

AUTHORITY: GOD'S HAND THROUGH THE CHURCH
Hebrews 13:17

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you."

INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s, a man became pastor of a church in Tucson with about 90 people in attendance. God blessed his ministry and commitment to prepare Biblical, relevant sermons. By the early 1980s, more than 2,000 attended Sunday morning services in one of the most thriving and dynamic churches in the State! This pastor deeply loved **Jesus**. The members generally held him in great esteem. About this time, at a meeting with the church staff and deacons, the pastor urged their church to embrace a particularly controversial and extreme ministry. A close friend of mine then served as a deacon there. As he later confided to me, he disagreed with the pastor over this ministry emphasis and carefully explained why he believed the pastor's proposal ran contrary to what the Bible teaches. After further discussion, my friend's objections were overruled by a majority of the deacons. After this meeting, several of the deacons spoke to him with words to this effect: "Don't you realize you were opposing our pastor? God speaks through our pastor. Who do you think you are?" Due to this incident and other concerns, my friend left this church. He was alarmed over the extent to which this pastor's opinion had become accepted as the voice of God, even when there were legitimate Biblical reasons for questioning the pastor's wisdom. Within six months, the controversial ministry urged by the pastor threw this church into spiritual convulsions. The lives and faith of many people were adversely harmed. Nearly everything my friend had warned the church leadership about had come true. A number of the core leaders then left this church in disgust and disillusionment.

In general, does God expect His people to submit to the leadership of the Church they attend, when careful efforts and prayer for God's guidance preceded placing these leaders into positions of spiritual trust? Yes. But is it possible for Church leadership to be heeded too closely, just as it is possible to heed their leadership too lightly? Yes. A careful search of the Bible reveals God governs our lives through four offices or types of officials to whom He has delegated some of His authority: The Family, Political Government, the Business World, and the Church. For each class of authority, the principles proclaimed by **Romans 13:1-2** apply: "Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God. ² So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves."

In "Authority: God's Government through the Church," we'll explore What the Spiritual Authority of Church Leaders Does *Not* Mean, and What the Spiritual Authority of Church Leaders *Does* Mean.

I. WHAT THE SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY OF CHURCH LEADERS DOES NOT MEAN

Just how much authority should Church leaders have in a Church and your life? Two extreme answers to these questions are equally bad. One is to follow Church leadership too *closely*. The 912 followers of cult leader Jim Jones, who followed his advice by engaging in mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978, after California Congressman Leo Ryan had been murdered on Jones' orders, is a tragic example. Colonial Village Church of Flint, MI, is another. Years after founding pastor Bernard Gill died of a perforated ulcer in 1975, church members maintained a 24-hour vigil awaiting his return from the grave. In 1974, Gill claimed God revealed to him in a vision he was one of the two last days' "witnesses" prophesied in **Revelation 11** who would be miraculously restored to life. Mrs. Mescal McIntosh, another Colonial Village member, was believed to be the other "witness." While waiting for Pastor Gill's return, the congregation did little as a group or as individuals without first checking with Mrs. McIntosh. She inquired of God for them and told them His will, until she too died and failed to be restored to life as they all believed she would.

Did members of the Jonestown and Colonial Village churches follow their leadership too closely? **Acts 17:10-12** (NLT) reveals Christianity's first apostles never demanded nor expected such unquestioning obedience: "That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea. When they arrived there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth. ¹² As a result, many Jews believed, as did many of the prominent Greek women and men." We get ourselves in deep trouble if we grant any individual or church leader the authority of God's Spirit *regardless* of what the Bible teaches. When my friend opposed his beloved and successful pastor for proposing a wrong ministry emphasis for their church, he did so on solid Biblical grounds. In this case, the pastor spoke from his own spirit, not from God's Spirit. God always encourages us to be Berean Christians who "search the Scriptures" to verify what church leaders tell us! Of course, regardless of how Biblical a pastor's leadership is, he is still open to criticism. Easter Sunday one year, a man who attended church became increasingly irritated with the sermon. After the service, he stopped to speak to the Pastor. "You really have to do something about your sermons," he said. "You speak about the same thing every time I am here." The preacher suggested in reply, "Maybe it's because you only come on Easter Sunday?"

Following church leaders too *closely* is certainly one extreme that should be avoided. Another extreme to avoid is following church leaders too [what?] *lightly*. **Hebrews 13:17** tells us: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." "Keep watch over" ("watch out for," NKJV) literally means "to be sleepless." The awesome responsibility Church leaders carry of being accountable to the Lord for the spiritual well-being of those placed in their care causes them to lose sleep. Such a responsibility by itself is a sufficient cause of "grief" (literally, "groaning" over the need to succeed despite "narrow," difficult circumstances), without church members unnecessarily adding to this grief. The Message expresses **Hebrews 13:17** like this: "Be responsive to your pastoral leaders. Listen to their counsel. They are alert to the condition of your lives and work under the strict supervision of God. Contribute to the joy of their leadership, not its drudgery. Why would you want to make things harder for them?"

A pastor once addressed a group of successful business leaders. He told them, "Each of us is in a position of authority. To accomplish our tasks we must give direction to a number of others who need to respond to our leadership. But there is a major difference between the leadership I give as a pastor and the leadership you give in your companies. I wonder if any of you can figure it out." After a few moments, one man spoke up, "The difference between us is that you have no clout. If I tell an employee to do something and he ignores me, it can cost him wages or even his job. You don't have this kind of clout."

Do you think there's anything to this man's words? He's already stated what can happen in the Business World when leadership authority is disregarded. How about Political Government? Suppose you choose to disregard City Government and drive 80 miles per hours through a school zone? Do you think it might cost you dearly if a policeman just happens to see you, or if a crosswalk guard reports you? Within a Family, are there ways to make a son or daughter, or even a spouse, regret it when family authority is violated? But when we come to the authority of Church leaders, because there are no legally enforceable penalties for not following their wishes, it is easier for people to disregard their authority than in any other area of life.

Here's a litmus test to help you identify your stance on the authority God delegates to Church leaders. Suppose you heard of a Bible-based church in southeastern Tucson with a daring policy to boost cooperation with its leaders? At the end of each year, each member endorsed by the leaders for promoting the ministries, the meetings, and the unity of the church would receive 10 entries in a drawing to win 4 tickets for an Alaskan Cruise; a week in Branson, MO, with passes to all shows; or a \$10,000 college scholarship for the student of their choice. Do you think the prospect of losing such rewards would motivate the members to honor this church's leadership more than God's command alone in **Hebrews 13:17**?

I think you understand my point. It's much easier to ignore the wishes of someone in authority if there doesn't seem to be any tangible loss of something important to us for disobeying. We understand the consequences of disregarding a boss, or a parent, or the government. But do we dread the spiritual consequences for ourselves and our church if we adopt a much more casual attitude about disobeying a church leader than we would ever adopt toward authority in a workplace, in a home, or toward the government? What we forget when we dismiss church leadership too lightly is a three-letter word: GOD! If church leaders have any authority at all, it's not their authority but God's. They are merely His agents.

In the fall of 1972, at age 21, I unwisely embraced disturbing teachings about spiritual warfare. I promoted these distorted teachings about dealing with demons in a Youth S. S. class. A deacon tried to rein me in, but I convinced myself he was misled by Satan and continued teaching it. One morning, the Pastor pulled me out of the Class. He told me emphatically what I taught was not of God. I was crushed and angry. But I knew this church had entrusted the Pastor with oversight authority over all teachers and over everything taught in the church's name, so I submitted. This began a process over several years in which God humbled and set me straight spiritually. Now, it's embarrassing to think of what I once promoted as being the truth of God's Word when it was far, far from the truth! This leads to our second point:

II. WHAT THE SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY OF CHURCH LEADERS DOES MEAN

For **Jesus** to embrace us as our Savior, must we surrender ourselves to God's authority? Yes. **Jesus** announced in **Matthew 7:21**: "Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord!" will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father in heaven." To follow **Jesus** as our Lord and Savior, we must be willing to submit our own ideas of right and wrong to be corrected by God in every area of our lives. As **Romans 12:2** (NLT) urges, "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect." The truth of **Romans 13**, "there is no authority except from God. . . . So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command," changed the way I thought and transformed my actions. I became much more respectfully cooperative with God's authority agents in Family, Political Government, the Business World, and the Church. I realized that disobeying someone in a valid position of authority who was not ordering me to do something God prohibited was also disobeying [whom?] God. **Jesus**, at age 12, caused Joseph and Mary distress when He made an unexpected visit to the Temple without the knowledge or permission of His parents. This incident is recorded in **Luke 2:39-52**. **Jesus** clearly had the blessing and approval of His Heavenly "Father" for His actions. Yet, when His parents objected, the Bible declares **Jesus** "was obedient to them." He recognized God's authority stood behind Joseph and Mary even when they mistakenly said "No" to Him about what God wanted Him to do. Do you think He obeyed from fear of being punished by His parents or because He feared displeasing God? **Romans 13:5** (NIV) provides this helpful insight: "[I]t is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience."

What am I suggesting then, that we must always assume any God-ordained authority, including church leaders, speak to us with God's voice? Heaven forbid! If a Church leader's actions or teachings do not square with how the Bible defines God's will, you have a responsibility to voice your concerns. God does not want you to follow any human authority too *closely*. Pastor worship is always a recipe for disaster. But neither does God want you to follow your church leaders too *lightly*. This means if you decide on your own to set aside a Church leader's guidance without indisputable backing from the Bible, you are also setting aside whose leadership? God's. I often say that anyone who assumes authority in a home or in a church that is not assigned to us by God is a fool. Increased authority requires increased responsibility. But anyone who declines authority God assigns us is a failure, because God holds us accountable for this responsibility whether or not we want it. This is the main point of **Hebrews 13:17**: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

The Greek word here for "leaders" is a technical term. It normally refers to the special oversight authority assigned to Political and Business leaders. **Hebrews 13:17** reveals God assigns this same special oversight to Church leaders. The Greek word for "submit" in this verse is also unusual. It's not used anywhere else in the New Testament. "Submit" has the primary meaning of "yield," "give way," or "resist no longer." God knows asking Christians to yield to Church leaders would be more difficult than yielding to Family, Business, or Political authority, and for two reasons: 1) Church leaders urge us to follow *God's* will. This goes against our old nature; 2) There are also *less immediate consequences* for resisting their oversight than when resisting anyone else to whom God delegates authority.

This may be why God clarified the extent of a Church leader's authority in **I Peter 5:1-2**: "I exhort the elders among you: ² Shepherd God's flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but freely, according to God's will; not for the money but eagerly." A pastor or other ordained Church leader has a twofold status: We are "among" "God's flock" ourselves, which means we must submit to the leadership of our "chief Shepherd," **Jesus Christ (I Peter 5:4)** as any other of His "sheep" (**John 10:7-15**). Yet, "overseeing" is from a Greek verb meaning, "to look upon, inspect, watch over, look after," and "care for"; all the duties expected of a faithful "shepherd" toward a flock of sheep. God wisely knows someone needs to be recognized as having the same general oversight authority of a church that a shepherd has over a flock.

Do sheep often resent the oversight of their shepherds? Yes. I recently read about a boy who day-dreamed about **Psalms 23** and how much he would enjoy having a flock of "sweet and cooperative sheep" to care for, just like he thought David had in the Bible. But when he got his first sheep, his dreams of an ideal life quickly evaporated. He found even this one sheep wanted to do anything but to cooperate with his care! The "sheep" of "God's flock" can sap the eagerness of their spiritual shepherds, as well. This is why God tells us our "oversight" must not be "out of compulsion," using a rare Greek word found nowhere else in the New Testament. J. B. Phillips paraphrases this expression, "because you feel you can't get out of it." Because shepherding "God's flock" is a privilege, not a penalty, we need to guard our hearts to fulfill our duties "freely" ("willingly"); "putting our heart" into our tasks. These actual comments by church to their pastors humorously reveal why pastors sometime need this reminder: "I don't care what they say; I like your sermons." "If I'd known you were going to be good today, I would have brought a neighbor." "We shouldn't make you preach so often." "Did you know there are 243 panes of glass in the windows?"

CONCLUSION

I want to present to you as the conclusion of this sermon an article entitled, "How Many Ulcers Would You Have?"

Nearly every businessman complains of at least one ulcer. Think how many ulcers the poor businessman would have if he worked under the same circumstances as the average minister?

Just suppose, Mr. Businessman, that you were overseer of 100 workers. Suppose only about 50% of them ever showed up for work at a given time and only 25% could be relied upon.

Suppose that every time a simple flash of lightning appeared in the sky, large numbers of your workers pulled the covers over their heads and failed to report for duty.

Suppose your workers only worked when they felt like it and yet you must be very sweet and never fire any of them. To get them back to work you must beg them, plead with them, pat them on the back, and use every means under the sun to persuade them, without offending them.

And suppose you were in competition with a notorious rascal, the Devil, who has no scruples and is far more clever than you are, and who uses such attractive things as fishing rods, guns, soft pillows, televisions, and a thousand other things to lure your workers away from you.

How many ulcers would you have?