

OBEY YOUR LEADERS

“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy and not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb. 13:17).

It goes without saying that Christians are to obey God. The Bible makes this crystal clear: **“Love the Lord your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always” (Deut. 11:1).**

There are, however, many decisions which God allows us to make for ourselves. One way He helps us make the right decisions is through spiritually qualified leaders. Take, for example, the simple decision as to when and where the brethren will assemble to break bread. Since we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, this simple decision is very important (See Heb. 10:25). This is one of many reasons why God has ordained earthly leaders. Just as sheep follow their shepherd, God expects us to follow our shepherds. Just as sheep need both a shepherd and one another, we also need a shepherd and one another. A sheep by itself is easy prey! The command therefore to “obey your leaders and submit to their authority” is therefore both practical and clear.

The question is “Which leaders are we to obey”?

We gain insight into this question from an earlier verse in the same chapter: **“Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7).**

These “leaders” whom we are to obey are the ones speaking to us the Word of God. Many congregations, in some parts of the world, are structured like a corporation. They are run by a board of directors like a corporation. They have a “chairman of the board” like a corporation. Just as the “official board” of a corporation is aloof from the public the “official board” in these churches is often aloof from the congregation they control. Just like a corporation, the board hires someone else to do the work. Just like a corporation, in many churches, the “official board” has been given the authority to hire and fire the workers. It is therefore the staff of workers that does the actual ministering and not the board. Frequently this is a cause of controversy as the “authority” is in one place and the “responsibility” is in another. If those churches do not grow it is invariably the preacher and staff who are replaced and not the official board. This, of course, is not a biblical model! The “leaders” whom we are to obey are not far away in a “board meeting,” they are actually our personal “leaders who speak to us the Word of God!”

In the Bible Jesus is the “Chief Shepherd” and all earthly leaders are directly responsible to Him. Note: **“To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 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. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (1 Pet. 5:1-4).**

Note that these “fellow elders” to whom Peter refers were themselves the “shepherds” or “pastors” of the flock. They, like Peter, were the ones who actually did the preaching and the teaching. They were also the ones commanded to “serve” the flock. These pastors were not to “lord it over” those entrusted to them but were to be “examples to the flock”. This model of working leaders is consistent with other passages of Scripture. Consider, for example, Acts 20:17-35, regarding the elders of the church at Ephesus:

- Paul was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost (Acts 20:16).
- So **“From Miletus Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church (Acts 20:17).** Note that there were a plurality of elders in each church (Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1; etc.)
- When the elders arrived Paul said: **“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28).** The word translated as “overseers” is “episkipos” which is sometimes translated as “bishops”. Thus the “elders” were also “overseers” set apart to do their work by the Holy Spirit.
- Paul also told these “elders” or “overseers”: **“Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).** The word translated as “be shepherds” is “poimaino” which means to “feed” or “tend”. These shepherds must themselves set a good example. Jesus condemned those leaders who would bind heavy burdens on others that they wouldn’t lift a finger to move (Matt. 23:4).
- Thus the “elders” at Ephesus were not “board members” hiring someone else to feed and take care of the flock. These elders were themselves the “overseers” and “shepherds” who personally did the preaching, teaching and feeding of the flock.
- It is interesting to note that there was only one church in Ephesus. It must have been very large congregation for in only two years everyone in Asia heard the word of the Lord both Jews and Greeks (Acts 19:10). Further, there were so many believers in Ephesus that the silversmiths who made idols of Dianna, feared going out of business (Acts 19:23-27). These many believers obviously did not always meet in one gigantic assembly, yet they somehow remained only one church. We repeat, Paul did not send for the elders of the “churches” (plural), but for the elders of the “church” (singular). There was only one church in Ephesus!
- Paul warned these elders: **“I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:29,30).** Years later, when John was inspired to write the book of Revelation, we find that these “savage wolves” had not been able to divide the church. According to Revelation 2:1 there was still only one church in Ephesus. The success in Ephesus in remaining “one” is a goal worth pursuing.
- Since the Scriptures do not tell us specifically how the church in Ephesus was structured, we assume that these leaders were free to improvise and adapt as was necessary. We do know that Paul taught them publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20). This flexibility makes it all the more important for the brethren in Ephesus, and everywhere else, to obey their leaders and submit to their authority. Obedient sheep are a “joy” and not a “burden” to their shepherd.
- For your information, the Scriptures never refer to churches in any city. The word “churches” occurs over 30 times in the Bible, but always refers to a plurality of churches in a country and not a city. So we read of churches in Cilicia, Asia, Macedonia, Galatia, and Judea, but never in Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, Antioch, or Jerusalem.

FALSE APOSTLES AND DECEITFUL WORKERS

The brethren at Corinth had to make a choice as to which leaders to obey. Paul, as you know, was not the only leader there. He was the first to preach in Corinth coming from Athens in “weakness, fear, and much trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3). Soon, however, other teachers arrived. Unfortunately, some of them were false teachers. Paul warned: “. . . **such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.**” (2 Cor. 11:13-15). Recognizing which leaders to obey is important for when the blind lead the blind both fall into the ditch (Matt. 5:14).

- We should not be surprised, therefore, when there are false teachers among us!
- Jesus warned of false prophets who are like wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matt. 7:15-23).
- Jesus also warned of false Christs and false prophets who would deceive many (Matt. 24:24).
- Peter warned of false prophets and false teachers (2 Pet. 2:1).
- Paul warned of false teachers who perverted the Gospel (Gal. 1:6-9).
- John warned that many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 Jn. 4:1).
- Jude warned of ungodly men who would turn the grace of God into lasciviousness (Jude 1:4).
- Etc.

So when the Corinthians decided to obey their leaders, they had to decide which leaders to obey. We do too!

QUALIFICATIONS FOR ELDERS AND DEACONS

Here are some of the Biblical qualifications for Christian leaders:

“Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap.” (1 Tim. 3:1-7)

“The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer manages God’s household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:5-9).

“In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.” (1 Tim. 3:8-13).

“No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds” (1 Tim. 5:9,10).

It is significant that the Bible never refers to “members of the church”, only “members of the body” (See 1 Cor. 12:12-31) Christ’s “Body” is not an “organization” it is an “organism”. Jesus is the Head of His Body and one way he directs the members of His Body is through spiritually qualified leaders. Since God is not the Author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33), each leader and each member of the Body must be fully surrendered to Jesus. This submission to Christ is foundational to the humility required to obey our earthly leaders. Remember! Jesus did not come to do His own will, but the will of the Father Who sent Him! (Jn. 6:38) This is a good example for everyone!

A humble and submissive spirit should be characteristic of all Christians. Young men are to be submissive to those who are older (1 Pet. 5:5). Young women are to be submissive to the older women (Tit. 2:3-5). Timothy was not to rebuke an older man harshly (1 Tim. 5:1). Children are to obey their parents in the Lord, slaves are to obey their earthly masters, and masters are to remember that they also have a Master in heaven (Eph. 6:1-9). Etc. It is our love for one another that will convince “all men” that we belong to Jesus (Jn. 13:35).

God has designed our bodies to excrete poison. When our kidneys fail, for example, we will die unless some other way of excreting poison is found. God has also designed His Body (the church) to excrete poison. One way poison is removed from the Body of Christ is by heresies. Note: **“No doubt there have to be differences (heresies) among you to show which of you have God’s approval” (1 Cor. 11:19).** Please note that heresies show which of you have God’s approval. The approved cling to Jesus, while the heretics cling to someone else! That’s why they leave! John said it like this: **“They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For of they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us” (1 Jn. 2:19).**

DISAGREEMENT DOES NOT ALWAYS MEAN HERESY

Barnabas and Saul, for example, disagreed with one another but neither of them were heretics. It was the Holy Spirit Who originally ordered them to work together (Acts 13:1-4). When they returned from their journey, however, they had a “sharp disagreement” over John Mark and never worked together again (Acts 15:36-41). It is important to note that their disagreement was over John Mark and not Jesus. It seems probably that just as the Holy Spirit put them together, He also orchestrated their separation.

Please remember that each of the apostles went in different directions and gathered around them teams of gifted workers. It was neither practical or possible for the disciples of Peter to obey Andrew or vice versa. Sheep are to follow their own shepherd. When Jacob came to Padan Aram he saw three flocks of sheep waiting to get a drink. Soon Rachel arrived with a fourth flock (Gen. 29:1-12). This did not constitute confusion, however, for each flock followed and obeyed their own shepherd.

So each leader in Christ can gather his own flock. All of these flocks still compose only “One Body” (Eph. 4:4). When Jesus promised that “other sheep” would hear His voice and become only one flock with one Shepherd, He was referring to Jews and Gentiles uniting in One Body (Jn. 10:16). This literally happened during the life time of Paul (Eph. 2:11-22). Jesus is the Head of this One Body and it includes people from every race, kindred, people, and tongue. He is also the Chief Shepherd of His One Flock. When all the shepherds and all the sheep give primary allegiance to Jesus we will live in harmony with one another and remain One Body. There should never be uncharitable divisions in the Body of Christ!

But now let us return to Barnabas and Saul. Saul (Paul) was set apart from birth to be an apostle to the gentiles (Gal. 1:15,16). For many years, however, he was not doing what God destined him to do. So the Holy Spirit paired him up with Barnabas and sent them out together. The name “Barnabas,” as you know, means “son of encouragement” (Acts 5:36). Barnabas had already helped Saul on other occasions (Acts 9:27; 11:25,26). Under the helpful influence of Barnabas Saul soon became the leader God intended him to be. When they began their journey Barnabas was the leader and his name was always mentioned first. Note “Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11:25,26; 11:30; 12:25; 13:2; 13:7). In the middle of their journey, however, Saul’s name was changed to Paul and he became the leader. Thereafter it was not “Barnabas and Saul”, it was “Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 13:42, 43, 50; 14:1, 15:22; etc.) Once Paul developed into the leader God intended him to be the Holy Spirit inspired him to write 13 or 14 books of the Bible. (The authorship of Hebrews is not certain).

Thus the sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas was not a heresy as both men were obeying Jesus. It was merely God’s way of allowing two gifted leaders to exercise their gifts.

Again, we repeat that it was neither possible or practical for the disciples of Peter to obey Andrew, and vice versa. Nor was it practical for Paul to give orders to John Mark for he was traveling with Barnabas. Paul, however, could give orders to men in his own flock like Timothy and Titus, but he could only give suggestions to men like Apollos who were working with someone else. Note: **“Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity” (1 Cor. 16:12).**

Paul called those in his flock like Titus, Artemas, and Tychicus, “our people”. Zenas and Apollos, however, were not called “our people” for they were working with someone else. Paul referred to “them” as “they.” “They” were wonderful workers for the Lord even though “they” were not in Paul’s flock. Please consider: **“As soon as I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, because I have decided to winter there. Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way and see that “they” have everything “they” need. “Our people” must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives” (Tit. 3:12-14).**

We repeat, Paul could order men like Artemas, Tychicus, Titus, to obey him, but he could only make suggestions to men like Zenas and Apollos.

If you are teaching a Bible class your students need to obey you and not some stranger.

We must all obey the commands of Scripture, but not the commands of human leaders to whom we have made no commitment!

INFINITE VARIETY

God is a God of infinite variety. Every star differs from every other star in glory (1 Cor. 15:41). While every snow flake has a hexagonal shape, every snowflake is still unique and different from every other snow flake. Every person has similar human traits but still every person has his or her own unique fingerprints and personality. It would be out of character with God if He intended every congregation and every leader to be identically the same.

The Jerusalem church **“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42)**. These four general categories, however, can manifest themselves in an infinite variety of ways. Please consider:

- There are three primary colors (red, yellow, and blue), yet they manifest themselves in an infinite variety of colors.
- The human tongue can only taste sweet, sour, bitter, and salt, but we can still experience an infinite variety of tastes.
- The 7 notes on a piano can manifest themselves in an infinite variety of melodies.
- Certainly devoting ourselves to the apostle’s teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer does not limit our God given creativity!

While our message never changes, our methods invariably do!

Obedying leaders will sometimes require a willingness to change. Remember! You can change without improving, but you cannot improve without change!

THE SHEEP ARE MANY, BUT THE SHEPHERDS ARE FEW

“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (Ja. 3:1).

Just like the bits in a horse’s mouth turn the whole animal, and just like a little rudder turns a big ship, and just like a small spark can set a big forest on fire, so also one teacher can influence many people for good or for bad (Ja. 3:3-6). This is why preachers and teachers need to be called by God.

After a long night of prayer Jesus selected 12 men to be His apostles (Lk. 6:12-16). Not one of these men had money, influence, or education. Jesus does not call the qualified, He qualifies the called. Jesus did expect these unlettered peasants to do it on their own, He promised to be with them. With His help they would help form the foundation for His holy temple. He promised to guide them into all truth (Jn. 16:13). With Jesus as the Cornerstone, together they would erect the household of faith (Eph. 2:19-

22). Words are not adequate to express the importance of the apostles. There are literally millions of believers but in heaven the wall of that great city has only twelve foundations and on them are the names of only the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Rev. 21:14). Great heavenly rewards, however, are not only for the apostles but also for all those who long for His appearing (2 Tim. 4:8). Truly **“Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 3:13).**

OBVIOUSLY YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A LEADER IN ORDER TO BE IMPORTANT! “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.” (1 Cor. 12:14-31).

CONCLUSION

As a member of His Body you are to use your spiritual gift for the good of all. For the sake of illustration let us assume that you lived in Ephesus during the days of the Apostle Paul. Please consider these basic facts:

- Paul spent three years in Ephesus (Acts 20:31). This was longer than at any other church he started.
- Special miracles were wrought by Paul in Ephesus so that even handkerchiefs and aprons which he touched had healing power (Acts 19:11).
- While he was there all of Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus both Jews and Greeks (Acts 19:10).

- Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to **“command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies” (1 Tim. 1:3,4)**. Thus Paul’s teaching to Timothy would have an immediate application to you.
- Paul also wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus was one of his four prison epistles. While all Scripture is inspired of God and profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness the Ephesian letter would be particularly relevant (2 Tim. 3:16).
- Of the seven letters to the seven churches in Asia the letter to Ephesus came first (Rev. 2:1-7). What the Spirit said in this letter would also be of special interest.

Since Paul taught publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20) let us assume you choose to break break of one of these houses (Acts 20:7). You are not going to forsake the assembly as some do. You are not only going to be there but you are also going to exhort one another as you see “the day” approaching (Heb. 10:25).

God will give you wisdom regarding which house to meet with (Ja. 1:2-8), but once you make that commitment you are part of a flock that is obligated to obey your shepherd.

THERE IS NO RULE BY COERCION IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD! THE KINGS OF THE GENTILES LORD IT OVER THEIR SUBJECTS, BUT IT IS NOT TO BE DONE THIS WAY IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST (LK. 22:24-27). NO ONE CAN FORCE YOU TO OBEY YOUR LEADERS, YOU MUST WILLINGLY CHOOSE TO DO SO BECAUSE OF YOUR COMMITMENT TO CHRIST!

“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (Eph. 4:11-16).

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