

# take hold of God and pull

by Calvin Seerveld

## THE EVILOF AUTHORITARIANISM

### An exploration in Proverbs 29

To understand the book of Proverbs you have to remember that Solomon debated with the wisemen of Egypt (I Kings 4:29-31). Debates in those days were somewhat like tall-storytelling contests or, can you top this riddle? A wiseman would formulate a nugget of wisdom that stretched your imagination and made a telling point, like Agur's "There are three things, really, which never stop craving - four, you could think of, which never say 'Enough' - " Pause. And then follows his answer (Proverbs 30: 16):

the Grave,  
a woman's womb unable to bear a  
child,  
the Earth, that never stops wanting  
water, and  
Fire, which never says, "Enough -"

Then the next wiseman would try out his. "There are three things, really, which are miraculous, too wonderful for me to grasp - four, you could think of, which I simply do not understand -" (Cf. Proverbs 30:18-19 for the payoff, and for its meaning, *For God's Sake Run With Joy*, pp. 42-46). And the wiseman who showed the keenest knowledge and sharpest insight won the contest. Solomon in his day was the sharpest, most subtle, deepest-going wiseman under the sun.

That's the temper of Proverbs 29 - back and forth repartee - which the (debating) wisemen at the court of King Hezekiah copied over from the Solomonic archives, under the leading of the Holy Spirit (Proverbs 25: 1). But Scripture is not just a collection of interesting proverbs that are kosher because Solomon said them. Scripture uses the wiseman's "Yes, but" method,

like David's poetic method in certain psalms, to tell us **who God is** and what is **the Lord's way of doing things**.

Now debate is a tricky thing. The truth of the matter often lies somewhere inbetween both of the sides taken. Like Job's cursing the day he was born (Job 3) and friend Eliphaz replying, well, you deserve it, you sinner (Job 4-5). Neither is quite right! All three chapters are authoritatively God-breathed, but you have to read the whole book and hear God's summing up voice (Job 38-41) before you know what the score is. You are not finished when you say Eliphaz's speech is infallibly inspired, because *the Gospel* is that chapters 4 and 5 are *not* the way of the Lord (Job 42: 7 -9)! And you don't have to believe people who talk like Job 4-5, even if they sit next to you in church.

This wiseman's back-and-forth way of getting at or getting out the truth sometimes confuses people. To this day Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 is read by many as if it means there is a time and a place for everything. And that is revealed as *partly* true. Because in context the point is: there *seems* to be a time and a place for everything, it's all relative and unstable and never-ending, what do you get out of it all, this hectic cosmic life (Ecclesiastes 3:9)? Nothing?! Hot air and chasing the wind? And the Good News comes in the next verses, Ecclesiastes 3: 10-15, which stop the believing reader from taking Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 in an unqualified, straightforward, indicative, factual manner (cf *Take Hold of God and Pull*, pp. 31-33).

Another way Solomon's wiseman method was taken amiss is this way. Imagine people who had attended a debate of "artful comparisons." They went home dazzled, remembering the most striking ones. Or, lesser wisemen, as teachers of the folk, would wrap up their point by using an "artful comparison," riddle, or parable-like story, which they had learned from a master wiseman. Some who picked up proverbs began to use them as slogans or to parade their newly acquired knowledge, to sound Solomonic or to end the argument with their neighbour by quoting kosher insight (like people who shut off discussion on something by saying, "Well, it was Providence"). Then the "artful comparison" no longer is wise, but pseudo-wise - just as you have pseudo-prophets. This kind of terribly conservative canonizing of proverbial slogans, encrusted and fossilized pseudo-wisdom, is what Jesus had to contend with when he debated the pharisaical scribes (= scholastic wisemen).

I have been arguing in *Vanguard* earlier that the book of Proverbs is not atomistic but hangs together in paragraphs and much larger units. If you still read Proverbs atomistically, verse upon Verse like jot upon tittle, I think you miss the Word of the Lord because of a misleading (perhaps, positivistic) hermeneutic. I have been offering an alternative. To hear the difference, please go read first, in your favourite translation, Proverbs 29: 15-24, and see what you get out of it. Then read the following translation aloud, to which I have put headings (comments, commentary), to help you hear the unified, Job-and-his-friends-debate-like progression of the section, as I understand it. To highlight my point in reading the translation here, a man's voice could take the odd-number verses and a woman's voice the even verses.

*Hardliner (stock quote)*

15 "Correction with a stick makes a fellow wise up:  
leave a young boy to himself, and he will shame his mother."

*Corrective comment (countering)*

16 . When brutal people ride high, wholesale apostasy happens!  
Those who do what is right will see them all cave in.

*Hardliner (a quote response with a "personal experience")*

17 ; "Straighten your boy out, and he'll do everything you want" -  
he'll even treat you to titbits of utter repose!

*Corrective comment (sorrowing)*

18 But without a vision (of their own), a folk will hang loose  
like disheveled hair!  
However, whoever keeps the Lord's order will be blessed.

*Hardliner (starting to argue rather than quote old sayings)*

19 You can't shape up a worker with words!  
even if he understands, he doesn't have to respond -

*Corrective comment (arguing back)*

20 Have you ever really looked at a man in a hurry with his words?  
Why you can count on a fool more than you can count on a hot-headed  
talker!

*Hardliner (shouting)*

21 But if you coddle and pamper a worker from his youth on,  
all you get finally is pure obstinacy!

*Corrective comment (bringing critique close to home)*

22 Indeed, a testy, angry man kindles quarrelsomeness all around.  
Whoever is mastered by uncontrollable rage commits untold destructive  
evil!

*Hardliner (gets the point somewhat, remembers an appropriate saying, calming  
down, a little pompously)*

23 "The presumption of man will humiliate him,  
but he who hath a humble spirit shall attain glory."

*Corrective comment (still correcting such full-blown, unthinking, abstract  
quoting, ironically, somewhat exasperated)*

24 Whoever deals with an inveterate deceiver is unable to stand it  
with himself after a while:  
he has to listen to the cursed stuff, but just cannot straighten  
it out!

Then follows immediately a coda, as it were (29:25-27), which sums up the thrust of the whole five chapters, Proverbs 25-29. I hope to explicate that another time. But let me explain a few things about the translated \ section right here: how do you know it is debate-like? The first verse says, "A stick and correction give wisdom ... " (:15). Isn't that true? Doesn't the Bible ask us to spank our kids, use the ruler or strap on gradeschool students, keep your workers in line, and punish criminals? Are you one of those liberal mollycoddlers that wants to take the hell out of our Bible? Do you perceive my meaning?

Proverbs 29: 15 a is only half-true taken all by itself, and it is *false* if mouthed by somebody taking a hard line as Job's friends did. You can't scare anybody into heaven, and you can't beat a kid into wisdom. Only the Lord gives wisdom, says Proverbs 2:6. And my suspicion that

... gives wisdom" (: 15) needs correction is strengthened by the expression, "Straighten out your boy, and he'll make it easy *for you*; he'll bring repose, sweets, and relaxation to the very heart *of you*" (:17). For it's a wrong focus to force children into line so they are good to *us*, don't cause *us* trouble, don't embarrass *us*! Children (and grownups like parents too) are to be disciplined only so that they will serve *the Lord*, with gladness - right?! And it is very significant that the half Bible text most used to support christian day schools, "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," has in the context of Paul's exegesis of the fifth commandment (Ephesians 6: 1-4):

**Fathers, don't you drive your kids to rebellious anger, but get them to grow up and flower in the discipline and mind-set of THE LORD.**

Proverbs 29: 19a doesn't sound

quite right in isolation either - "a servant cannot be educated by words"; because Proverbs' is full of the fact confessed that God's Word *does* things, and human speech too either *heals* if it is wise or *actually kills* if it is idle (cf *Vanguard*, March 1972 on Proverbs 25: 11-15, 23-28). It's so, fools are beyond reach, but that is not the norm; and 29:20 immediately challenges 29:19, saying that words spoken in frustrated anger are worse than foolish and naturally do not effect the righteousness of God (cf James 1: 17-27, especially :20). "But!" sputters the black-and-white thinking, hardlining antagonist, "if you don't use force, you get spoiled brats, recalcitrant workers, and just stubborn disobedience (:21)! Don't you see!"

I see, says the Word of God in Proverbs 29:15-24, that angry men with power and authority commit untold destructive evil in the world (:22). Violent action is simply sin, and destroys the center of those who are violated, so that while you may shape up the child, student, worker, or believer on the outside, inside a deep-seated, disloyal desertion sets in (: 16). If a person, a student body, a work staff, or a people of God do not have their own integrating vision of the Lord's order for their life building up within them, no amount of yelling or rules, punch-clocks or pulpit pronouncements shall stop them from disintegrating, each going his own unstructured way, like sheep and children and handicapped people scattered on a thousand hills (: 18) ....

At this point in the argument, 29:23 strikes me like this: suppose an opulent, paunchy fellow in an expensive limousine or one of those famous sports idols with a six-figure income, in a lowly Ferrari, glides into your driveway, power rolls down his air-conditioned window, taps the ashes off his Cuban cigar on the shiny side, looks you straight in the eye, and says, "My only comfort is that I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ" - what would you think, as you surveyed the scene?,

I'd think Proverbs 29:24, and wince. He gave the right answer, all right, but who cares ! if it is only pseudo-wisdom, blocking a self-examining repentance, warding off the Word of

the Lord by generalizing it into an abstraction .. , or applying it only to your neighbour. 29:23 was a commonplace, all right, quoted by everybody. Eliphaz quotes 29: 23 to finish off his judgment upon Job (Job 22:29)! ‘ [Notice the context, for example, in which Matthew reports Christ quotes 29:23 - ironically? touché on something the scribes would never have thought of applying the saying (read Matthew 23:1-12).] So what does it mean? If you interpret it atomistically, it is a formula of orthodox warning and reward. If you read 29: 23 in the context of 29:15-24, then you see revealed the spiritual, anti-christ blindness and cover-up of a hard-lining, self-righteous authoritarianism, whether it show up in the home, school, at work, or in the church.

Just a couple things yet.

(1) Godly authority becomes demonic authoritarianism whenever those persons, who wield the power or direct the course assume the prerogatives of God, a merciless god with no penultimate loopholes, who reaps what is sowed, period (like the God of Job’s friends). Parents who stifle a disobedient child’s response through fear are authoritarian, and do not save him or her but curse the young one , with an everlasting resentment (29: 16). Teachers who break the spirit and mind of a student by covert threat, coercing deportment and thought into a, single, accepted track created in their own image, are authoritarian, and do not lead the boy or girl into knowledge, but wilder them for years and years (29:18). Church leaders who are so touchy and self-serving they smother every breath of congregated believers who sigh for renewal in liturgical response, doctrinal emphases, church life priorities: they are authoritarian and do not shepherd God’s children but gravely kill them with immaturity (cf Matthew 23). And anyone, including Christ-believers, who judge their neighbour not to heal things straight, very concretely, but to show who is right, quite abstractly! “ are accursed, a blight upon Christ’s body (cf Matthew 7: 1-5; cf also *Vanguard*, May 1974,

(2) I believe the Bible is authoritatively inspired by God and happily believe “without any doubt all things contained in them.” I also believe that many *uninspired* ministers, teachers, and parents have not known how to break the Word of LIFE to men and women, but have just broken people into bits with the Bible. And I cry in my study for those I know who are dead to God and closed to the joy of creaturely life within the Lord’s ordinances because of the ways they were misread the Bible. I know, we do not need scapegoats. We need a reformation away from a pharisaic hermeneutic.

But I sense what a fearsome thing it must be for any middle-aged churchgoer, especially a pastor, to face the possibility that you, *as a believer*, might be reading the Bible, Proverbs, in a wrong way! How do you know who can you trust to open up the Scriptures in spirit and in truth?! Yet it is desperately important that we not be like the proof-texting Pharisees Jesus referred to in John 5:39, who can win Bible quizzes, but lack knowing the Lord in his full-orbed, judging mercy for daily life, pedagogical life, labouring life, liturgical LIFE. The Scriptures are not an insurance manual with hard-lining regulations on what *I* to do if fire, theft and murder occur. The Bible is our Father in heaven talking to us in a special way that enlightens the eyes of our heart so that in Christ we begin to receive the wisdom needed for searching out and keeping his creational ordinances ....

*Note: As I become more and more sure of what I am doing, I see how exposition of Proverbs, in both conservative and liberal theological circles, is going to have to be radically reformed. Since the matter is so serious, if any of you regular believers feel ill at ease with what I am discovering, if it does not ring true, please help me along with a comment or question.*

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