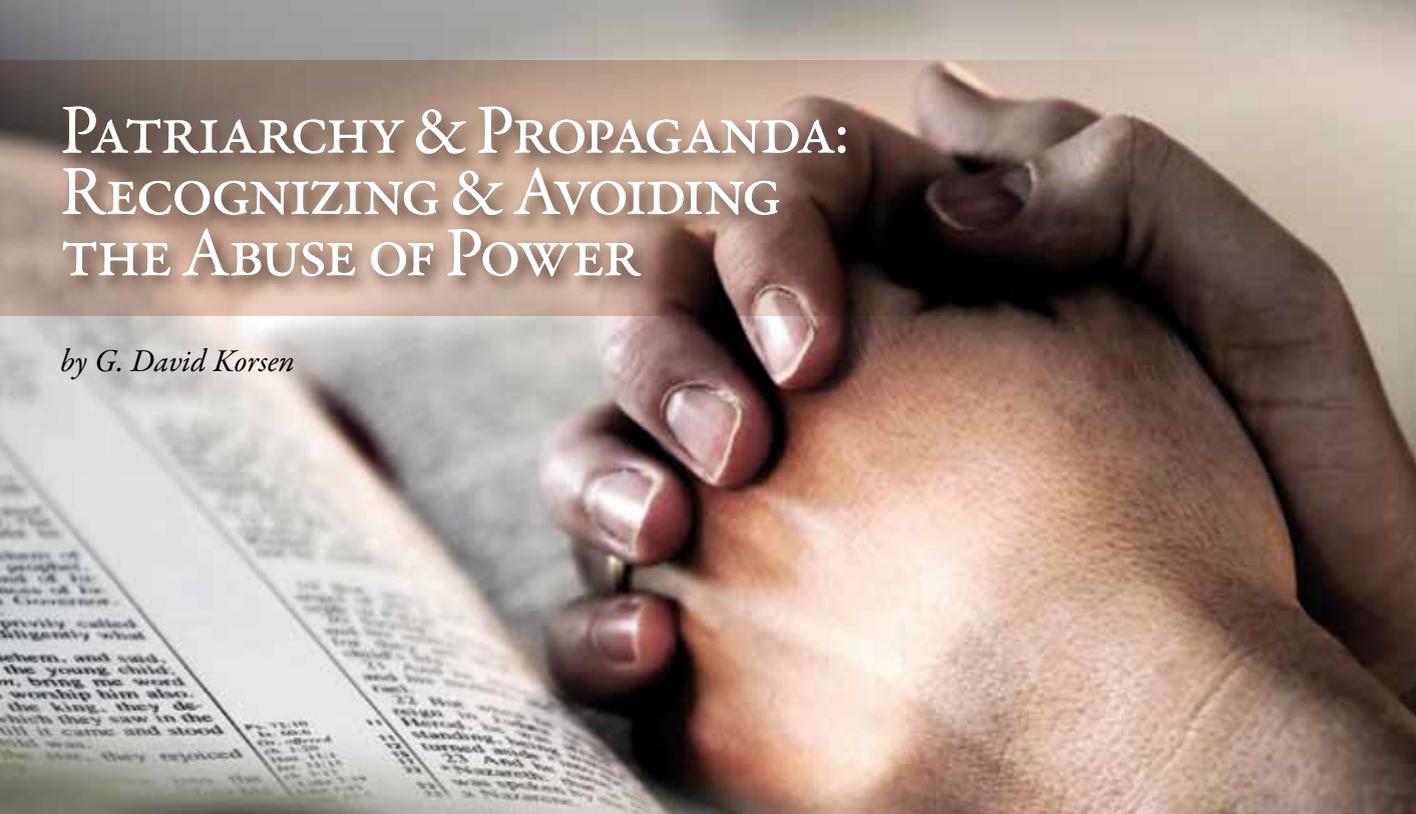


PATRIARCHY & PROPAGANDA: RECOGNIZING & AVOIDING THE ABUSE OF POWER

by G. David Korsen



Apparently, some believe that I am a treacherous person. Some claim that I have undermined the authority of Scripture by giving in to the pressures of modern culture. Some fear I have taken a “dangerous first step” and started down the “slippery slope” of liberalism and am willing to take others along with me.

I am an egalitarian.

Seven years ago I accepted the call as senior pastor to a church seeking revitalization. During the first three years we were blessed with renewal and growth, so a search team was formed to hire an additional staff person. After considering many candidates, one clearly stood out—a young woman with her master of divinity and all the skills the position required. Yet, when the search team brought this candidate to the church board, she was rejected solely because she was a “she” and not a “he.”

When I accepted the call to this church I was very candid about my convictions supporting women in leadership. Although a woman had never served in such a role, I was assured that “the time was coming.” This church belonged to the denomination I was ordained in, which had formally affirmed biblical equality in 1979.

So assuming what was now needed was sound biblical teaching on women’s service and leadership, I initiated a dialogue within the church. I did not realize I had ignited a fuse.

Almost immediately I became aware that a core group of influential leaders did not see this “dialogue” as an opportunity for discussion, but as a threat. They were convinced they had been protecting their church from a denomination that had compromised with the culture some twenty-five years ago. I was now viewed as advocating for their church to follow a “liberal” course. So, drawing on the recent writings from some influential patriarchal authors and websites, they set in motion a “propaganda machine.”

RECOGNIZING PROPAGANDA

The word propaganda does not seem like an irenic word that would foster conciliation. So, let’s clarify the term. Propaganda is information designed to shape opinions and behavior. Propaganda seeks to achieve a particular end—persuading others to “buy into” something. There is no motivation for entering into an unbiased dialogue to foster mutual respect and understanding.

Propaganda takes on a variety of forms, but in this brief article we will consider just three of these strategies.

CARD-STACKING

The term “card-stacking” comes from the world of gambling where accomplished players will stack the deck in their favor, even as they are shuffling the cards. In “card-stacking,” deliberate action is taken to bias an argument in one’s own favor by making the best case possible for one side and the worst case possible for the opposing perspective. By carefully citing evidence that only supports their preferred side, propagandists encourage listeners to accept their one-sided conclusions.

Patriarchalists engage in “card-stacking” when they present only the findings of their scholarship and ignore or denigrate other research. For example, one of the ongoing debates regarding gender roles has centered on the Greek word *kephale*. Translated “head,” it is used in a number of key passages central to this discussion (especially Eph. 5:23). Many patriarchalists insist that *kephale* must always mean “authority over” and that there is no evidence anywhere to suggest otherwise.

Yet, over the past three decades many studies have noted that *kephale* also means “source” or “origin.” Other recent scholarship has shown within the New Testament writings themselves that

kephale most often means “servant-provider.” In Paul’s letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, *kephale* is used five times and, in each instance, this meaning is verified. Christ is the *kephale* (“head”) in being a “servant-provider.” This is why it is all the more unsettling that many patriarchalists continue to claim that no evidence exists to support reading *kephale* in any way other than “authority over”... unless a deck is being stacked somewhere.

GLITTERING GENERALITIES

These are words that “glitter and sparkle” and use valued ideals to attract approval. Words like “freedom,” “honor,” and “love” trigger positive reactions. For example, when someone is asked to do something in “defense of freedom,” they are likely to agree because freedom is a valued ideal.

Patriarchalists often use phrases like “glorifying God,” “taking the Bible literally,” and “standing up for traditional values,” which are powerful motivators to accept their position. The implication is that if you want to be someone who affirms these values, then you must align yourself with patriarchy.

NAME-CALLING

The opposite of glittering generalities, name-calling associates an idea or a person with negative connotations in order to create unfavorable opinions. Name-calling is also closely associated with labeling and stereotyping.

Name-calling is most often used to discredit persons. Using negative words or references, it creates fear and arouses prejudice by labeling the opponents in derogatory and threatening ways. Two common labels used by patriarchalists concerning egalitarians are “feminist” and “liberal.” These provoke highly negative responses among most conservative evangelical Christians.

Another name-calling tactic is called *ad hominem*—Latin for attacking one’s opponent as opposed to their arguments. Many leading advocates for patriarchy have resorted to this by maligning the character of those who support egalitarianism. Several recent books assert that egalitarian scholars are drifting from affirming the authority of Scripture and are deliberately leading others astray.

These strategies work together to produce a climate of “fear and smear.” Fear is a powerful force in persuasion. It builds support for a particular position by creating distress or dread of the opposition. And it can be quite successful.

RESPONDING TO PROPAGANDA

Cultivating an awareness of propaganda is the essential first step toward recognizing how it is being used, identifying what specific techniques are being employed, and responding to its potential power.

The main thread running through the strategy of propaganda is not a quest for truth but a struggle for power. Propaganda is not necessarily interested in proving or disproving something. The goal is to discredit something or someone so that the position of the propagandist emerges as the “winner.” An awareness of this fundamental reality is essential to responding effectively to it.

The propaganda tactics of patriarchy must be confronted for what they are, and egalitarians must have the courage to speak out. Because of its “truth-telling” deficits, propaganda is very much an unethical phenomenon. Therefore, a response is required that confronts its unethical nature with an ethically driven resistance.

Truth matters in a climate of half-truths, misinformation, and even deception. To effectively challenge the agenda of patriarchy, these “truth-twisting” realities must be faced and confronted openly. However, we should not engage in a “counter-propaganda campaign” or seek to denigrate or demonize others. Rather we need to discern how Jesus’ words to be “wise as serpents, yet harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16) might be applicable.

Patriarchy is increasingly being advanced in many evangelical churches as a doctrine essential to the Christian faith, especially among a new generation who sees themselves as crusaders in a battle that must be won by any and all means. Consider this quote from a leading patriarchal website:

“This whole controversy is really about God and how His character is reflected in the beauty and excellence of manhood and womanhood as He created it. Will we glorify God through manhood and womanhood lived according to His Word? Or will we deny His Word and give in to the pressures of modern culture? That is the choice we have to make.”

For patriarchalists, the phrase “manhood and womanhood as God created it” is strictly defined by hierarchy, and to believe otherwise is to deny God’s Word. Impassioned by these convictions, many patriarchalists have unfortunately engaged in distortions of the truth. Egalitarians, on the other hand, have sometimes minimized the intimidating and detrimental nature of patriarchy. Too often it has only been mentioned in a passing manner, as an unfavorable or threatening influence, but little else.

Our challenge is to recognize, understand, and respond to the propaganda of patriarchy with discernment and courage, believing that “in Christ, the new creation has come: The old is gone and the new is here.” (2 Cor. 5:17).



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When does persuasion become propaganda?

“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (Jam. 1:19). With all conviction comes the calling to speak and live in love. As passionate egalitarians, how can we be sure our efforts to persuade others are God-honoring? We must continually and prayerfully examine our attitudes and actions.

PERSUASION

Devoted to attitudes based in truth

Considers other perspectives

Respects other opinions

Encourages dialogue

Rooted in mutual trust

PROPAGANDA

Distorts truth or includes false information

Criticizes other perspectives

Relies on biases or assumptions

Exhibits control through monologue

Rooted in fear