

THE SPIRIT OF REBELLION

By Frank Mancuso, Ph.D.



The world news headlines of April 2011 leave some asking what God plans regarding the fall of North Africa's Tunisia, the Middle East's Egypt and the rebellions in Iran, Libya, Yemen, Algeria and the small Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain. All these nations are in an uproar reportedly because of food inflation, unemployment, corruption and governance problems. How these revolutionary actions will ultimately affect the world is unknown. Will the countries come under the rule of democracy, radical Islam or another form of government? Some of these people rebel because they want freedom of choice, while others desire the power to dominate and even rule the world.

These happenings should not surprise Christians who know scripture's words on the end times, when rebellion and wars will be as commonplace as the rising of the sun. In most Christian circles, rebellion is thought and spoken of negatively. This view comes largely from biblical stories of rebels, such as Adam and Eve, who chose to follow their own desires rather than God's. Most are familiar with the rebellion of Lucifer (Satan) and one-third of the angels who wanted the absolute freedom to rule their own existence without the interference of God, their Creator.

Some Christians hold the position that opposing any authority is wrong because it is all instituted by God (Romans 13:1, NASB). This applies to the authority of teachers, parents or the rule of law in any land. Pacifism can lead to the belief that submission, tolerance and patience must rule over the impulse to fight and take matters of authority into one's own hands.

When the prevailing attitude is either, "Let others rule" or, "I rule" (rather than "Let us, the people, rule through representation [republic]") I believe abuses and dysfunctions also rule. It doesn't take much thought to realize that evil, anti-God and anti-Christian authorities have always been in existence. We won't walk away from our God because a government says so, or

have an abortion because the law permits it. Our obedience to God overrides our subjection to the laws of any earthly authority. In other words, some acts of rebellion are righteous.

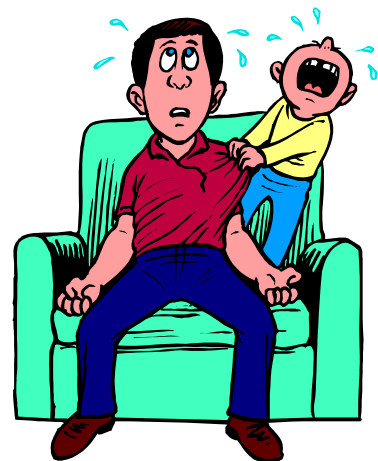


On July 4th each year, we celebrate the actions in 1776 that demonstrated the American colonists' spirit of independence from the English rule of King George III. Had our forefathers not rebelled, we would not be Americans—we would be English. I have nothing against the English, but I am glad to be an American. Our July celebrations signify our continued approval of the rebellion against English rule. Said differently, we agree that rebellion can be proper.

Another example of healthy rebellion was Jesus' handling of the Pharisees. He encouraged people to do what these religious rulers said, but not act as they did. He didn't speak against their position, but against what was revealed to be in their hearts by their behavior. He was very direct and called them hypocrites, blind, white-washed tombs, murderers, neglectful, thieves, selfish, serpents and a brood of vipers who had the power of preventing others from entering the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 23).

FAMILIES AND TEENAGE REBELLION

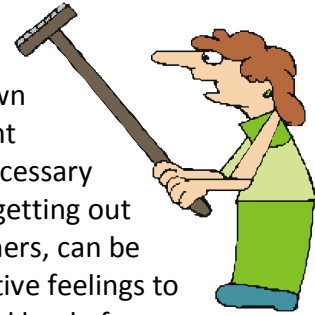
In our Christian culture, it is hard for parents to consider a son's or daughter's rebellion as anything other than selfish, wrong and sinful. As a Christian counselor, I have been confronted by parents of rebellious young people who not only want, but actually *demand* I help get their children in line with parental control. Though they do not often admit it, they behave as though they have the right to absolute control over family members. No human being has such a right over another person. Even God, who could exercise absolute control over others, refuses to do it. He has given us free will and respects our liberty to choose right or wrong, as we find in the story of the prodigal son. Parents need to exercise responsible leadership that is not dictatorial.



It is often difficult for parents to see teenage rebellion as a sign of family dysfunction (which is fairly often the case), and not just the result of a son's or daughter's anger, impulsivity or immaturity. *Some* of all parental control during young people's development is inappropriate and serves to escalate family conflict. The teen years are a breeding ground for conflict and family disintegration. Without a doubt, parents should have clear and firm boundaries and reasonable control in leading the family. However, if the rules are only reasonable to the parental mind, and fail to consider younger people's physical, emotional and spiritual development, they will cause great friction. Teens are growing in knowledge and experiencing significant changes in values, beliefs, feelings, etc. They long to develop self-confidence, exercise free will and grow independent of the family. To accommodate these changes, many parental boundaries need to be flexible and bend as teens transition to adulthood.

REBELLION AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL TASK

“Pleaser” children and teens flow readily with the controlling tide of the wishes of adult and heavenly authorities. These “good boys and girls” rarely (perhaps never) exercise their own independent thoughts and conscience. Being compliant may prevent them from passing through a rebellious phase or completing the necessary psychological task of adolescent rebellion. Fear of their own anger getting out of control and hurting others, as well as their fear of displeasing others, can be powerful enough that they hide and suppress or repress their negative feelings to their own physical, emotional and spiritual detriment. It takes a truckload of courage to live one’s own reality without donning a self-made mask of Christian piety or maturity. Real, deep and permanent heartfelt change and becoming like Christ requires that we choose to move beyond our own fears. Each of us needs to remove the mask to live the truth of our inner and often secret life, which is both beautiful and ugly. God is a God of truth; in that place of honesty, He does His work.



Most people who never “rebelled” in their own family of origin will do so, or need to do so, at some point of their lives. It is deeply wearying to put up defenses against the reality of negative feelings and be someone they are not. It is maddening to live in a constant state of forfeiting one’s own feelings, wishes, thoughts, conscience and decisions—one’s own self—for others.

Many Christians have misunderstood the admonition to live righteously by putting others first. They often cite Philippians 2:3,4, which says,

Do nothing from selfish or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

What most people hear is “Don’t be selfish. Always regard others above yourself and their interests above yours.” This interpretation is close, but the difference is destructive. “Do nothing from selfish or empty conceit” means we are to think about ourselves, but *not to the exclusion of* thinking about others. It does not mean we can never do what we want. We are not to *always* regard others and their interests above our own. The verses tell us to “not merely only look out for your own personal interests,” which implies it is expected and proper that people look out for their own interests. Even the second greatest command, “love your neighbor as yourself,” clearly says self-love should exist, and it is even the basis for our loving others. There is meant to be some balance between giving to self and others.



In the end, we need to rightly and thoughtfully rebel against all false teachings and beliefs, against laws that are unlawful and against those who threaten to take away our God-given rights, freedoms and liberties. Sometimes we must stand against our own church, family or government when it is clear that following them would be a violation of

our own precious conscience and the higher laws of God. Beyond agreeing with the idea there exists a healthy and righteous rebellion, we all need to follow it up with supportive action—words are not enough.

A CALL TO ACTION

The decision of whether rebellion is right or wrong is determined by each person's informed sense of discernment and conscience. Such internal guidelines are developed according to scriptural mandates and life experiences, while listening to the collective voice of others without feeling obligated to please them.

At any given time, there are any number of people, laws and beliefs that need to be challenged or resisted in our families, churches, places of employment and government. What or whom is God calling you to stand up to? He may call you to rise up against yourself—that is, confront the fear that inhibits your speaking the truth or living as you believe you should. The pathway to any change begins by embracing the truth, be it pleasant or unpleasant. This is where God begins His work in us, which can have a ripple effect that extends to those in our sphere of influence and beyond.

In the end, we each must learn to stand alone with our beliefs, even if no one shares our view or if others lack the fortitude to take action. Yes, it is far easier to do so with supportive company, so seek out others on the same journey. A great help in overcoming fear and inertia is to remember that, "A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart" (Ecclesiastes 4:12). When people who stand together have confidence their rebellion is righteous, vision is enhanced, courage is fortified and voices are made strong.

