

When rulers break rules

By Dean Merrill

My wife and I were blissfully cruising down a highway in a central European country last year when our vacation hit a snag. The traffic squeezed from two lanes into one; and before I knew it, a stern-looking police officer was waving me over to the shoulder.

I got out to meet him. He quickly began lecturing me in his native tongue. I feigned a helpless pose as I murmured, "English — only English." He then pulled out a diagram of international highway signs and began vigorously pointing to one that meant merge right. Apparently he thought I hadn't gotten over soon enough.

Next came a multilingual document that said the fine for my infraction would be about \$15 — and I should pay him right there on the spot.

I looked back around the bend in the road. How had he even seen my merge into the right lane? With the naked eye, it was impossible.

Gradually, it dawned on me: This was a scam. The man wore the badge of law enforcement, but he wasn't doing police work at all. He was sim-

ply harassing befuddled tourists in rental cars for trumped-up offenses.

I kept tossing up my hands and playing dumb until he finally grew frustrated and gave me another paper that said I could go pay my "fine" at any post office instead.

When I told our story to missionaries that night in a neighboring country, they laughed. "Yes, it happens all the time up there," they said. "Freedom may have come to the eastern bloc, but the old habits of abusing power die slowly. He just wanted to pick up some extra cash for the weekend.

"You'll learn that when you're driving in parts of Europe and have car trouble, get lost or, heaven forbid, get into a fender-bender — the authorities are not always on your side."

Later on, as I reflected on the incident, a question crossed my mind: In a society like this, how would you tell your children to do the right thing even though the designated authorities don't? Would you say, "Yes, Son, I know the police don't always uphold fairness and justice — but even so, you need to please the Lord and obey the law"? How successful would that be?

And then I thought about my own country, where public leaders in high places have disappointed us. Role models who fail to live up to their solemn duty make it hard on us all, especially the young and impressionable. As David put it, "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can

the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3, NIV).

We have seen, in a hundred different ways, the truth of Proverbs 29:4 — "By justice a king gives a country stability, but one who is greedy for bribes tears it down." The social fabric in the 1990s has been gashed, and evil is oozing through the holes.

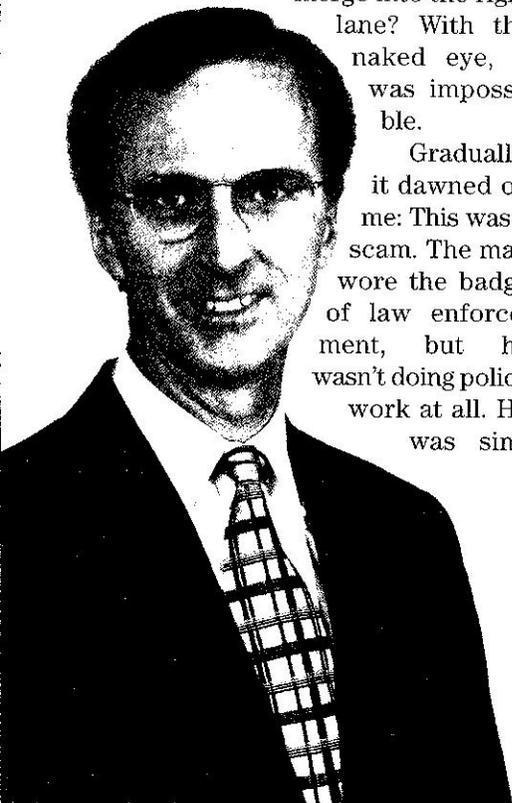
These are times that call for each of us to stand independent of the trend and become ever more trustworthy, credible and faithful — because we too are being watched. It's not just the president who ought to set a good example. Virtually every adult has someone who silently looks up to him or her.

And godly principles don't hinge on what happens in the White House or the courthouse. They come from the One who never wavers. That is why the apostle Paul, while on trial in front of a crooked magistrate named Felix, declared boldly, "I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and all people" (Acts 24:16). The fact that Felix was angling for a payoff (see v.26) didn't sway Paul in the least.

It's not good enough to shuffle through life saying, "Oh, well, at least I'm setting a better example than so-and-so." The more authorities who fail, the more our society needs the power of at least a few godly models. ■

Role models who fail to live up to their solemn duty make it hard on us all, especially the young and impressionable. As David put it, 'When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?' (Psalm 11:3, NIV).

Dean Merrill is a deacon at Living Springs Worship Centre (Assemblies of God), Colorado Springs, Colorado, and is the author of *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Church* (Zondervan).



7-11-99