

Life Together...



CALLED INTO
THE COMMUNITY
OF FAITH

Elders' Joy Hebrews 13:17

The importance of godly leadership in the church can hardly be overestimated for four reasons. **First**, the requisite spiritual maturity and courage are not common among the saints. In **Ezekiel 22:30** God says, *"I searched for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one."* **Second**, the price that must be paid is a high one. J. Oswald Sanders has said, "... true leadership, is achieved not by reducing men to one's service but in giving oneself in selfless service to them. And that is never done without cost. It involves drinking a bitter cup and experiencing a painful baptism of suffering" (*Spiritual Leadership*, p.20). **Third**, the standards that must be met are high. God has instituted positions of leadership within the New Testament church and, by the Holy Spirit, has outlined the qualifications, the duties, and the manner required of these men. **Fourth**, the prosperity of the Church hangs in the balance. Sanders says, "The church has always prospered most when it has been blessed with strong, spiritual leaders who expected and experienced the touch of the supernatural in their service" (*Spiritual Leadership*, p.25).

Of course, the vitality and health of the church depends upon how the leaders relate to the congregation. But this prosperity does not depend upon the leaders alone. Ray Stedman suggests, that the responsibility for making the operations of a church a joy, and not a burden, is placed on the congregation, not on their leaders" (*Hebrews*, p. 157). One of the most clear verses in this regard is **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.* I think you can see clearly where I get the sermon title for today – *Elders' Joy*.

Hebrews 13 is a chapter where the leaders of the church are mentioned three times. In **verse 7**, *remember those who led you*. In **verse 17**, *obey your leaders*. In **verse 24**, *greet all of your leaders*. I want to point out that the Greek word for "leaders" used here is not one of those typically employed to refer to an ecclesiastical office – pastor, elder, or bishop. The word is used 24 times in the New Testament to refer to the civil magistrate. Rightly does the King James Version translate it all three times in Hebrews 13 as "*those which have rule over you.*" The emphasis is clearly on the God-given "authority of their words in our lives" (Wayne Mack, *Life in the Father's House*, p.54). In a PCA church this authoritative leadership is vested in ruling and teaching elders.

Now let's look at Hebrews 13:17 in its context. To do this we go back to **verse 7**. *Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.* **Verse 7** refers to those men now deceased who were responsible for planting this church and nurturing it through its infancy by means of a faithful ministry of the *word of God*. These men faithfully exercised gifts of preaching and teaching, evangelism and pastoral care. Like the

saints in Chapter 11, these men ran the race well. They finished the course. They lived their lives in hearty reliance upon the promises of God in Christ. Rightly are those in this church called to *imitate their faith*. **Verse 17**, however, clearly has reference to leaders who are alive and active in the fellowship. The idea is that the same deference is due to them as well.

Remember those ... who spoke the word of God to you. Now look at **verse 9**. *Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings.* It appears that this group was attracted to strange doctrine. The appeal of the author is for them to remember the sound doctrine taught by the founders of the church and to continue that commitment to sound doctrine as taught and upheld by the present leadership in the church. So when he says, *obey your leaders and submit to them*, it is precisely the matter of doctrinal integrity that he has in mind. Whenever the ministry of elders is evaluated intangible things such as their zeal for rich and sound doctrine must be taken into account. If some squirrelly doctrine ever makes its way into this church you can be assured that it did so over the bodies of three teaching and six ruling elders.

Now let's dig into Hebrews 13:17 itself, breaking it down into its four constituent parts. First, *obey your leaders and submit to them*. This command should not strike us as unusual. We ought not chafe under it. Indeed, the principle of authority and submission is woven into the fabric of every institution ordained by God – the family (Eph. 5:21; Col. 3:18, 20), the civil government (Rom. 13:1), and, here, in the church. The Greek word translated “obey” (*peitho*) certainly includes the idea of obedience. It does not suggest, however, unthinking acquiescence to unlawful or unbiblical demands. Pastor Kent Hughes explains, it “does not mean unqualified [blind] obedience – the kind that made it possible

for Jim Jones to murder 800 of his followers by ordering them to drink poisoned Kool-Aid. Neither does it provide the basis for authoritarian churches, like some of the contemporary house-churches whose members submit virtually every decision of their lives to the elders" (*Hebrews*, p. 235). The particular form here (present, imperative, middle) means "to permit oneself to be persuaded" or "to yield to persuasion." So "obey" suggests a willingness to receive the teaching and counsel of the elders. But the word also means "habitual readiness to comply." So, in addition, "obey" suggests a compliance on the part of the congregation with the directions of the elders. This sense is clear in **James 3:3** for example. *Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their whole body as well.* Now the word "submit" is active and means "to yield" or "to place under." This indicates "that we must diligently and continually devote ourselves to the process of "placing ourselves under" our leaders" (Mack, p.57).

Now how, practically speaking, can we do this? What does this look like? We get a little help from **I Thessalonians 5:12-13**. *But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction,¹³ and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.* Three requests are made in this verse.

First, *live in peace with one another.* Jay Adams says, "Only after great care and willingness to be taught and corrected by the leadership after they explain the Word of God to him, may [a member] refuse to submit to them. And then may he do so only if he is thoroughly convinced of their failure to base their case upon the Scriptures. He must not refuse to submit to authority because of personal differences or because of conflicts of any other sort. He must remember

always that the authority to which he submits is not theirs but rather is the authority of Christ" (*Shepherding God's Flock*, pp.330-331).

Second, *appreciate* your elders. Literally this means "know" them. Of course, this includes personal acquaintance. More importantly, however, it calls the members of the congregation to an understanding of the function of the elders within the body and the value of godly elders to the body. Ideally, the elder ought to take the initiative in this process of acquaintance, *introducing* himself to you as a man and brother in Christ and then *instructing* you as to his role and the character of his work. But if he does not, there is nothing that says you cannot take the lead in this by scheduling time with him, getting to know him, and inquiring into the nature of his ministry.

Third, *esteem them*. It ought to be the natural tendency and desire of every Christian to think highly of the elders of the church. It may be argued, how do I do this when I have reason to doubt a particular elder's fitness for the office? How can I think highly of someone who is charged with the oversight of my family and yet has had little or no personal involvement with us? It seems that Paul might have anticipated questions like these. He says we should esteem them *because of their work*. We value elders not primarily or necessarily based upon their performance in a particular area but because of the very nature of the work with which they are charged. "The motivation for submission, according to Paul, is not our personal feelings toward leaders, but the desire to obey God by loving them, and the realization of their position before the Lord" (Mack, p. 59).

Indeed, this same idea is expressed in the second phrase. *For they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account.* As soon as we read these words the image of the shepherd comes to mind. *And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night (Lu. 2:8).* This, of course, emphasizes the pastoral dimension of the elders' work especially the vigilance that is required of them (Mk. 13:33; Lu. 21:36; Eph. 6:18). Yes, the elder is to provide care and counsel in temporal matters. But he is primarily concerned with the eternal welfare of your souls. Each elder must go about his labors anticipating the question he will have to answer when his labors are done. How did the saints fare on my watch? Did they continue in the way of holiness on my watch? Did they prosper spiritually on my watch? Were they nurtured faithfully and tenderly on my watch? It is this task to which we are called and you as God's people need to recognize it.

The elders bear the heavy responsibility and the staggering accountability of the watchman of **Ezekiel 3:16-21**. *At the end of seven days the word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁷ "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. ¹⁸ When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. ¹⁹ But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself. ²⁰ "Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil ... he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. ²¹ But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself."*

What responsibility! “If Ezekiel spoke the Word of the Lord to the people, he was absolved of any responsibility in their wrongdoing; but if he failed to warn them about their sin, he would be punished himself” (Mack, p.61-62).

What accountability! “As God said to the prophet, regarding a man who had not been warned, *‘I will hold you accountable for his blood’*” (see Mack, p.62). Certainly an elder must give account of his labors on several levels. He is accountable to his flock although no particular individual may ever call him to render that account. He is accountable for his ministry to his brother elders although they may or may not ever require that accounting of him. In the PCA an elder is accountable to the higher courts of presbytery and General Assembly. But none of these are in view here. The elder is primarily accountable to God. And it is *the great Shepherd of the sheep* who will, most assuredly, call each of us to account for our labors among and to the people of God. The assumption in Hebrews 13:17 is that the elders will go about their pastoral labors with a keen sense of this accounting that awaits them. This sense of accountability is so pervasive that they will *keep watch over your souls* accordingly. They will look after you as they would their own families – wisely, sympathetically, sacrificially, and conscientiously. The assumption in Hebrews 13 is that this is, in fact, the case; that elders are shepherding those under their care in this manner and it is on this basis that the appeal to obey and submit is made to the congregation.

We recognize the tremendous burden laid upon the elders. But there is an equally weighty responsibility, in addition to the obedience and submission already mentioned, that God places upon you, the congregation of His people. Ray Stedman explains it. “If individuals yield voluntary submission to such

responsible leadership, it will make the leader's work a joy and of great advantage to all. Note that the responsibility for making the operations of a church a joy, and not a burden, is placed on the congregation, not on their leaders" (*Hebrews*, p. 157).

Let them do this with joy and not with grief. The responsibility to see to it that the elders exercise their oversight with joy rests with you, the people of God. What brings an elder joy? Wayne Mack supplies a helpful list (see pp. 62-67). Elders rejoice as they are assured of your salvation (I Thess. 2:19-20). Elders rejoice as you articulate a clear and sincere profession of faith. Elders rejoice as they see you walking in obedience (III John 3-4), living a life consistent with your profession. Elders rejoice as they see you pursuing the unity of the body (Phil. 2:1-2); as they know of your prayers for them (II Cor. 1:10-11); as you express your love for and loyalty to them (II Cor. 7:5-7). Elders rejoice as you voluntarily seek their counsel and direction; as you receive their reproof with gratefulness; as you believe the best about them (I Tim. 5:19). Elders rejoice as you work alongside them in ministry (Phil. 1:3-5).

"Hebrews 13:17 says we should help our leaders to watch over our souls with joy and not with grief. The Greek word for "grief" literally means *groaning*. And we cause these men to groan in disappointment; we make their ministry difficult and unenjoyable by doing the opposite of the activities [just mentioned]" (Mack, p. 67). Again, Wayne Mack supplies a helpful list (pp. 67-68).

We grieve our elders when we are indifferent about salvation and fail to examine ourselves regularly to see whether we are in the faith (II Cor. 13:5). We grieve them when we sin against Christ or fail to grow in Him as we should. We grieve

them when we *bite and devour on another* (Gal. 5:15) and sow discord among the brethren (Prov. 6:19). We grieve them when we make no effort to affirm our love for them or even know them personally. We grieve them when we hesitate to seek their counsel preferring rather to seek help and guidance outside the church (Ps. 1:1). We grieve then when we respond to their loving reproof with insults or callousness (Prov. 9:7). We grieve them when we distrust their motives and judge them unfairly or too hastily (I Cor. 4:1-5). We grieve them by not fulfilling our basic membership pledges to give and to assume a ministry.

For this would be unprofitable for you (as a congregation). If you read this phrase literally according to the Greek word order it would sound like Yoda: *for profitless to you this would be*. Do you see what God is saying? In causing your elders grief you yourselves will be brought to grief. You're only hurting yourselves. To the degree that you make life difficult for your elders, you will be the losers. Don't miss this. Your own spiritual welfare is tied to how others in the church treat and respond to the elders. It seems to me that a spiritually mature congregation would be well-served to police its own members in this regard, knowing that the corporate welfare is at stake. When you see sinful behavior; when you hear sinful conversation that you know would grieve your elders. When you see or hear these things and remain silent know that you do so to your own spiritual hurt and to the hurt of your church.

How is such behavior unprofitable? First, violation of the Biblical injunctions of Hebrews 13:17 constitutes high-handed disobedience in the face of a clear and oft-repeated command. It renders one liable to the Lord's discipline. Second, to reject lawful, responsible, God-ordained authority in the body of Christ is to reject the authority of God. John MacArthur points out, "Submission to these

men is submission to God.” Third, we bring reproach upon the gospel when we demonstrate ourselves to be as disagreeable and proud as those who are void of the grace of God. Fourth, God will simply not bless a people who perpetuate an atmosphere of contention, quarreling, and selfishness. Fifth, the advance of the gospel is halted as the church is preoccupied with intramural affairs. The energies of the pastors and elders are diverted from teaching and discipleship to settling squabbles, squelching rumors, answering complaints. Under such burdens the elders groan.

But we shall set our goals high in this regard. I close with these verses from Paul’s letter to the Philippians that give us a taste of things when Hebrews 13:17 is being lived out. **Philippians 1:3-4**, *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all.* **Philippians 2:17-18**, *but even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all.* ¹⁸ *And you too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.* **Philippians 4:1**, *Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, so stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.*