

On Rule

by J.B. Stoney

The importance of rule and oversight in the church, and the dangers of clericalism and radicalism.

Scripture: Acts 20:28, 1 Timothy 3:1, 1 Timothy 6:17, Hebrews 13:17

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Spiritual Authority"

Description

J.B. Stoney emphasizes the importance of rule in the church, distinguishing between clericalism and radicalism. He highlights the need for oversight and character qualifications for those in leadership roles, emphasizing the responsibility of rule and the principle of subjection. Stoney stresses the significance of divine intelligence in ruling and the necessity of maintaining order in the church. He discusses the roles of bishops, deacons, and the practical aspects of distribution of resources within the church, urging individuals to be rich in good works and ready to communicate.

Transcript

HEBREWS 13:17

I FEEL impressed to bring before you, beloved brethren, the subject of rule, in the hope that a few words upon it may enable us to distinguish between clericalism and radicalism.

Clericalism is the assumption of rule in a teacher. The teacher is not necessarily a ruler, though the ruler may be a teacher. Radicalism is that which wants to be independent of all rule. Nothing is more important for us practically at this time than to see that it is more according to the rule than according to the teaching in a place that the progress is.

Rule is not merely government; it is oversight. " If a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God ? " It is character that is the qualification for rule. I see it in every place that it does not depend upon the gifted person there, but upon the character of the oversight. A teacher may be an elder, but it is not of a teacher but of an elder it says, " They watch for your souls." And of such it says, " Obey them that have the rule over you"-- the guides, properly speaking. I therefore have read this verse as the best passage I can find to bring the subject before you.

From the beginning I see how necessary it is to be subject to rule. At the very start the breakdown was through disobedience; and the first commandment with promise is in connection with obedience to rule. The wife is to be in subjection to her husband. It is a principle which you find pervading all Scripture, and

the contrary principle you find running parallel with it all through also. Cain says, "Am I my brother's keeper ? " Christianity maintains that you are to be your brother's keeper ; it is the principle of John 13 : " If ye know these things happy are ye if ye do them."

I am called to minister to a person, not as he desires, but to so minister to him that I may remove from him anything that comes in as a hindrance between his soul and Christ. I see something in you, and I take pains to remove it; that is charity. " I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you." "Anew commandment I give unto you. That ye love one another as I have loved you." I do not act towards you as your inclination dictates; but just as a father might say to one of his children, I do not like that colour that you wear; or, I do not like the way in which you act. It is not that I wish to wound you, but I take such an interest in you that I wish to improve you. True love desires the perfection of its object Love is not blind; it says, I will take care that you shall be altogether such as I would have you : " Thou art all fair, my love ; there is no spot in thee." That is the great principle. Thus in small meetings there is often more real vitality than in large, because there is more oversight.

I am not touching on the place of the pastor. The great principle is that we are all to have oversight: " Be subject one to another." We are all to have godly care over each other, and if this be common to all, how much more those who are older ? Of course it would not be right for a young person to go up to an old brother and say, I do not at all approve your ways. " Thou shalt rebuke thy brother " is law. Legality consists in pointing out the fault; rebuke is always legal; washing is with divine power removing the defects that I perceive, else it is only making the blot still greater. If I see a defect in you I am responsible to remove it, though I may not be able to do so. Whether able to remove it or not, if I charge myself with the responsibility of it, I shall not be very ready to gossip about it. If I am responsible for a window being clean, I shall not be in a hurry to point out the spots on it; I shall not want to talk about them to the master and the company. I often say to myself, You are responsible for that defect; do not be in a hurry to talk about it. You may be very quick to see defects, but your very quickness of perception only saddles you with the greater responsibility. Some are more responsible than others; the greater your age the greater your responsibility, so it is, " not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil."

Now there is a difference between gifts and office. If I am a bishop in Quemerford I am not a bishop anywhere else. If I am a gift in Quemerford I am a gift everywhere else. Christendom is very anxious to maintain the office, but it overlooks the gift. If I could say of any regiment. All the officers of that regiment are there, I could not say it was demoralised, though the rank and file might be in a very low state. But if the officers are wanting, I admit the regiment is demoralised, and I am anxious to get it into order of some kind. There must then be some officer, there must be order. There is no such thing as being left by God to do things in the church anyhow at all. I know places where things go on well, and where, as I have said, it does not depend so much on the gift as on the oversight. " Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof," or as it is literally, "Shepherd the flock."

There is always a tendency to connect rule with teaching; and that is clericalism. I do not know anything that has caused more confusion than teachers trying to be rulers, gaining a certain prominence in rule because of their having a gift. Teachers are often young men, and I say to such, you must be subject to rule. There are other qualifications for rule besides that of age. I never take the place of rule myself, though certainly I am old enough; still I lend my aid to any ruler in case of difficulty.

There must be divine intelligence in ruling; the work is done by the power of God-- there could be no order otherwise-- but meanwhile there is no assumption of office. I may not be able to appoint the rulers officially, at least I cannot give them their commission. But as it is said, when there is no Lord Chancellor, the great seal is put into commission--what is called a care meeting; just so we may not have a bishop, but three or four do the work. I am not so particular about who does the work, as that the work is to be done.

You cannot appoint bishops ; for if you were to try to do so in Quemerford, you would find that some of them would be in system, and that therefore you could not get them. " Much food is in the tillage of the poor ; but there is that is destroyed for want of judgment." It is lost because there is not a man who can come in and say, I am the deacon or the bishop of this place ; and so the work is left in abeyance, and there is untold lack for want of judgment. People say, You have no bishops and deacons, and I answer. Well, I cannot say we have them, but anyhow if you come amongst us you will find the work is done. Just as I might say. In this house there is neither governess nor tutor, but there is a maid-servant who has so much grace and power that she keeps the children in order, and the children are so good that they obey her. So do not talk about the lack of officers, but see that the work is done.

Turn for a moment to Acts 20. What do we find here ? When the apostle comes to the church at Ephesus, for whom does he send ? for the teachers ? Not at all! He sends for the elders-- the overseers as they are called in verse 28 ; and he puts them in the place of watching. " I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch."

I now pass on to I Timothy. I know what objections are raised as to this epistle ; but I am very certain no person can understand the second epistle without understanding the first. We get here the orderly state of the church as it was at the first. Suppose there is a garden all grown over with weeds, and entirely gone to ruin, so that no traces of what it was at one time remain, and I want to put this garden to rights again. I make inquiries as to who saw it in its original state, for it is the original idea I want to respect. And an old man turns up who says. There was once a walk that went down in this direction. I know so much. Well, immediately I set to work to clear out anyhow that one walk. Thus I Timothy gives us the original idea.

Young Christians are full of enthusiasm as to the wonderful truths that God has recovered to us in these last days, but I believe we have no conception as to what the original church was--as to its magnificence on the earth. I am as ready as any one can be to acknowledge with my whole heart before God the marvellousness of the grace that has visited us; I believe it is the most marvellous thing that the Lord should have taken us up and revealed to us His mind, as He did to His disciples at the beginning, in Luke 24, but I should like to know what " the laying on of the hands of the presbytery " was, and what the gift that was given Timothy " by prophecy." I may make a sort of guess about these things, but they are beyond me quite. It is not that we are not to be full of thanksgiving for what we have got, but I do say that a great deal of humble waiting on the Lord is needed that He would indeed instruct us as to what is " the house of God "--as to what the church is in His mind; as it says, " That thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God." When man looks at it it is the house of God: when Christ works in it it is the body. A man cannot behave himself in the body, but he is called to do so in the house.

The first chapter of I Timothy is taken up with doctrine ; it is the essential thing. The second chapter is prayer. Prayer is dependence upon God. The man was to be characterised by prayer, the woman by appearance. That is the difference between the man and the woman. A godly woman, instead of seeking to attract man by dress and appearance, shows by her ways that she has retired from the world, and has

taken God for her portion. Man, on the other side, instead of being self-reliant, is dependent on God.

Chapter 3 is rule. Here we get bishops and deacons. We all know this is the letter, but the question is whether we know it as divine. Some have before now been offended with me when they have spoken of beginning a new meeting, if I have asked, " Who is to be the bishop ? " If you are going to have the church of God in a place, I say, who is going to have the charge of it ? Who is going to rule ? Are you sensible of the gravity of what you are doing ? People think lightly of it, but it is quite contrary to Scripture to do so; it is a very serious thing, therefore it is said, " if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God ? " I do not know any one thing people are so slow to take as the responsibility of the church of God. If a man is a bishop Peter says he ought to take the oversight of the flock " willingly." And here it says, " If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work." There is no better, no higher. I am not talking of gift now ; but he adds, " Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine."

It is a solemn question-- one in which we all help or hinder. Which are you doing ?

And now a word about deacons. It is not as to whether there be a deacon or not; this work also may be put into commission. The assembly provides the means, and there are certain persons who carry out the dispensing of them. A deacon is to be a well-ordered person; if you cannot find one to undertake the work you must get two or three to do it. The fifth chapter takes up the practical action of it in the matter of distribution. As much as possible you ought to be careful in the distribution of money not to put the saints in a position where faith cannot be exercised. Thus no one is to be put on the list until they are too old to work for themselves. I think every one in need ought to be looked after, but no one, except a person in certain circumstances, ought to have, so to say, a stipend. There are certain qualifications for such, as we get in verses 9 and 10.

I believe great mischief has been done through ignorance on this point. It is not that you should not help people over a difficulty, but if you make them entirely dependent on you, you hinder their faith in God, and by your very kindness you do them an injury. If a man be in a difficulty, help him over it. In some cases, of course, there must be a continuation, and they must be put on the list.

All this is really important, for it is a day when every barrier is broken down, rule is altogether gone, absence of subjection is the rule. The point is not how the oversight comes, but whether the thing itself is really worthy. This is an immense help. As a young man I found that obeying others who, as people say, had no right over me, was exceedingly useful. Often a man thinks if he has a certain gift that he is not under rule. I say, not at all. Your gift does not give you rule over others. On the contrary, part of that very gift consists in the ability given you to press home on others that they are to be subject to those whom God has put over them, and as you do this you will find out the real honour that there is in subjection.

All I say is, I would support rule by prayer, by the word of God, in every way that I could; but do not mix up the overseer with the gift. They are not derivative in any way. I believe the church would hold a very different position in the eyes of men if it were known that every person who came in was looked after more than they would be in a nunnery; that there would be no detail in their private life that would not be a matter of interest to the overseers.

There is an order that runs all through the epistle. In chapter 3 we have what the church should be here-- " The pillar and ground of the truth " ; and in chapter 4 comes in the apostasy, or Romanism, which attempts to set up another order of things by exaction-- not supersession, which was the necessary result of "Jesus

Christ come in flesh." If He have so come, He has of necessity superseded the man that was here; and so wicked spirits will not acknowledge Him as having so come, because it supersedes everything of Adam.

But Romanism comes in admitting that the man is alive. It is the effort of the enemy to make a man religious without God. Radicalism is the effort to elevate him in his own way, and so it is called liberality, and is simply exalting man; so that 'gain is godliness.' They will be rich; they get a certain power by wealth. The moment a person seeks the elevation of man, he looks for all that will raise him; and so wealth comes in. Therefore it says in the midst of such things, " Charge them that are rich in this world."

And this brings in something apart from deacon's work. I do not think a rich man should use deacons. I do not say he is never to put into the box; but this I do say, that when he hands money over to the deacons it becomes the Lord's money, and the responsibility of it is no longer his but theirs. The box is the Lord's money; it is simply the Lord saying to each one. Will you give me anything to-day ? You may refuse to do so, and you may have good reasons for refusing; but it is to the Lord you refuse to give. The deacons are responsible to the Lord for the use made of it.

I would also notice that the apostle Paul would not take from the church at Corinth, whilst he would take from an individual Corinthian. I am not sure that the assembly is up to giving in ordinary cases ; there is too much partiality in the saints. Stephanas and his companions supplied Paul with what was lacking on the part of the Corinthians ; though he would not take from them, he was " glad of their coming." In this way it is the company in which you are least a receiver as a labourer in which you will be the happiest working. You will be all the happier for not being dependent on them; they receive from you, and not you from them.

Meanwhile those that are rich are to do good, " be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate, laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life." Suppose there is a penny. I have no divine title to that penny. But you cannot take it by force; for I say you have no divine title to it, either. I, then, have got possession of it, though no title to it; and I may do as I will with it. If I lay it out on myself, I have the good of it now, and I thank God for it; if I lay it out on someone else, I will get the good of it by-and-by. " Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations." If I lay it out badly, I have got neither the good of it now nor hereafter ; I have not used it as the Lord .would have me. I have heard people say in a radical sort of way, when receiving from another, I do not thank you for this; I thank the Lord and no one else. Well, I say you might as well thank them now, for the day will come when you will have to.

I object to a person having what you call an almoner. All I want to make clear is the difference between the individual and the assembly in the matter of money. I want a gifted individual to be responsible to the Lord for his money. If he likes to put anything into the box with me, all well and good ; but when he does so he has handed it over to the responsibility of others. For my part, I think there is nothing more difficult than the use of money for the Lord. It is the gift that people are most anxious to have, and I think it is the most difficult to exercise. I believe immense harm has been done by making pensioners. It is of importance to care for poor saints, and keep them from want, and yet to leave room for faith to act. Never prevent a soul being exercised before God.

We can thus easily understand how it is a grief to those who rule when the saints do not go on well. " They watch for your souls as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief." They

will have to give an account to the Lord of the way in which they have acted to souls. " Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward." It is the servant, not the people, who loses his reward. The servants have to give an account of what they have done to the souls.

In conclusion, you ought to be able to say to inquirers. Do you ask for bishops and deacons ? the work is done. It is not a question of keeping up a position, but of keeping the house in order. And if, as I have said, there is none but a servant-maid to do it, I say she is anyhow keeping the house clean. It is not a person sitting ex cathedra that we want; it is a person that will do the work. The moment teachers take upon themselves to act for the assembly it is clericalism. It is not teachers, it is the assembly, that must act; it is a deliberative company. Overseers and pastors should visit cases, look after them, and so on, and thus prevent their coming as matters of discipline before the assembly. Only the assembly can deal with them.

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