

“Submission”
Hebrews 13:17

November 15, 2015

SI: This fall we’re looking in detail at one chapter of Bible—Hebrews 13

It’s a series of short instructions

about how to cultivate brotherly love in our church.

Verse one is the theme verse of the chapter: Let philadelphia continue.

But we’re not left up to ourselves to figure out how to do it—

we’re told how through a series of instructions.

Let’s continue with verse 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.

INTRO: There was a pastor at a church on St. Joseph years ago who I got to know personally. Once I was sitting in his study and I asked him: What form of church government do you have? He leaned forward, banged his fist on his desk and said: The buck stops here! That was true. He was the final authority on all matters in the church. He hired and fired church staff, he checked off on every committee decision.

His wife was the secretary. His adult daughter the treasurer. They counted the offering and decided how every dollar would be spent—including how much they would be paid.

It was his way or the highway.

If you didn't like it, you could hit the road, Jack!

Things got done in that church.

A dictatorship is the most efficient form of government.

I know some of you have been in churches with a completely opposite form of church government—a democratic government.

All the major decisions were made at congregational meetings where every member has a voice and a vote.

That sounds better than a dictatorship, but I guess it depends.

I've had more than one person tell me how much they dreaded congregational meetings and how often they have seen them lead to conflict and bad feelings.

I don't have any way of proving this, but I bet that if you asked 100 American evangelical Christians what top things they look for when choosing a church

They would say: good programs for my kids, good music, good preaching.

Maybe they would add friendliness, or even missions, something like that.

But I bet church government would be high on the list.

It should be. Because church government is a big deal in the Bible.

There is no manual of church government in the Bible

because the Bible is not that sort of document, thank God.

But there are three NT books with lots of instructions—the pastoral epistles.

And the other epistles have scattered instructions and examples,

like this verse we've just read in Hebrews 13.

The book of Acts is also full of valuable examples that serve as paradigms.

When you systematize all this biblical information,

a form of church government clearly emerges.

Hebrews 13 gives us one reason for the importance of church government. The theme of Hebrews 13 is brotherly love.

It tells us all the different ways it should be cultivated in the life of the church. This verse tells us submission to that government conducive to brotherly love. Well, we ought to know what that government and leadership should be

So what I want to do this morning is look at this passage under two headings.

First, let's survey biblical church government.

We're told here to obey our leaders.

Who are they? What sort of offices and authority do they hold?

Then second, let's focus on ourselves and consider how we are to obey and submit to our leaders, the challenges and good things from it.

MP#1 Biblical church government and officers

In the Bible the church is described with several metaphors.

It's called the family of God, where people are born in faith, grow up with brothers and sister, fathers and mothers in the faith.

It's called a body with many parts. Each part has its role to play.

It's called a temple built of living stones, a place where God is worshipped.

It's also called a kingdom. Visible manifestation of Christ's kingdom.

Every kingdom has a government, it has a structure, officers, ministers, laws in order to carry out the desires of the king.

The New Testament gives us the basic form and structure of church government for carrying out the desires of King Jesus. Let's make a quick survey.

We see first there are two different types of church officers—elders and deacons.

Their qualifications are spelled out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

Elders go by two different names in the New Testament—presbuteroi and episcopoi, those are the names in Greek.

Presbuteroi is the word for elders. Its basic meaning is simply a person of age.

It's where we get the word Presbyterian. Government by elders.

It's the actual title for the office.

Episcopoi is translated bishops or overseers.

It's a word that describes the function of the office—oversight of the church.

Usually the word bishop is used today to refer to a high church office, someone who is in a position in church hierarchy above ordinary pastors.

But that's not the way it's used in the New Testament.

It's just another way of referring to the elders. You could call the elders in this church bishops and that would be perfectly in line with New Testament usage.

The other church office is that of deacon, diakonoi. Word that means servant.

There are a number of places in the New Testament where these two offices are addressed together. For example, in Philippians 1:1, Paul greeting church.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.

This shows that both offices functioned together in the church.

Who chooses the officers? They are elected by the people.

Acts 14:23 gives us an example of elders being elected.

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

This word appoint means election by popular vote, show of hands, consent.

So Paul and Barnabas oversaw this election process.

Deacons were also elected. Acts 6:2-4 describes the first election.

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

There is the pattern again, election overseen by Apostles.

Then, once the officers were elected, they were set apart by ordination.

Paul reminds Timothy of his own ordination, in doing that shows us the pattern.

Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

That's the pattern of ordination. The body of elders lay their hands on the elected officers and in doing that they set them apart for the work of the office.

Timothy was an elder and pastor. That's how he was ordained.

And that's the same way deacons were also ordained.

Told in Acts 6 that after church had chosen the, apostles laid hands on them.

1 Timothy 5:7 is an important verse,

because it indicates there is a distinction in the roles of elders.

Some are primarily called to teach and preach. Others are primarily called to rule.

In our own church we make this distinction by referring to teaching elders and ruling elders. Pastors are teaching elders. Other elected men ruling elders.

But the pastor or teaching elder is not the boss.

He is just one member of the board of elders with one vote like the rest.

This leads to another vitally important New Testament pattern—

there are always more than one elder governing a church.

Not once is a New Testament church described as having one elder, it's always elders (plural). When Paul planted churches, saw to appointment of elders.

Paul told Titus to go to Crete and put things in order, appointing elders.

Our verse today from Hebrews, obey your leaders (plural).

New Testament never shows church government by one man who runs things.

For that matter, never shows a church being run by democratic vote.
It's always a plurality of elected elders, a board of elders collectively governing.

Another significant principle—

The New Testament church was connectional. What does that mean?

They were all connected to each other through higher courts of authority.

These courts were made up of elders from local congregations who came together to make decisions about weighty and delicate matters.

The clearest example is Acts 15—the Jerusalem Council.

There was a problem and conflict in some churches over the matter of whether or not Gentile believers must be circumcised. Some Jewish believers said so. So the elders from the churches, together with the apostles met in Jerusalem, and as a court, as one large body of elders, they discussed and came to agreement. Then that decision was sent down to the churches for them to follow.

This shows the connectional nature of the New Testament church.

The leadership of the local congregation was not a law unto itself.

They were bound with other churches for mutual accountability and appeal.

In other words, in New Testament, there is no such thing as an independent church.

And no one man or hierarchy of men are the head of the church.

Christ is the head and he exercises government through bodies of officers.

So what are the functions of these two offices of elder and deacon?

According to the New Testament, elders oversee the spiritual life of the congregation through prayer, teaching, and personal example.

They guard the doctrine and life of the church through exercise of discipline.

1 Peter 5:2 is one good summary.

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

Office of elder has roots in OT, elders appointed by Moses to govern Israel.

The office of deacon is a new office, instituted by the apostles.

During a time of rapid growth, conflict developed over the care of poor widows.

Apostles and elders could not handle it and continue to preach and teach.

So office was created to serve this need. Proper function of deacons.

They take care of the physical and material needs in the body, wisely steward the resources of the church, and enlisting church members for mercy ministry.

The spiritual and character qualification are identical for elders and deacons—
difference is matter of gifts and interest.

Could say more, but that's it in a nutshell. Fairly simple form of government.

And central to it are the officers, the leaders you are called to obey and submit to.

That brings us to the next point. Let's consider . . .

MP#2 Our obedience and submission to church officers

My mother taught elementary school for 40 years.

She said there was a cultural shift she experienced when the generation that came of age in the 60s began to have children and send them to school.

In previous generations of parents,

her authority as the teacher was not questioned, it was respected and affirmed.

If she called parents and said:

I've been having a problem with Johnny.

Or I need to tell you about an incident today, something Johnny did.

The parents always took her word and her side.

They would say: Thank you for telling us. We're going to get to the bottom of this. You can be assured this will not happen again.

But then things changed and parents began to question her authority,

even questioned the truth of what she said about incidents in the classroom.

Unless she had corroborating evidence, they would take child's word over hers.

We spoke to Johnny and he said he didn't do what you said he did.

That anti-authoritarian spirit is in the news every day.

You see it on both sides of the political spectrum.

You have the Black Lives Matter, anti-police, anti-law and order crowd on the left.

You have the Tea Party, Don't Tread on Me, anti-government crowd on the right.

One side says they are defending justice, the other side says defending freedom.

But both advocate not submitting to certain authorities they don't like.

That's the spirit of our age—anti-authoritarian.

The instructions God gives us in his word

for how he wants us to live as followers of Christ don't change.

But the spirit of the age changes, cultural and societal trends change.

That means it's sometimes easier and sometimes harder

for Christians to follow particular biblical commands.

Hebrews 13:17 is a hard one at our particular moment.

John Piper calls this command "culturally outrageous."

Adults are to obey and submit to other adults, voluntarily—that sounds crazy.

Most American Christians just don't do it.

If their will is crossed by their church leaders, if they are told that they are doing

something wrong and have to stop—just leave in a huff, go to another church.

The command itself is pretty straightforward:

Obeys means do what they tell you to do, don't do what tell you not to do.

Submit means to have a humble, willing attitude about it.

The challenge of this command is not to figure out what it means, it's to do it.

This is not an intellectual issue, it's a volitional issue, it's a matter of the will.

I know there are more complicated questions we could ask:

When does church leadership become wrong and abusive?

When is it right to leave a church?

But that's for another time.

This is a positive command that we must come to terms with and be convinced of so that when things do get hard, we know what we must do.

Let's walk ourselves through this in three stages.

See how it applies to officers, to members, and to the head of the church.

First, officers.

I believe Bible advocates Presbyterian church government.

One key reason is because, in the Christian life, everybody under authority.

Everybody has to learn submission.

That's my problem with my friend's church, the pastor-dictator.

Even if he's a good man, who does he have to obey and submit to?

Hebrews 13:17 says that church leaders will have to give an account.

That certainly refers primarily to the account they have to give to Christ.

On the day of judgment, they will be asked to give account of souls under care.

But there is also accounting in this life. Christ mediates authority through people.

In our church, Presbyterian Church in America, we have a formal way of expressing this.

There is an ordination vow that all elders, deacons, and pastors must take:

“Do you promise subjection to your brethren in the Lord?”

That means individual elders and deacons must obey and submit to the Session, just like every other church member, and Session must submit to Presbytery.

That doesn't make things perfect or prevent problems, but it does help our anti-authoritarian attitudes to say, ok, they are men under authority too.

Another thing about officers:

Verse says, obey them so they can do their work with joy and not with groaning. They are joyful when members walk in wisdom and obedience to God's Word, they groan and grieve and worry when they don't. I've seen both.

The purpose of that is to convince you that they have your best interests in mind.

They care about you. Don't toss that aside if tell something don't want to hear. That brings us to the next to members.

The verse says that if you don't obey and submit to your leaders, if you make them groan and grieve and worry, then that is "of no advantage to you."

It hurts you and hurts your church when you disregard the spiritual oversight of your elders and pastor. An old Puritan said:

The heart of the minister is discouraged, the great Master is displeased, the tokens of His favor are withdrawn, spiritual barrenness prevails.

But let's flip that around and consider the positive.

If you do submit, you not only make their work joyful, it is of advantage to you. None of us can see ourselves clearly. We're all prone to self-deception.

In the officers of church, Lord has given you watchmen over your soul. Remember the Ezekiel passage, watchman on the wall? He sees enemy coming.

People in the field can't see. Calls to them, they come into safety of the walls. That's who the Lord has given you in officers.

But if it so happens that your elders, your pastor warns you, and it really angers you, and you don't want to listen, and you want to do your own thing— then you must consider the head of the church.

Who is the head of the church? It's not me. Not Session.

The head of the church is Jesus Christ.

The buck stops at his throne. All authority on heaven and earth given to him.

But what did he do for your salvation?

He was arrested and treated like a criminal. He was subjected to trial.

He was stripped, scourged, struck, mocked, spat upon.

But his own disciples he was abandoned, betrayed, and denied.

He saw the terrible grief in his mother's eyes as she looked on him hanging there.

And in the three hours of darkness he was made sin for us and felt God's wrath.

He was obedient. He submitted to his Father's will and plan.

He willingly suffered horrible things, unjust things for you, so that your sins could be forgiven, so that you could go to heaven and not to hell, so that you can become a good and holy person, fit for God's presence.

So here's what the great king and head of the church asks you to do:
"Obey your leaders and submit to them."

If you don't want to do it for them, or for yourself, do it for him.

CONC: Well, I never got around to working out
how this is conducive to brotherly love in our church.

But I think that's pretty obvious.

The royal law of the Christ's kingdom is that we love one another.

All the counsel and instruction of the church should serve that end.