

Your Duties Toward Church Leaders (Hebrews 13:17-19, 22-25)

“Obey your leaders and submit to them,” is a difficult text to speak on because of our culture and because we are Baptists. Our culture is anti-authoritarian and postmodern, and both ideas militate against obedience or submission.

Anglican preacher, John Stott, wrote (*Between Two Worlds* [Eerdmans, 1982], p. 51), “Seldom if ever in its long history has the world witnessed such a self-conscious revolt against authority.” To prove Stott’s statement, I ask, when you hear the words, *authority* or *submission*, what comes to mind? Do you welcome them as pleasant words, or do you bristle and put up your guard? Our nation was founded on a rebellion against authority, and one of our early mottoes was, “Don’t tread on me!” We have a defiant national spirit that exalts individual rights. The concept of submission to authority seems wimpy to us!

Our culture is also influenced by postmodernism, which holds that there is no absolute truth and that each person is free to make up or interpret “truth” as he sees fit. Thus, your “truth” is fine for you, but I have my own “truth,” and I would never feel obligated to submit to your “truth.” You can believe as you like, but you must also let me believe as I like. Truth is not authoritative. *I* am the authority over my life, and I use “truth” for my own ends.

Then, add to that the Baptist idea of congregational church government, where each member has an equal vote, and our text becomes especially problematic! Baptist church government is notoriously political. Baptists have divided from other Baptists over relatively minor issues. There is even a joke about the Baptist who was stranded on a desert island. When rescuers finally found him, they saw three buildings on the island. They asked, “What’s that building?” “That’s my house,” the Baptist answered. “Well, what’s that second building?” “That’s my church,” he said. “But, then what’s that third building?” “Oh, that’s where I used to go to church.” If Baptists don’t like a church, they wouldn’t think of submitting. They just start or join a new church!

But against all of these powerful influences, we come to [Hebrews 13:17](#): “Obey your leaders and submit to them...” As a part of God’s inspired Word, these commands are profitable for us ([2 Tim. 3:16](#)), and so we must grapple with them. Our verses are directed at church members, but they also implicitly contain some duties for church leaders. (Since next week is Easter, we will look at 13:20-21, which mentions the resurrection. The following week, Lord willing, we will look at the duties of church leaders.)

Your duty is to obey and pray for godly church leaders.

1. Your duty is to obey godly church leaders.

The Greek words for “obey” and “submit” mean to obey and submit! The difference, if any, between the two words is that obedience implies going along with direction or commands, whereas submission involves an attitude. You can obey outwardly while seething with anger on the inside, but you aren’t submitting. Submission implies a sweet spirit of cooperation that stems from trust. You trust that the leaders have your best interests at heart, and so you go along with them. The author gives two reasons why you should obey and submit to godly church leaders:

A. You should obey godly leaders because they keep watch over your souls as those who are accountable to God.

God has constituted various levels of authority under His ultimate authority. The purpose for all authority is to protect and bless those under authority. God establishes the authority of *civil governments* to protect and bless law-abiding citizens from those that would harm or take advantage of them. When the government does its job,

criminals are punished, foreign invaders are kept at bay, and the people can dwell in peace. To the extent that government leaders are corrupt or negligent, the citizens suffer.

In the *family*, God appoints husbands to have authority under Christ in order to protect and bless their wives and children. The husband is to provide for his family ([1 Tim. 5:8](#)), to protect his family from physical and spiritual danger, and to bless his family by leading them in the ways of God. An ungodly husband who uses authority for his own selfish ends is abusing the authority that God has entrusted to him, and will answer to God for his sins.

In the *church*, God has appointed elders or pastors (shepherds) to oversee the flock ([Acts 20:28](#); [1 Pet. 5:1-4](#)). They are not to lord it over the church, but rather to be examples to the flock ([1 Pet. 5:3](#); [2 Cor. 1:24](#)). On every level, those in authority are never in absolute authority. Every leader will give an account to God!

In our text, *leaders* is plural. The New Testament is clear that there is to be a plurality of elders over the local church ([Acts 14:23](#); [20:17](#); [Titus 1:5](#)). Plural leadership is a safeguard against the abuse of authority. When all of the elders in a local church have wrestled through an issue biblically and in prayer, and they all agree, they are not infallible, but there is a fair chance that they are right. There should always be room for biblically-based discussion of issues ([Acts 15](#)), but when the elders come to a consensus, the church should follow their leadership, unless it is clearly against Scripture on a major point of doctrine.

The text is clear that the church should submit to *godly* church leaders. Abusive leaders should be confronted and removed from office ([1 Tim. 5:19-21](#)). John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on [Heb. 13:17](#), pp. 352-353) observed, "the Apostle speaks only of those who faithfully performed their office; for they who have nothing but the title, nay, who use the title of pastors for the purpose of destroying the Church, deserve but little reverence and still less confidence."

Before we leave the subject of obedience and submission to leaders, let me be more specific on what it does not mean and what it means. First, it does not mean blindly following leaders without question. I doubt if this is a problem for most people, but the Jim Jones mass suicide incident of the 1970's shows that it can be a problem when an evil leader deceives people. Even in a church that is seeking to follow the Bible, it is not wrong and is right to examine the Scriptures to see if the teaching is sound (as the Bereans did with Paul's teaching, [Acts 17:11](#)). I welcome interacting with anyone about my sermons, as long as you are seeking to be faithful and submissive to what the Bible teaches. I am not infallible!

When is the church responsible to obey and submit? Obviously, when the leaders teach God's truth, especially on the essential doctrines and commands of the faith, we all must submit. It is not the elders' authority, but God's, that we must submit to. If it is an area where godly Christians may differ, we must give grace to one another to disagree. But submission to godly leadership would require that if you disagree with me on a secondary matter, you would be disobeying God to lead a faction against me. There needs to be a respect shown toward the office of those who teach God's Word. Paul wrote to Titus (2:15), "These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority [lit., commandment]. Let no one disregard you." To disregard Titus would have been to disregard God, whose word Titus preached.

I have seen two specific situations where church members should submit, even though it may be difficult. In one instance in my ministry in California, a very popular author was coming to our small town to speak. The problem was, this man had left his wife for another woman. The church he attended had disciplined him, but he told them that they couldn't do that, and he kept on with his popular ministry. We told our people that as elders, we did not want them to attend his talk, because to attend it was to give endorsement of his sin. Later I was grieved to hear that several of our members went anyway. I think that they disobeyed [Hebrews 13:17](#).

Another situation involved disciplining a widow in the church who married an unbeliever. She knew that this was sin, and since she had been the leader of our prayer ministry, her sin wrongly could have tempted other single women to follow her example. But when the elders put her out of the fellowship, some of the women in

the church continued to fellowship with her, in disobedience to [1 Corinthians 5](#), and in disobedience to the elders.

Church discipline is a difficult matter, because there are always those in the church who have emotional ties to the one being disciplined. Some always feel sorry for the person and urge others in the church to show grace and mercy, not judgment. But to be effective, discipline has to be uniformly enforced. If some members continue to fellowship with the person under discipline, then the penalty of being put out of the fellowship is undermined. It's the same thing as when parents do not stand together in disciplining their children. The children quickly recognize that they can do as they please, without any penalty, because dad and mom don't agree. So obedience to church leadership is especially important if the church has to discipline a sinning member.

B. You should obey godly leaders because if you cause them grief, you cause yourself grief.

[Hebrews 13:17](#) states that obedience to godly church leaders is for your benefit. Disobedience to them "would be unprofitable for you." God designed authority to protect and bless. If you disobey godly church leaders who proclaim God's Word to you, you are really disobeying God, which always has serious consequences ([Gal. 6:7-8](#)). Again, it is implicit that these leaders are conscientious men who are walking with God.

Spiritual children, like our natural children, can be the source of immense joy or of immense grief (which, literally, is "groaning"). Every pastor has had frequent occasion both for joy and for groaning over people in the flock. The apostle Paul told the Thessalonians, ([1 Thess. 3:9](#)), "For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account?" (See also, [1 Thess. 2:19-20](#).) The apostle John wrote ([3 John 4](#)), "I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth."

But Paul agonized over the Galatians' defection from the truth ([Gal. 1:6; 4:19](#)). He wrote to the Corinthians "out of much affliction and anguish of heart ... with many tears" ([2 Cor. 2:4](#); see also, [Phil. 4:19](#)). Paul was not concerned about his own welfare or reputation, but about their welfare and God's glory. If you cause your pastors to groan, it's because they know that your disobedience will damage both you and the name of Christ.

Thus, you should obey godly leaders because they keep watch over your souls and because if you cause them grief, you are causing yourself grief.

C. You should obey godly leaders by obeying their exhortations from God's Word.

In 13:22, the author says, "But I urge [lit., exhort"] you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly." Some may think that a 13-chapter letter is not on the brief side, but it can be read aloud in 48 minutes. Given the weighty subject matter, that's not too bad! Three times the author has indicated that he could say much more, but he restrained himself (5:11; 9:5; 11:32). (I can identify with that problem!) The word "exhortation" is used of a sermon ([Acts 13:15](#)). So even if the sermon runs almost an hour, you should bear with it and seek to obey it!

The word "bear with" is translated "endure" in [2 Timothy 4:3](#). After charging Timothy to "preach the Word," which includes "reprove, rebuke, exhort" ([2 Tim. 4:2](#)), Paul adds, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires."

The reason you must *bear with* or *endure* sound doctrine is that it often confronts how you think or live, showing you God's different way ("reproof," [2 Tim. 3:16; 4:2](#)). Because they want to please people, many pastors shrink from declaring "the whole purpose of God" ([Acts 20:27](#)). They think, "the doctrine of election is too controversial," so they don't preach on it, even though it's in the Bible for our spiritual profit. Or they would dodge our text, which talks about obedience and submission to church leaders, because it might upset too

many people. They dodge talking about male leadership in the church and home, because that upsets the feminists. Pretty soon, the Bible becomes a tame book of platitudes that allow everyone to live as they please!

Of course leaders must exhort with patience and gentleness. We must allow people time to wrestle with difficult truth as they grow in Christ. Spiritual maturity, like physical and emotional maturity, takes time. But, on the listening end, if you want to grow in Christ, you must bear with the exhortations of your spiritual leaders. Don't shrug off things you don't agree with. Go back to Scripture and see if these things are true. If they are, submit to them as the Word of God, not the word of men ([1 Thess. 2:13](#)).

A pastor did some research and found "that most people do not prepare in any significant way for church." He said, "In an average church, fewer than half of the worshipers pray for their encounter with the sermon. Less than a third pray for their pastor or his preparation. Even when the passage is clearly announced the previous week, only one in five people will take the time to read it before they come to church" (Michael Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives* [Thomas Nelson Publishers], p. 153).

If you want to "bear with" the word of exhortation that I bring each week, I would encourage you to pray for your own heart to be receptive to God's truth. Pray for me as I prepare the message and preach it, that I would be faithful to the text of Scripture. And, spend some time during the week going over the passage itself, meditating on how it applies to your heart. The effectiveness of my preaching does not just depend on how well I preach, but also on how well you listen. Even Jesus, the greatest preacher ever, exhorted His audience, "Take care how you listen" ([Luke 8:18](#)). Your first duty is to obey godly church leaders, and that primarily means obeying the Word of God that they preach.

2. Your duty is to pray for godly church leaders.

"Pray for us..." (13:18). It is instructive that the apostle Paul frequently asked for prayer. In [Romans 15:30-31](#), he asked his readers to strive together with him in their prayers for him, that he would be rescued from those who are disobedient, that his ministry would prove acceptable to the saints, and that he could come to visit them in joy by the will of God. In [Ephesians 6:19](#), he asks for prayer so that he could open his mouth and boldly proclaim the gospel. I would not think that he needed prayer for that, but he did! In [Colossians 4:3-4](#), he asks for prayer that God would open up a door for the word, and that he could make it clear (again, I wouldn't think that Paul had a problem making the gospel clear!). In [1 Thessalonians 5:25](#), he simply asks, "Brethren, pray for us!" In [2 Thessalonians 3:1](#), he asks for prayer that the word of God will spread rapidly and be glorified, and that he would be rescued from perverse and evil men. In [Philemon 22](#), he hopes that through Philemon's prayers, he would be able to visit him soon.

If the apostle Paul was that aware of his need for prayer, how much more the rest of us who attempt to serve the Lord! As Paul exclaimed, "Who is adequate for these things?" ([2 Cor. 2:16](#)). In our text, the author mentions two areas for prayer for leaders:

A. Pray for leaders in the battle to maintain a good conscience in all things.

We have to take an educated guess at what is behind the author's comment in verse 18, but it would seem to be something like this: The author has said some difficult things. He has confronted the traditionalists, who wanted to hold onto their Jewish ways, while still trying to follow Christ. He has said, "You can't do that! If you go back to Judaism, or try to blend it with faith in Christ, you will face God's judgment because you have diluted the gospel." The traditionalists were arguing with others in the church, "He's gone too far! He's saying that the ways of our fathers since the time of Moses are no longer valid." The author is saying in effect, "I understand how difficult my teaching has been, and I ask you to pray for me, because I am sure that my conscience is right before God, and that everything I have said has been to promote God's truth and your spiritual welfare."

Every pastor who is faithful to God has to say or do some things from time to time that undoubtedly will offend someone in the church. Often, it is the traditionalists: “We’ve never done it that way before!” They will say that he has no respect for the past. Sometimes they will accuse him of causing disunity. Sometimes, they try to work out a compromise so that they can hold onto their cherished beliefs or practices, even if they compromise biblical truth. Under such pressure, some pastors capitulate and play politics in the church. Pray for your leaders, that they will stand firm and maintain a good conscience before God, who knows the heart ([1 Thess. 2:3-5](#)).

B. Pray for leaders to be delivered from circumstances or difficulties beyond their control.

The author asks them to pray all the more, so that he may be restored to them the sooner (13:19). We don’t know what the situation was that kept him from visiting them, but it was beyond his control. It could have been a health problem, or something else. Perhaps his critics in the Hebrew church were saying, “If he really cared about you, he would have visited here personally by now!” I find that critics often judge the pastor because he does not have the gift of omnipresence! But the author’s heart was to visit them, and so he asks them to pray.

His request shows that God is bigger than any circumstance we face, and that prayer is our means of laying hold of God’s power. Prayer is not just a polite gesture that shows brotherly concern. God has ordained prayer as one of the ways that He pours out His power and blessing on His people. Prayer shows us that we are not competent people who just need a little boost from God now and then. We are totally inadequate, unless He works, and He has chosen to work through our prayers. If more people prayed more regularly for their pastors, maybe there would be fewer church splits and fewer people leaving churches over petty matters.

Conclusion

I hope many of you will take to heart two simple applications. First, prepare your heart for church by taking some time during the week, perhaps on Saturday evenings, to pray for me (or whoever is preaching). Pray that your heart would be open and submissive to God’s Word. Spend a few minutes reading the text in its context and meditating on it. Pray for the effectiveness of the printed and audio sermons and the sermons on the web site.

Second, pray for me to maintain a good conscience before God and to preach His truth without compromise. Pray for me while I’m preaching, that the seed of the Word would find fertile soil in hearts. Pray against distractions that arise. Pray for individuals you know of who are struggling with sin.

On one of his visits to the Continent, Charles Spurgeon met an American minister who said, “I have long wished to see you, Mr. Spurgeon, and to put one or two simple questions to you. In our country there are many opinions as to the secret of your great influence. Would you be good enough to give me your own point of view?” After a moment’s pause, Spurgeon replied, “My people pray for me” (in Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* [Banner of Truth], p. 44). Although I will never have Spurgeon’s gifts or power, I would ask the same, that you pray for me!

Discussion Questions

1. Why does the idea of obeying church leaders sound so jarring? What are the limits of this?
2. What are legitimate grounds (biblically) to leave a church?
3. What are some proper and improper ways to evaluate a sermon?
4. Will you commit to pray for your pastors and to prepare your heart to receive God’s Word when it is preached?