster. Far better to have a few clearly defined policies based on Scriptural principles that you then follow and maintain regardless of the cost in loss of popularity. Deep down inside many young people are actually looking for godly, loving leaders who are men and women of principle, and who will not compromise or forfeit their integrity. As Frank Hamrick once remarked, “*You get what you honour!*” i.e. if you honour, or at least excuse and overlook direct disobedience, laziness, rebelliousness, etc., in order to try to maintain peace get your young people to like you, I believe it will backfire. Paul said, “Those things which ye have both learned and received and heard and seen in me do”(Phil. 4:9). I believe young people who genuinely desire to follow Christ will be attracted to a leader and a ministry that exhibits consistency and integrity. Admittedly, you may not have the largest youth ministry in the world, but I believe the hand of God and His blessing will be upon it!

With that said, let me now share with you the four thoughts I shared with those young men that day:

1. SEEK TO LEARN THE REASON FOR THE RULE. I pointed out to the two young men who came to my office that day and lodged their “ultimatum” that it was perfectly fine for them to ask about and find out why the church had that policy that they didn’t like. There is nothing wrong with asking any authority for an explanation for a rule or policy—in the right way and with the right attitude i.e. courteously and respectfully! ²

Mt. 5:27-28

Rom. 13:14 – (e.g. Explaining our Bible Baptist Church Youth Mission team standards)

Rom. 14:1-23 – (e.g. Why we had dress standards for the girls in our youth dept)

I Cor. 10:23, 32 – (e.g. Why I no longer ran on Sundays)

Job 31:1 – (Why our dress standards for girls were more stringent than for boys at our BBC “*Gym Days*”)

I Thess. 5:17

¹ –Originally jotted down July/August, 1975, Madison, Ohio. Made into a computer document July, 2000, Goroka, Papua New Guinea & reformatted into a Word document, May, 2011, St. Vincent, West Indies. Explanatory Note: Many of the items in parentheses are illustrations that I used at that time. They will probably have little or no meaning to the reader today, nor will they be fully understood by most. However I decided to include them nonetheless. –Mike Edwards, *Baptist Mid-Missions, St. Vincent, West Indies*. Note: British spelling used throughout.

I Tim. 2
I Pet. 3:1-6
Rom. 12:18
John 17:6-16
I Jn. 2:15-17
II Cor. 12:15

2. COMMIT YOURSELF TO OBEEDIENCE TO THE RULE. Next, I pointed out to the young men who “represented the youth group” that the Bible is crystal clear that believers are expected to obey legitimate authority.

Acts 20:28
Rom. 13:1-7

Heb. 13:17 – (e.g. Adjusting to the stringent rules of BJU after having attended EMU; Obeying Pastor Globig who was my superior at Bible Baptist Church; etc)

I Pet. 2:16 – (e.g. Do you always “*feel*” like going to school? But you go anyway. Illustration: When is a train most productive and effective, when it’s running all over the countryside or when it is running on a (confining) track?)

I Pet. 5:5 – (e.g. Cleaning your wardrobe/closet, washing the dishes, etc, when you are still living at home. As a child my responsibility is to obey)

At this point in our conversation I pointed out to those two young men who represented the entire youth group, that a majority of believers will usually follow the above two steps. But I told them that if they stopped there, they would probably not grow spiritually from this episode at all. Many Christians, while doing the above two things (asking why there is such a rule or policy they don’t like & deciding that they had better obey it) go on and complain about the “stupid” rules and obey them grudgingly, griping and complaining as they do so. I told those two youth that if they did not go on to the following two steps, that they would probably become bitter instead of better! I said however, that if they would go on to steps three and four, such controversial and even unpleasant rules and policies (whether in a youth group, church, school or place of employment, etc) can actually become a source of spiritual growth!

3. CHECK YOUR REACTION TO THE RULE. How do we act and react upon losing our “rights?” We can either have a gripey, complaining attitude or a rejoicing one.

I Cor. 10:23

Phil. 2:1-11(esp. vv. 3-5) – I mentioned to the youth group representatives that a Christian has no “rights.” For instance, a father has no “right” to read the newspaper when he comes home from work. A student has no “right” to dress any way he pleases. The only true “right” each of us had, was to go to hell. That is something that we truly DO deserve! We are sinners by choice and by nature, and as such we truly have a “right” to go to hell. But thankfully God has removed that “right” from the lives of all truly believers in Christ. (Hallelujah!) But apart from that “right,” we are not “owed” anything. We do NOT “deserve” to have everything go smoothly for us every day. We don’t have a “right” to do whatever we feel like doing. Rather, the Bible bluntly teaches that the Christian, ANY Christian has been “bought with a price” and that we are to “glorify God in our body and in our spirit, which are God’s.” (II Cor. 6:19-20)

I Thess. 5:18

I Pet. 2:20

4. SEEK TO DISCOVER GOD’S PURPOSE IN HAVING THE RULE (that you find so distasteful!). Finally I encouraged those two young men that day to ask themselves, “*What is God trying to teach me or develop in my life through this?*” In other words, what’s the reason for this trial?

- Perhaps it could be that God wants me to learn to do things I don’t like to do. that lesson will prove invaluable in the future, since throughout life every one of us has to perform countless tasks and obey countless rules that we don’t necessarily like or find agreeable, or that we may not understand.
- Maybe God is trying to teach me that the world’s goods are not to have my affections.
- Perhaps God is trying to develop a servant’s heart and a selfless attitude in me by forcing me to go “the extra mile” for others—even when it’s inconvenient and not enjoyable.

There are a multitude of character qualities that God may wish to develop in me via rules and policies that I don’t agree with or may not even understand. But if I will ask God to show me what He wants me to learn from such “rules,” genuine spiritual growth can and will begin to appear.

James 1:2-8 (esp. vv. 2 & 5) – (e.g. a child saying: “Why do I have to go to school anyway? An illustration in that regard: I knew of a teenager whose parents allowed him to regularly stay up until 2am-3am on school nights, watching late night programmes on television (these were not immoral or intrinsically evil). Naturally he would then not want to wake up at 7am and go to school. He even invented “sicknesses” (“I don’t feel good,” “My stomach hurts,” etc) and excuses to not go to school. Unfortunately the parents often gave in to him and let him get away with this, and allowed him to stay home. It made him happy in the short run, but was absolutely terrible preparation for life in the “real” world. Is anyone surprised that he later had trouble holding a job?

Rom. 8:28-29 – (e.g. “Why do I have to sweep the floors, make my bed or clean my closet?”)

II Cor. 4:17 – (Illustration of “*The Picture*” vs. “*The Frame*.” God is more interested in my inner man i.e. my character, than He is in my external beauty or my just being “happy” & getting whatever I want. God wants you and I to “*get back up on the easel*” and let Him to continue to mould and shape and develop us into what He wants us to become, by the grace of God!)

CONCLUDING THOUGHT: Note, following the above steps does not mean that you can’t question or suggest changes or new ideas. But it is imperative that a person, especially a young person, do so in the right way! – I Tim. 4:12; 5:1-2.