

The Church – Submission to Elders

Pastor Tim Rech

Hebrew 13:7-21

Introduction

This evening we conclude our series on submission. If you recall submission is the yielding of one's will and actions to the will of another. Submission is fundamental to a proper relationship with God and with those He has placed in authority over us in this life. Now we all submit to someone or something. But God says instead submit to those whom He has appointed and in the way He commands.

God has ordained authority and submission in all spheres of life. So far we have considered what and how God requires us to submit to in the authority spheres of human government, the workplace, and in the home.

Our final stop this evening is to consider submission to those who lead the church – namely the elders. Now God is concerned with all spheres of authority but gives primary attention to the sphere of the church. It should not surprise us:

Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:14-16, *"I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, 15 if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. 16 Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:*

*He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory."*

Paul also wrote to Titus in Titus 1:5, *"This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.."*

Christ's church is of primary importance to God and an authority structure within it is vital.

Biblical Call for Elders

Now before we move into what the Bible says about submission to elders, let's look briefly at biblical support for eldership.

The apostles and NT writers relied upon the framework of the elders they observed in the Scriptures and witnessed in their lives as they worked out the structure of church leadership in the New Covenant.

The first was taken from the Old Testament. In Exodus we see tribal leaders among the Israelites when they lived in the land of Egypt and forward into the wilderness, the Promised Land, and beyond. We also see Jethro's counsel to a weary Moses concerning the need to distribute leadership of people to able

and God fearing men – men who could govern and teach. Moses wisely received the input of his father in-law.

And we also see in Exodus 24 God calling out a specific number of leaders (70 to be exact) to accompany Moses and Aaron in going up to see God.

Then throughout the remainder of the Old Testament and into the gospels and the book of Acts, we see elders as leaders of cities and of the nation who were to govern and teach the people. Now the outcome of this leadership was not pretty especially in their day – the times of the Pharisees. But nonetheless, the shape and language of elder leadership was carried into the structure of Christian churches.

We also see this concept of leadership and authority in the Jewish synagogues of Acts:

The Scriptures and Jewish history reflect that the leadership of each local synagogue were elders. This system developed during the Babylonian exile as a means of maintaining instruction and religious community during the years they could not go to temple. The system remained even after the exile with synagogues as local places of worship for Jews and Jewish proselytes all over the world.¹

So there emerged in the New Testament the leadership of the church by what were called elders. That this leadership by elders was universal is evident from elders:

- being appointed in all the churches Paul established (Acts 14:23)
- sharing the leadership in the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2)
- overseeing the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17)
- overseeing the churches in Crete (Titus 1:5)
- overseeing the churches of the Diaspora (James 1:1; 5:14)
- overseeing the churches throughout the northern Roman Empire (1 Peter 1:1; 5:1).

Oversight Role of Elders

The word “oversight” summarizes the responsibility and activity of elders. This oversight can be broken into two functions or roles.

Shepherding

The first is a shepherding aspect of being an elder. Elders are instructed in 1 Peter 5:2 to “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight*”. Shepherding involves leading, feeding, protecting, serving, and praying for the flock.

Governing

In addition to shepherding, there is a governing component to eldership. 1 Timothy 5:17 says, *17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*

Governing involves the organization / administration aspect of church leadership. Again Paul wrote to Titus, “put things in order in the church”.

¹ Pastor Russ Kennedy, *Biblical Eldership at the Chapel*

Our Response to Elders

Given the Scriptural support for elder leadership and teaching on their character and responsibilities, what is our response? Turn with me to Hebrews 13:7-21 which gives us our central text for answering this question:

7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. 8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. 9 Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. 10 We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. 11 For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. 12 So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. 13 Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. 14 For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. 15 Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. 16 Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

18 Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. 19 I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.

20 Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, 21 equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

This text is contained within the sweep of what the writer describes as “acceptable worship to God” back in verse 12:28 as we run “looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (12:2) – these are things like loving the brethren, showing hospitality to strangers, remembering those in prison for the faith, avoiding sexual immorality, and being content with what we have been given in this life.

Time does not allow for expounding every verse in this text but let’s look at some key points that pertain to our submission to church elders.

Look to Their Example (13:7-9)

The first is in verses 7-9. “Remember your leaders” – presumably this would have been their elders from the past. Some may have been martyred for the faith. But the writer prompts the church to remember them for their Word ministry to them. The work of the elders to the flock is a Word of God ministry –

patiently preaching, teaching, and exhorting people to hear, learn, and apply the Bible to their everyday lives and their local body. All of their oversight responsibility has God's Word at its core.

And then the writer points them to look at their example – to look at the outcome of lives which were centered upon the Word. Remember how they demonstrated Spirit-filled lives that abided in Christ and where fruit was produced. Remember their faith and how it may have even led them to their death.

And this remembrance of former leaders includes the ultimate “leader” - Jesus Christ (13:8). He taught the Word perfectly and laid down the perfect example. Jesus is the same today as in the past and will never change in the future. His Word is unchanging and still true and trustworthy so it applied to them as well. They were not to be “*led away by diverse and strange teachings*” in verse 9 – teachings that departed from grace to embrace the outward form of Judaism.

So they were to remember their leaders whose ministry and example pointed them to the unchanging Christ – their lives spent pursuing Christ would never go out of style or become irrelevant.

Obey and Submit to Elders (13:17)

The second point is in verse 17 where it reads, “*Obey your leaders and submit to them*” Obey here means to “listen to, follow” while submit means to “yield, give way, defer to”.

We are commanded here to be responsive to church leadership, yield to their authority, and subordinate themselves to the elders ministry of shepherding and governance. God has raised up faithful and gifted leaders and teachers to minister to us.

When it comes to preaching and teaching, this involves bringing an attitude or a disposition which is poised to learn and to have your mind changed. As elders, we know not everyone comes with the same mind and that it may take time for some to work through and be convinced in a particular teaching. We only ask that you have a heart to hear and be persuaded by the Word of God.

And in governing, elders are called to make decisions and develop guidelines for ministry and administration. These things need to be followed for the good of gospel ministry. Keep in mind when a decision is made that you do not agree or understand that there is often more to it than you might be aware. Just be willing to do your part to go along with it. Sometimes a decision does not work out but the elders can revisit and adjust.

Why Obey and Submit to the Elders?

This command is direct and we need to take it seriously. God has always taken seriously the submission of His people to those He has put in authority in the church or any other sphere of authority. Do you remember the Old Testament examples of Miriam and later Korah?

The remainder of verse 17 gives us further reasons.

Elders Required by God to Keep Watch Over Your Souls

God requires of elders to keep watch over the souls of His people. “*Keep watch*” refers to keeping oneself awake - watching, guarding, or caring for people. Keeping watch is like a soldier keeping watch at his post to protect his unit. The shepherds put in place in the church must always stay alert, be conscientious, and diligent. Spiritual harm can occur if the elders do not do their duty to God.

Keeping watch is critical because there is constant spiritual danger. If there were no danger then watching is not necessary. False teaching can arise at any moment. There are many spiritual snares out there as well and any believer can fall in a hole lured by the world or a return to a legalistic form of Christianity. Fear of man, fear of the future, fear of trouble, the shiny attractions of the world, flirting with a particular sin (often secret), relationship stand-offs, and bitterness threaten to harm our souls. Elders are called to keep watch, to warn and to steer God's people away and back from spiritual danger.

But the biblically mandated efforts of elders will be wasted if the body does not obey and submit to them. They need to be obeyed for our protection and growth in Christ.

Elders must give an account

Another reason to obey and submit is that elders will be called to give an account – held to a standard stricter than those being led (Luke 12:48, Mark 12:40). Elders must keep watch, protect, and warn – if they do, God is satisfied and you benefit. If not, you will suffer harm and they must explain to God. (Ezekiel 3:18-19). Paul speaks to this in Acts 20:26,27, 1 Cor 4:1-5, 9:27; 2 Cor 5:9-11; 2 Tim 2:15, 4:7-8.

James 3:1 says teachers in the church will receive a stricter judgment because of their influence and responsibility.

And this accountability to God is not confined simply to their actions and non-actions but also for their motives and attitude in doing so. In 1 Peter 5:1, Peter writes to the elders:

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” 1 Peter 5:1-4

Note the motivations and attitudes; not under compulsion, but willingly, not for shameful gain, but eagerly, and not domineering over or lording over people but leading by example.

Being an elder in the church is serious – God will hold each accountable. Understanding this should lead us to better respond to their decisions and actions. So help them - obey and submit to their leadership.

Make their work a joy and not a source of grief

Such submission brings joy to the hearts of the elders. Seeing lives changed by the preaching and teaching of the Word and its application (especially in the face of hardship) encourages church leadership (3 John 4).

The elders continuously look for submission and its resulting fruit. When they only find disobedience to Word ministry, they are grieved. Such sorrow can lead to discouragement and the work of the church can be impaired. Areas causing grief can be:

- Wandering after false teaching
- Always looking for alternative teaching
- Always learning but never obeying the Word

- Refusing correction
- Grumbling and complaining

These things distress the shepherds of the church.

It has been said, “A lack of submission is an expression of selfishness and self will”² Such self absorption causes a person to not even realize or care that church leadership is grieving. The Old Testament prophets and Jesus were grieved by an unbelieving nation and Paul was grieved by a disobedient Corinthian church – in both cases, neither cared about the grief they were causing.

There is no advantage to you

But an even more serious consequence of not submitting to your church leaders and grieving them is the impact on you. Hebrews 13:17 closes by saying there is *no advantage to you* which is an intentional understatement meant to cause us to think. Persisting in non-submissive attitudes and actions towards the elders may bring God’s chastening or make you more vulnerable to the delusions and confusion of the enemy. Your growth in Christ will be suspended. Bitterness may set in with its deep root. And the brief and precious time of this life is wasted – a life where God is calling us to grow and become more like His Son so that we might be fruitful and bring Him glory.

Pray for Elders (13:18)

Given their responsibilities and the magnitude of the mission, a third response is God’s call for us to pray for our elders. Paul says, “*Pray for us*” in verse 20. Every elder desires to be prayed for and is blessed by it. Being an elder can be a lonely, seemingly thankless role with occasions to be discouraged. We cannot forget or take for granted our elders. But most importantly, praying for the elders helps to move the church forward along the path God desires to take us.

Limits to Submission

Now there are limits to an elder’s authority over the people of God. Remember the elders have authority in the matters of the church – shepherding the souls of its people and overseeing its function. But most of life’s decisions are made by you. The elders’ aim in Word ministry is to foster your obedience to God’s clear commands and in the process, culture hearts of wisdom for making decisions.

So the elders are not micro managers in the governance of the church. Our aim is to organize and set guiding principles for ministries to follow leaving the myriad of decisions to all those doing the work of ministry (Eph 4:12).

And neither do the elders dictate your personal choices; where to live, jobs to work, schools to send your children. If an elder can help you think through life’s decisions, he will be glad to help. However, these areas are your call. But if your choices take you down a path of clear sin – actions which violate the Word of God, then the elders and the church body obviously has something to say. But to take this one step further, the elders have an obligation to speak into your life if they see your choices hindering your walk with Christ. There are so many things out there (seemingly good) than can consume us like career choices, hobbies, buying things, etc. Sometimes we never say “no”. In these cases, the elders may

² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Hebrews* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1983), p. 446

get involved – it is a matter of shepherding since it impacts your soul. But if you want to wear that loud shirt or ugly sweater – go right ahead!

Do Elders Submit to anyone?

Now you might ask, “are the elders required to obey and submit?” Absolutely!

First of all, the elders are called to submit to one another. Here at the Chapel the elders are each given responsibility for a flock and most if not all, a churchwide ministry {for example}. The other elders then are required to submit to the authority of that elder in that ministry (for example). And this can be hard at times. Elder #2 may have experience with the ministry of Elder #1 and is tempted to jump in.

And there are roles established among the elders; a chairman, a vice-chairman, and a secretary. Their roles are different but all contribute to a proper organization of how the elder body works together to get things done. And the non-office holding elders submit to them.

Second, the elders submit to those in other ministries. We are no different than anyone else. For instance, if I serve in the nursery, I submit to not only Pastor Dale but to Kellie Hines and the others who lead in this ministry. I cannot show up and discard the sticker system, leave the gate open and let the kids wander the hallways. This would be misplaced authority and harmful to the kids.

And just like you, we the elders are required to show deference to all in the church (Ephesians 5:21) – not as to forsake the responsibilities we are given by the Lord but in all other things which is most of “other things”. Elders ought to be setting the example in submission.

The elders are poised to take input from you. God has gifted many here in this Chapel with wisdom and it would be foolish not to hear from you. A recent example was this past year when each elder took input from their respective flocks concerning changes to our gatherings. Much good input was gathered and applied to the change in format last summer. And better yet, the time spent in that input process was wonderful.

But sometimes the input is well meaning but conflicts with the direction we are taking the overall ministry. So then we have to say “thank you but no or not yet”

Our Chief Shepherd (Heb 13:20-21, 1 Peter 5:4)

So yes, the elders submit to all people in the body in one way or another. But the ultimate submission for the elders and for all of us is to the Chief Shepherd.

You see there is one ultimate source of authority in the church and that is Jesus Christ. Remember Hebrews 13:20 where it reads:

our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep and in 1 Peter 5:4 which reads:

4 And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

The elders are simply serving as under shepherds, men who seek to serve you guided by Christ’s Word and the Spirit until that day when the ultimate authority appears. Then there will be no longer be imperfect elders but rather the One who rules perfectly – the Lord Jesus Christ, the one and only true Shepherd.

Reflect and Respond

A spirit of obedience and submission to authority is fundamental to the life of a Christian. It is the fruit of genuine humility and faith – the mark of a Spirit filled life (Eph 5:18-6:9). Such a mindset towards church leadership will protect you in your battle with sin, contribute to your maturity in Christ, and demonstrate true submission to God.

What is your attitude toward your elder or the elders of the church? Is it one of nonchalance or even disdain? Or is your heart poised to submit to their leadership?

Do you pray for your elder or for the elders here at the Chapel? If you do not know what to pray, ask them.

Do you realize how serious the mission of the church really is? Elders are to lead and every one of us is commanded to follow – all for the glory of Christ.

Remember the Chief Shepherd will appear one day – may He be pleased with our account.

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