

SUBMISSION TO YOUR ELDERS

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ABSTRACT

Submission to Your Elders

The church is called by its head, the Lord Jesus Christ, to submit to the elders of the church. The concept of submission to the church leadership has suffered in the consumer culture of the West. Some, like Harold Camping, have called for Christians to leave the church. Some Christians wander from church to church and do not see a need to be submissive to the elders of the church.

In Chapter 2, this thesis will lay out the concept of submission from the New Testament. Christians must submit to their parents, government, employers and spouses.

In Chapter 3, four texts from the New Testament will be examined which instruct the congregation to submit to their leadership. The texts are Hebrews 13:17, Thessalonians 5:12-13, 1 Corinthians 16:15-16, and 1 Peter 5:5. Then it will briefly trace the way the concept of submission changed with Reformation and continued to change in America with its emphasis on democracy and the right to choose.

Chapter 4 will present the biblical view of submission. It will focus on the necessity of elders being qualified for the ministry. This qualification must be recognized by both the current leadership and the congregation. Both congregation and leadership must acknowledge their ultimate submission to God, and they must obey his commands. The congregation is not required to follow an elder who is commanding them to sin. In the final section of Chapter 4, three specific examples of submission will be discussed: financial, receiving admonishment and areas of disagreement.

Chapter 5 will discuss times when submitting to leadership is sinful. A member is not to submit to elders who are disqualified either morally or doctrinally. The church must also practice church discipline of both the regular members and the elders, since the church is ultimately ruled by Christ.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Both the congregation and its leadership need to relate rightly to one another in order to operate as a healthy church. Many Christian books do not mention how a congregation should approach their leadership. Even in many leadership books, it receives scant attention. Still Christian congregations should be submissive to their leadership; it is essential to a healthy church.

In some ways the concept of submission to elders¹ seems to be clear in Scripture, yet in the United States some do not agree to the concept. In my own church experience, I have seen this demonstrated. There was time when many people from our local city attended our church. They were an interesting group who seemed to practice a form of Neo Monasticism. They lived close to one another; some even lived in a large house together. Some of this group would jump on the trains running through our city and ride them from one city to the next. Some of them were quite transient. Some were genuine believers while others were not. They even had their own church service on Sunday afternoons in a different building. It was difficult for the elders to figure out how best to administer the church. The elders could not adequately exercise control over this group.²

¹ Scripture uses the terms elder, bishop, and pastor. I personally believe the leaders in the church should be called elders but in many Christian circles there are many different names with the title pastor being the most common. In this paper the term elders, leaders, and leadership will be used interchangeably. It is also assumed that the people in leadership are men. The debate over whether or not women can be elders is beyond the scope of this paper.

² It must also be mentioned that at the time our church did not have any formal membership.

A second situation was when some of the younger men of our congregation, those just out of college, did not seem to think submission to the church leadership was necessary. It was a foreign idea to them. I want to demonstrate clearly that Christians must submit to their leadership to be obedient to the teaching of the New Testament.

We will begin by looking at how and why a congregation should submit to their elders. First, the different types of submission in the New Testament will be examined. God has clearly called all Christians to submit to their parents, the government, employers and spouses. Next, four verses from the New Testament³ will be explored to gain an understanding of the early churches view of submission. These verses will guide the structure of the thesis. It will be clearly established that the early church believed in the need to submit to their elders and accept their admonishments. The elders themselves also needed to submit themselves to God and rule in a manner consistent with His will. They are not to command anything contrary to Scripture, and the congregation is not to obey any commands contrary to Scripture. The New Testament verses emphasize the need to obey the elders since they watch over the souls of the congregation.

After exploring the texts from the New Testament, there will be brief look at how submission to one's elders underwent a change during the time of the Reformation. In the United States today and its emphasis on democracy, people are less willing than before to submit to their leadership. This can take the form of outright refusal, attempting to get the leader(s) removed or in simply leaving the church when they do not like the way the church is led.

Submission can be an ambiguous term, but the Bible speaks of different ways the congregation submits to its leadership. In a correct understanding of submission one must

³ The texts are Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15; 1 Corinthians 16:15-16; 1 Peter 5:1-5.

first make sure the elders are qualified and appointed according to a process amenable to the Bible. The congregation and leadership itself must all acknowledge they are under the authority of God and all decisions need to be subject to His revealed will. The Bible also clearly gives examples of when the congregation should submit to their leaders, specifically financially, in receiving admonishment, and in areas of disagreement.

At the same time there are occasions when submitting to the elders is sinful. The congregation is not to submit to elders who are living in sin morally or teaching false doctrine. Both leaders and the members of the congregation, while in submission to God, must be willing to practice church discipline on any member who is in unrepentant sin, including those in leadership. The submission of the congregation to its leadership is an extension and example of their submission to God.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of submission to elders within the church setting is one which usually does not see much mention in books that speak of the church nor in books on church leadership. Usually the topic is found here or there throughout the book if it is spoken of at all. There are three main views on submission to elders in the literature. One view stresses the priesthood and equality of all believers; this will be referred to as the priesthood view. Submission to one's elders is not stressed in this view; elders do not have any special authority from God. A second view believes that elders are in the church and have special authority given to them by God. This view will be referred to as the office of elders view. A third view does not believe the members have to be subject to spiritual authorities in their quest for a true spiritual experience. This view will be referred to as the no submission needed view. There is some overlap between the views, especially the first two views.

The Reformation rediscovered the teaching of the priesthood of all believers. The priesthood view sees this as a key to understanding how the church should be run. Frank Viola bemoans that, "By the fifth century, the concept of priesthood of all believers had completely disappeared from Christian practice."¹ Although the New Testament does not make a clergy/laity description most churches today operate with this distinction. He writes, "The New Testament...never used the terms *clergy* and *laity* and does not support the concept that there are those who do ministry (clergy) and those to whom ministry is done

¹ Frank Viola *Reimagining Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook Publisher, 2008), 117.

(laity).”² Since all members are equal this will affect how a member would submit to his elders. Robert J. Banks writes, “Paul rejects any formal distinction between official figures and ordinary members in the community.”³ All the members of the church are equal and all deserve equal respect.

The priesthood view believes that most of the structure of the Christian church today has been taken far from the New Testament principles. It has simply copied too much from the world. Titles do not have a place in the church. Banks writes, “This renunciation of offices, and of the titles and honors that belong to them, radically departs from first-century attitudes to religious organizations.”⁴ The creation of many different offices within the church are not derived from the Bible. Banks also writes, “We cannot say, then, that Paul’s communities were hierarchical in structure.”⁵ The structure of the church based on the New Testament clearly laid out the equality of all believers and there is too much authority vested in leaders in the church today. The pastor in churches today is relied on to do too much. In addition, leadership should be plural and not vested in only one person. Viola writes, “The contemporary pastorate rivals the functional headship of Christ in His church. It illegitimately holds the unique place of centrality and headship among God’s people, a place that is reserved for only one Person—the Lord Jesus.”⁶ The priesthood view would call for the church to reorganize itself to be aligned with the teachings of the New Testament.

² Ibid., 113. Emphasis in the original.

³ Robert J. Banks *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishing, 2009), 131.

⁴ Banks, 132.

⁵ Ibid., 148.

⁶ Viola, 137.

The priesthood view still sees elders as important in the church. Viola believes they help “superintend” the church. “First-century elders were simply spiritually mature men-exemplary Christians who superintended (not controlled or directed) the affairs of the church.”⁷ But today too much authority is given to elders and to those in leadership just because they have a title. Banks writes, “Their authority comes from the ministry discharged by them in the community rather than from their status outside it or position within it, and it is not an irrevocable possession.”⁸ Although not explicitly stated it seems that the elder does not have a right to call for any kind of extra submission to his word. He should be treated the same as any other brother or sister in the faith. Since all are equally priests and members of the body there should not be a special spiritual authority invested in an elder. His word may carry more weight based on the fact that he is older and more mature, but there is no special God-given (due to his office) authority to be given to his word. It is not that elders are not important. Viola writes, “Simply put, elders were spiritual facilitators who supplied guidance, provided nurture, and encouraged faithfulness in the church. Eldership, therefore, is something that one *does*. It’s not a slot one *fills*.”⁹ An elder is only owed submission if they are a servant and only as a wiser brother. There is no special submission commanded by God.

The office of elders view believes that God has ordained elders to help lead the church. The elders are owed special submission since they rule the church as part of the authority structure ordained by God. Although some in this view may not like the phrases clergy and laity they would still affirm there is a difference between leaders and the regular members of

⁷ Viola, 171.

⁸ Banks, 148.

⁹ Viola, 172. Emphasis in the original.

the church. G.K. Beale writes, “Too often churches proclaim that their goal is that every believer is to be equal with every other believer and that, ideally, there should be no one in an authoritative position over anyone else. But Christians are not equal in the sense that they have functional equality in the church. Rather, they have different gifts that entail different kinds of functions. Leadership is among these gifts (Eph. 4:11).”¹⁰ The office of elders view sees leaders as vested with authority in the church.

This does not eliminate the duties and the priesthood of the believers. Wayne Mack and Dave Swavely write, “In fact, for the authority structure of a church to function as God designed, each member must be aware of his or her responsibilities to the leadership and diligently attempt to fulfill them (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-30)”¹¹ The members of the congregation must be involved in decision making processes. Alexander Strauch agrees, “All members have a voice in assuring what is done in the church family is done according to Scripture. So there is a tightly knit, delicate, and reciprocal relationship between elders and congregation.”¹² This view clearly agrees that all members are to be involved in the work of the church; they just believe there is a distinction between the elders and the rest of the congregation.

The office of elders view also believes in a hierarchal structure within the church. Since God set up the authority, the elders must use this authority. It is God-ordained. Of the elder system Strauch writes, “I am convinced that one of the reasons the apostles chose the elder system of government was because it enhanced the loving, humble-servant character of the

¹⁰ G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, vol. 13, *IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downer Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 159.

¹¹ Wayne Mack and Dave Swavely, *Life in the Father's House: A Member's Guide to the Local Church* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1996), 53.

¹² Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Colorado Springs: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 292.

Christian family. The New Testament provides a consistent example of shared leadership as the ideal structure of leadership in a congregation where love, humility, and servanthood are paramount.”¹³ This biblical eldership does not distract from the glory of Jesus Christ, but “guards and promotes the preeminence and position of Christ over the local church.”¹⁴ This structure of leadership is for the good of the church and to the glory of Jesus Christ. Phil Newton writes, “The church needs leaders with authority in order to give the church direction, to exhort where needed, to correct and restore those who have gone astray, and to model the servant leadership of Christ among the flock.”¹⁵ This organization of the church was established by God and the church needs to follow this organization to honor God.

The proponents of the office of elders view do not believe the elders in the church are infallible but also must be submissive to the will of God. They can fall into sin and if they do then they should be removed. The ultimate authority in the church resides in Christ. Thomas Schreiner writes, “Paul emphasizes the authoritative teaching, not the authoritative person. We could make the mistake of posting too great a disjunction between authoritative teaching and teachers, and yet the difference is important, for the gospel itself is the authority rather than the teacher or elder per se.”¹⁶ The elders do not rule in their own power nor from their own minds but instead are to be servants as Christ was and serve the church.

Those who hold the office of elders view believe that submission is a voluntary action done on the part of the congregation. They are also only to submit insofar as the elder is

¹³ Strauch, 114.

¹⁴ Strauch, 115.

¹⁵ Phil Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Mode for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 142.

¹⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 388.

imitating Christ. Elders can and do sin. Newton writes, “Following Christ remains the church’s priority; we are to follow spiritual leadership *only* as it imitates Christ and adheres to the teaching of the Word. We are never to obey and submit in areas that are clearly in conflict with the teaching of Scripture.”¹⁷ However, they do believe there is a special way in which Christians are called to submit to their elders. God has ordained them for the good of the church. This submission is so important Strauch writes, “Indeed, submission to authority is often a test to our submission to God.”¹⁸ The church is called and required by God to submit to their elders.

Both the priesthood view and the office of elders view see the priesthood of believers as making each member a vital working part of the congregation. They differ on role of elders. The priesthood view thinks elders are not a special office within the church. There is no submission owed to them on the basis of their office. The office of elders view sees elders as God-ordained and they are owed obedience because of their office. If you do not submit to your elder then you are sinning. The no submission needed view does not believe the members have to be subject to authorities in their quest for a true spiritual experience. This view is a minority report within Christendom. One side of the no submission view is represented by Harold Camping who believes that members should leave the church and not be subject to any form of church leadership. Another side of this view is represented by Michael Spencer who believes that church oftentimes is not the best place to have an authentic Jesus-shaped spirituality.

Harold Camping, the late co-founder of Family Radio, believes God has abandoned the church. This is because in the “New Testament era God has overlooked and tolerated the

¹⁷ Newton, 90.

¹⁸ Strauch, 160.

high places in the churches”¹⁹ in the past. The church has allowed false doctrine to get into its confessions and God overlooked this sin, but He will no longer. He believes Jeremiah 29 has a word for Christians today and should be applied as, “Get out of Jerusalem (the church). No longer are you to be under the spiritual rulership of the church.”²⁰ God has abandoned the church and the candlestick has been removed. The Holy Spirit is no longer involved in the local church. Therefore, “The elders and deacons are being guided by their own minds rather than by the Holy Spirit.”²¹ If a congregation agrees with his teaching then they can, “reorganize their congregation from a church congregation, to become a fellowship of believers. The elders will no longer be elders. The deacons will no longer be deacons. The Pastor will no longer be pastor. In other words no individuals will have spiritual rule over the congregation.”²²

In comparison with the first two views Camping agrees with the priesthood of all believers but rejects the idea of any leadership in the church. He does not see any function for elders or any other leadership. When it comes to the structure of the church Camping does not believe the church as constructed in the New Testament exists any longer. This view is still held by Family Radio today.²³

Michael Spencer represents the other side of the no submission view. He does not necessarily advocate leaving the church structure, but he thinks it frequently can be a

¹⁹ Harold Camping, “Has the Era of the Church Age Come to an End?” (San Jose: Good Message Foundation, 2002), 5.

²⁰ Ibid., 6.

²¹ Ibid., 7.

²² Ibid., 8.

²³ According to Christian Post, the Family Radio Ministry headed by Harold Camping still holds these views after his death. “Harold Camping’s Death Will Not Change Family Radio, Says Spokesman.” Michael Gryboski, January 23 2014, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/harold-campings-death-will-not-change-family-radio-says-spokesman-113267/> (accessed July 18, 2014).

hindrance to true spirituality. He clearly does not believe a Christian has to be in a church or be submissive to the leaders of the church. He writes, “Following Jesus does not require you to pledge allegiance to a religious institution.”²⁴ He believes the organized church is too in love with the world and is taking worldly standards as its own. The church has left its moorings. He writes:

I seriously doubt that what you are walking away from resembles the movement Jesus started . . . I would guess that what you walked away from bears a superficial resemblance to the way of Jesus. I also would expect that what you left behind bears more than a passing resemblance to one of the religious systems that Jesus repudiated. . . . For many of you, leaving the church may have been the most spiritually healthy thing you ever did.²⁵

Spencer certainly believes in the priesthood of all believers and the ability of every Christian to make their own decision. He writes, “I trust individual Christians-including those who have left the institutional church or are on the verge of leaving-to know where God wants them to be.”²⁶

He does not see a need of the church to submit to their leaders, they are to submit to Jesus and seek to follow Him. The church has made too many rules which are simply not in the Bible. It makes rules where God has not, and Spencer advocates separation. Of those who leave the church and might be accused of not submitting he writes, “The problem does not lie with those who refuse to sit down, be quiet, open their wallets, and do what they are told.”²⁷ He does not believe God has called his people to submit in this way.

Both Camping and Spencer believe the church leadership has overstepped its bounds and a person does not have to submit to the leadership. In the case of Camping it would be

²⁴ Michael Spencer, *Mere Churchianity*, (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2010), 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 212-213.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

sinful to submit to them. On the other hand, Spencer thinks the need to follow Jesus far transcends the need to obey one's elders. We should not be concerned with what the elders say since we are following Jesus and not man.

CHAPTER 3

SUBMISSION IN THE BIBLE

Submission is a biblical word and concept. The American society has become anti-authority and the idea of submission is oftentimes seen as an attack on the rights of the individual. But God's word reminds us of many ways in which we are told to submit to one another. In this chapter we will take a short look at the different kinds of submission mentioned in the New Testament. The Webster Universal Collegiate Dictionary defines submit as "to give over or yield to the power or authority of another (often used reflexively)."¹ In the natural course of life a person first learns submission to his parents. Then he learns submission to his government, followed by submission to his employer or spouse. It should also be noted that all of these types of submission are interrelated; indeed, they can all be carried out concurrently. There is even a sense in which all Christians are called to submit to one another as Paul tells the Ephesians to be "submitting to one another in the fear of God" (5:21).²

Submission to parents

The family is very important to God. Rousas John Rushdoony writes, "the authority of the family is basic to society, and it is a God-centered authority."³ God has clearly taught

¹ Webster Universal Collegiate Dictionary, 784.

²All references will be from the New King James Version.

³ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (United States: The Craig Press, 1973), 164.

children to submit to their parents. Exodus 20:12 states, “Honor your father and your mother that your days live long on the land which the LORD your God gives you.” Colossians 3:20 says, “Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord.” Notice the phrase “all things,” children’s obedience to their parents is to be “very comprehensive”⁴ in the words of William Hendriksen. Yet this obedience is “always subject to the limitation of Acts 5:29”⁵ which clearly states that Christians should obey God and not man.

A newborn baby grows up around the context of submission. He is taught to submit to the authority of his parents. At first the submissiveness is forced since his parents have physical control and are more powerful than the child. He is made to submit. He can fight, cry and struggle all he wants, but, in the end, the parent makes his decisions for him. Rushdoony argues learning submission as a child is important because, “He is, by virtue of the discipline of obedience, most in command of himself and best able to command in his field of endeavor”⁶ as he increases in age. As the child grows older, the physical advantage of the parents wane in comparison to the child. At some point the child will become stronger than his parents. A child’s submission does change over time, but if the parents have done their job, the child will always submit to his parents, regardless of physical strength.

Even as adults, children still owe obedience and submission to their parents. John Frame writes, “But as a child grows older, especially when he leaves his parents’ home and starts a family of his own, Scripture applies the fifth commandment to him, not in terms of obedience, but rather in terms of respect/reverence and financial support.”⁷ This submission,

⁴ William Hendriksen, *Colossians, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 171.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶ Rushdoony, 195.

⁷ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2008), 580.

though changing over time, still exists throughout the lives of both the parents and child. The child is only released entirely from submission at his death or that of his parents.

Submission to government

At some point in a child's life he learns of the authority of the government. The parent will obey laws and the child asks the simple question "Why?" Thus begins his instructions on submitting himself to the government. In today's society the submission of United States citizens to the government seems to be something many people would rather not do. This is especially true in conservative Christian circles where some do not respect or want to follow the current President. God is clear that we are to respect our leaders, "Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake" (1 Peter 2:13) and "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities" (Romans 13:1). Furthermore, Paul says "there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God" (Romans 13:1-2). Mirroring the society, some in the church have forgotten the exhortation of 1 Timothy "that all supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life" (2:1-2). J. Rawson Lumby writes, "Whether the demands made upon them in this wise be always for the ends of which they would approve, they are not to discuss so long as their rulers provide duly for the social order and welfare."⁸ A Christian is to obey and submit to his government.

Much like submission to parents this submission is not absolute. The government can tell us to violate the will of God, but submission to God trumps submission to the state. For

⁸ J. Rawson Lumby, "The Epistles of Peter," vol. 6, *The Expositor's Bible*, ed. by W. Robertson Nicoll. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943), 698.

instance, in Hitler's Germany, many of the troops were told to assassinate any "Bolsheviks" and Jews who were "ruining" society. Commands of this nature, issued with the authority of the German government, were to be disobeyed by Christians since they violate the command not to murder. Donald Grey Barnhouse writes, "If governments order us to do evil, we will disobey."⁹ This is in accord with the New Testament. The apostles happily disobeyed the Sanhedrin who told them not to teach in the name of Jesus. Peter and the apostles said, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). The job of the Christian today is to emulate Paul's words in obedience and submission to authority, but the Christian today is not to be one that slavishly obeys as many in Germany did in World War II.

Submission to Masters

A third point of submission of a Christian is to their employer or superior. An employer or superior is one who has authority over a person in an economic or social setting. In New Testament terms, this is paralleled to the slave and master relationship. In Ephesians 6 we read that slaves were to "be obedient ... in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eyeservice...with goodwill doing service" (5-7). Most countries today do not allow slavery. The application for Christians today is to serve our employers and superiors with respect. John MacArthur writes, "Paul's admonition applies equally well to all employees."¹⁰ We are called to work "heartily as to the Lord and not to men" (Colossians 3:23). Calvin writes that Christians should see "their services are acceptable to Christ, as though they had been

⁹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Romans*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983) 107.

¹⁰ John MacArthur, *MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997) 1814.

rendered to him.”¹¹ All things considered no matter how gracious and respectful our bosses may be, they will tell us to do things we would rather avoid. As Christians we must submit and obey our bosses. This submission is not absolute. If an employer asks a Christian to lie to a potential client he must not do so. His ultimate allegiance is to God, and he owes entire obedience to God alone.

Submission to your spouse

Submission to your spouse, the most controversial topic, is last. This one issue gets the most attention today both in the world and in the church. If one types “submission” into a search engine the information will not point out the necessary submission to Christ or to the church, but the overwhelming number of results will, instead, talk about the marriage relationship. Turning again to Ephesians we read “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord” (5:22). The wife is instructed to obey her husbands’ leadership and look to him as her head. Indeed, she is to submit to her husband in “everything” (5:24). George W. Knight III states, “The phrase is all-encompassing: submission must encompass all aspects of life.”¹² Even if the husband is making a bad choice or wrong choice she is still to submit to what he says. She can still be submissive in attempts to change her husband’s mind about an issue, but she must do so in a respectful manner.

At the same time, the husband is actually given the more difficult job, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her.” (5:25). His supreme example is Christ who gave His very life for the church. He gives “honor to his wife” (1

¹¹ John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999) 221.

¹² George W. Knight III, “Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church: Ephesians 5:21-33 and Colossians 3:18-19” in, *Rediscovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Biblical Feminism* ed. John Piper & Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 170.

Peter 3:7). The headship of the husband “must be a headship of love in which the husband gives of himself for his wife’s good, nourishing and cherishing the beloved one who, as his equal, voluntarily submits to his headship.”¹³ He is to love his wife seeking her good just as Christ did when he died on the cross for his people.

Once again the allegiance of the wife is ultimately to God and the allegiance of the husband is ultimately to God. The husband cannot do whatever he wants in the marriage relationship. Knight writes, “Paul rules out elsewhere the idea that anyone in authority should ‘lord it over’ those he leads (2 Corinthians 1:24)”¹⁴ If a husband commands his wife to cheat on their taxes the wife is to disobey her husband.

In this world, although a person might seek to get out from under all authority, for all practical purposes it cannot be done. The only way to escape authority is to become a survivalist and live off the land. Even then, if the person violates the law he would quickly find out that the government still had authority over him. So, in many different situations, people in general are called to be in submission. For the Christian, since he is first called to be submissive to Christ, he is also to be in submission in the four ways mentioned above. In addition, the New Testament calls him to be submissive to his church leadership. It should be evident that there is a limit to submission. If submission violates the revealed will of God, not only can the Christian not obey, but he has the moral obligation not to obey. For the Christian, the ultimate submission is to the Lordship of Christ and no man should be allowed to usurp His authority.

¹³ Ibid., 173.

¹⁴ Ibid., 170.

CHAPTER 4

SUBMISSION IN THE CHURCH

The church was called in its birth to submit not only to Christ but also to its leadership. In this chapter we will first examine four texts from the New Testament to see how the early church understood submission. Next, we will proceed to see how things radically changed at the end of the Medieval times with the Reformation. Lastly, we will shortly consider the American church and its submission to its leaders.

Submission in the Early Church

The idea of submission to leadership is mentioned explicitly in four different texts in the New Testament; Hebrews 13, 1 Thessalonians 5, 1 Corinthians 16 and 1 Peter 5. We will consider those texts in that order. These texts will inform us of the early churches view of submission. These texts were chosen for study because they all direct a congregation to submit to the leaders of the church. Although the word for submit may not be in each text, the concept is still taught in the passage.

Hebrews 13:17

Hebrews 13:17 states, “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.” This is the most commonly used verse relation to submitting to elders.

In the first part of the verse the congregation is exhorted to obey their leaders. There are three main words to pay attention to; those who rule (hegeomai), obey (peitho) and submit (hypeiko). Arthur W. Pink points out that those who rule (hegeomai) has been translated as chief in Luke 22:26 and governor in Acts 7:10. Therefore he concludes the people described in this passage, “have received power from Christ to preside over His assemblies, to declare His will and execute His laws, to reprove, rebuke, exhort with all authority and longsuffering. They have no arbitrary power except what Christ has given them, yet within the limits He has prescribed, they are rulers, and it is the duty of their members to obey them.”¹ This passage clearly tells the congregation that there are leaders who do have authority over them. They must submit. He adds, “To ignore those rulers or to rebel against their authority is to despise the One who has appointed them.”² The congregation must follow these leaders in order to follow Christ.

The word obey (peitho) comes across in the text more strongly than it should in most English versions of the passage. Wayne Mack and Dave Swavely explain, “In the tense and voice used here, the Greek peitho literally means ‘to be continually persuaded.’ It is always used in reference to a verbal proclamation or argument, and so the idea is clearly that we are required to constantly allow the teaching and counsel of our leaders to be very persuasive in our hearts and lives.”³ Timothy M. Willis agrees, “One should read instead: “Be persuaded (by your leaders).”⁴ The idea of obeying is not in an absolute sense, but the congregation

¹ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 1240.

² *Ibid.*, 1240.

³ Wayne Mack and Dave Swavely, *Life in the Father's House: A Member's Guide to the Local Church* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1996), 53-54.

⁴ Timothy M Willis “Obey Your Leaders: Hebrews 13 and Leadership in the Church” *Restoration Quarterly* 36 (1994).

needs to weigh heavily the teaching of its leaders. According to Pink the instruction to obey, “is not to be restricted to their teaching...but includes their ruling of the church as well.”⁵

They should be looking for ways to obey what the leaders proclaim rather than seeking to get out from under their authority. When the congregation can trust its leaders it will be more likely to allow them to persuade them into the recommended course of action.

The word submit (*hypeiko*) is used only here in the New Testament and has the meaning of yielding to the authority of another. Alexander Strauch writes “This means Christians are to be responsive to their leaders, yield to their authority, and subordinate themselves to them even when they have a difference of opinion.”⁶ The congregation is not to sit in the back of the church with their arms folded resistant to any change or direction from the leadership. Pink writes that this word “seems to us to have reference unto the *spirit* in which they were to obey-obedience was not to be merely an outward act, but prompted by submissive hearts.”⁷ Instead they are to work with leadership for the good of the church with a positive attitude.

The next section of passage states the reason why the church should be willing to obey and submit. The leadership is acting in the best interests of the church. They “must give account” of how they have ruled the church. They will have to explain why they have required the congregation to follow them. This is a huge check on the power of the leadership. They are not running a secular business but instead the church of God. They are ultimately under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, the one Head of the church. John

⁵ Pink, 1241.

⁶Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Colorado Springs: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995) 268.

⁷ Pink, 1241.

MacArthur writes, “Just as church leaders are to rule in love and humility, those under their leadership are to submit in love and humility.”⁸ Therefore, they will rule in a manner that is pleasing to Him.

Not only should the congregation obey and submit to their leadership because they must give an account to God, but also because it will benefit them. Ultimately the entire church benefits when the leaders are qualified and the congregation follows. MacArthur writes, “When you do not have Spirit-filled leaders who rule well or submissive people who follow well, you have chaos and disunity in the church and open the doors to all sorts of spiritual problems.”⁹ If they are submissive their leaders will be able to serve them with joy. It is just common sense. When a person is doing work joyfully he will do a better job. Basically the author of Hebrews is telling them to make it easy for the leaders to lead. MacArthur adds, “it is the responsibility of the church to help their leaders rule with joy and satisfaction. The joy of our leaders in the Lord should be a motivation for submission. We are not to submit begrudgingly or out of a feeling of compulsion, but willingly...”¹⁰ God is honored and the church is functioning well when the congregation submits to its leadership.

Hebrews informs us of some of the principles of submission to leadership. The leadership must be made of men who are trustworthy and respected. If they are not, they will be unable to persuade others to follow and submit to them. A congregation can trust the elders since they are ultimately submissive to God. Rebelling against the elders hurts all the

⁸ John MacArthur, *Hebrews*, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 445.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 445.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 446.

church and the congregation will suffer. Finally, this submission covers even areas of disagreement. The congregation is still called to submit even if they do not agree.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

In 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 Paul writes, “And we urge you brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them highly in love for their work’s sake. Be at peace among yourselves.” This letter was written to a young congregation from which Paul and Silas had to leave before the authorities arrested them. Still, they did have leadership in the church. There is a question about whether or not these men were elders. Much like Hebrews 13 the text does not specifically mention any specific offices or titles. Robert Banks writes, “what is in view here is not official positions within the community but special functions.”¹¹ Banks does not like the idea of having offices in the church. His view is discussed more in chapter 5. Some are relatively sure they were elders with William Hendriksen exclaiming that it was “highly probable that there were [elders there]!”¹² Either way the congregation must recognize the leadership of the church.

Again, it is important that the ones whom the congregation are recognizing are those who are laboring and are over them in the Lord. The character of the leadership is evident. They are working, toiling, probably working night and day as Paul says about his own work. They are also doing it in the Lord; they are working for Him-their labor must be pleasing to

¹¹ Robert J. Banks *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishing, 2009), 141.

¹² William Hendriksen, *1 Thessalonians, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 135; Robert L. Thomas says they were “quite probably” elders; see “1 Thessalonians,” vol. 11, *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 288.

Him. Vine defines the word *proistemi* (translated as “over”) as “literally ‘to stand before’ hence to lead, to direct, attend to”¹³ Of *proistemi*, G. K. Beale writes, “The idea is of those in an authoritative position of ‘managing’ or ‘shepherding’ (see the same word in 1 Tim. 3:4, 12; 5:17.)”¹⁴ In the context of the book of Thessalonians itself, Paul makes evident that there were many idle in the congregation who were not working with their own hands. He even instructs them, “If anyone does not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). In light of their actions the leadership was to be exactly the opposite. They were to be an example especially to the idle who “were loath to obey the rules laid down by the religious authorities.”¹⁵

In light of the character of the leaders, the congregation should be willing to accept the admonishment (*noutheteo*) of the leaders. Beale writes this, “word refers not merely to teaching but to instruction aimed at changing one’s moral disposition, with respect to both enlightening and warning the ignorant about potential problems ahead and rebuking those already entangled in wrongdoing.”¹⁶ These men were worthy of imitation and worthy of being listened to. They were not charlatans saying one thing and then doing the opposite. Robert L. Thomas writes, “Admonishing is correction administered either by word or deed. It implies blame on the part of the one admonished. Naturally, it arouses resentment, since discipline is never pleasant. Still the apostle presents admonition as necessary for the

¹³ W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 822.

¹⁴G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, vol. 13, *IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downer Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 160

¹⁵ Hendriksen, 134.

¹⁶ Beale, 161.

congregation and requires respect for those who exercise it.”¹⁷ Arousing resentment is a major side effect of admonishment. It shows submission when a church member can accept the admonishment and profit from it rather than fighting back and biting the leader who rebukes and corrects them. Scripture requires the elders to admonish the congregation and requires the congregation to submit and obey the admonishments of the elders.

The church members are not just to submit but to “esteem” the leaders highly in love for the work they do. This response is contradictory to the initial human impulse. When a person points out our sin we are apt to respond in like manner and find some fault of theirs we can criticize. Instead they are told here to love them for their work, their admonishing and laboring. The Greek word for labor used here is *kopiaō* of which Gene L. Green writes, “The verb has to do with engaging in difficult or exhausting labor, the same as the noun form of the word in 1.3”¹⁸ This is also a strike at those who are idle and not working—they are admonished by the example of the leaders to work themselves. Strauch writes, “The church, then, has a divine obligation to highly esteem its spiritual leaders.”¹⁹ The leaders are to be respected because God wants them to be respected. “This position of authority is not to be performed in a dictatorial or sinful way, but the elders *are over* the rest of the believers *in the Lord*. Their authority can be exercised only in so far as the Lord has given them authority to act.”²⁰ It is their work that makes them worthy of this esteem. They are laboring in the name of the Lord and by His divine power so the congregation needs to acknowledge them with their love.

¹⁷ Thomas, 288.

¹⁸ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 248-249.

¹⁹ Strauch, 170.

²⁰ Beale, 160-161. Emphasis in the original.

Finally, they are told to be at peace among themselves. Whenever somebody is in authority over another and has the power to tell them how they should be acting there will be times when toes get stepped on. Ben Witherington writes, “The exercise of authority, especially in a new situation, almost always prompts resentment. . . . The number one thing that divides congregations is dissension or division over leadership”²¹ They must be reminded to pursue peace with each other. Robert L. Thomas writes, “That Paul included such a command shows that relations were not all they could have been. . . Leaders were to guard against abusing their authority; idlers were not to disregard those over them in the Lord.”²² Both the leaders and the congregation have their own sins to be aware of. It is easy for the leaders to use their authority to command things better left to conscience and to command with an unjust spirit. The congregation can mumble and complain against their leaders much like the Israelites did against Moses while they were in the wilderness. Beale counsels, “Church members should not consider suing or leaving the church when disputes arise but should try to work out the problem.”²³

The next two verses also add a significant reminder to both congregation and leadership. Paul writes, “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and all” (14-15). The entire congregation is to have a part in the discipline process. The discipline process starts on the personal level and oftentimes never reaches the full congregation. As William Hendrickson

²¹ Witherington, 161

²² Thomas, 288

²³ Beale, 162.

points out “Mutual discipline must be exercised by all the members. It is wrong to leave all this to pastors and elders.”²⁴

In 1 Thessalonians we see elders are to be those who are laboring and putting forth work. They do exercise authority in the congregation and are accountable to God. One of their keys functions is to admonish the flock. The church is also required to have high affection for the leaders. In addition when it comes to church discipline the entire church should be involved and not leaving it only to the elders.

1 Corinthians 16:15-16

1 Corinthians 16:15-16 reads, “I urge you, brethren-you know the household of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints-that you also submit to such, and to everyone who works and labors with us.” There are two main aspects of leadership discussed in this passage which are also common to the Hebrews and Thessalonians. The leaders have “devoted themselves” and the congregation is encouraged to submit. The household of Stephanas had worked hard for the good of the Corinthian church. Therefore the Corinthians should be willing to submit and follow their lead.

W. Harold Mare writes that the mention of the household of Stephanas “was evidently prompted by the Corinthians lack of respect for them; by personal experience the apostle knew full well that the Corinthians were capable of disrespect.”²⁵ Paul was concerned about the lack of respect Stephanas was receiving so he exhorted the church to follow their

²⁴ Hendriksen, 136.

²⁵ W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians,” vol. 10, *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 295.

example. In connection with Thessalonian passage it is important to notice verse 14 which reads, “Let all that you do be done with love” something the Corinthian congregation was not doing. Thomas R. Schreiner writes:

The Corinthian congregation is summoned to “submit” (hypotasso) to such leaders. The call to submission is not an example of authority being enforced from above. Paul does not say that the leaders are to compel the congregation to submit. He urges the congregation to submit voluntarily and gladly to leadership. The congregation takes it upon itself to follow the leadership. Paul does not instruct leaders to compel the congregation to submit.²⁶

So in 1 Corinthians 16 we see some more familiar aspects of submission. The household of Stephanas is an example of leadership since they have devoted themselves for the good of the saints. The congregation is also told to submit and it can be reasonably concluded the Corinthian church was not obeying its leaders. Finally, the nature of the submission is voluntary from the perspective of the congregation. Leaders are not told to force the church to submit but must be examples.

1 Peter 5:1-5

The final passage comes from the pen of Peter. In 1 Peter 5:5 it states, “Likewise, you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders, Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.’” There is some debate as to who the elders are in the passage. Some believe it refers merely to the older men in the congregation while others believe it refers to the official position of elders.²⁷ Alexander Strauch thinks “it seems more probable that Peter is referring

²⁶Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 386.

²⁷ John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999,) 147 believes it is in reference to age. Simon Kistemaker believes it refers to both age and function and writes “The one

to the official elders of the church. Peter has just exhorted the elders not to lord it over the flock. Now he feels compelled to instruct the younger men to subject themselves to the elders.”²⁸ The main point to verse 5 is the aspect of humility. Thomas Schreiner writes, “Smooth relations in the church can be preserved if the entire congregation adorns itself with humility...Humility is the oil that allows relationships in the church to run smoothly and lovingly.”²⁹ Peter enjoins all his readers to “be submissive to one another” and “clothed with humility” so if the passage is speaking of elders it is very clear they are not rule in an authoritarian manner. Peter said previously in the passage they are not to be as “lords over those entrusted” to them (3). The character of the elders is evident since they are supposed to shepherd the flock willingly. In verse 4 they are reminded that the Chief Shepherd will appear. This should impel them to serve with honor knowing the Chief Shepherd sees all and judges righteously.

The first Peter passage repeats some familiar themes as the other three passages. The idea of humility is expressed and Peter is explicit that humility must be shown by both the elders and the congregation. The elders must rule with humility and the congregation must accept their authority with humility. The elders must not rule as a king over his subjects and must remember the ultimate King is the one who rewards their work.

The Christian church, from its infancy, was taught to submit to their elders. This was the basic teaching of the early church. Speaking of Basil of Caesarea (329-379), Rico

interpretation does not rule of the other. A word can convey two meanings when a writer provides indications to that effect” in *1 Peter, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 196. Peter H. Davids thinks it refers to the office of elders *The First Epistle of Peter, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 184.

²⁸ Strauch, 250-251.

²⁹ Thomas Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 238.

Gabriel Monge writes, “In addition, Basil's requirement that all members of the Church must work in harmony with each other regardless of their specific gifts implies that those granted the charism of leadership, the clergy, cannot dominate followers in an authoritarian way. At the same time, however, it also suggests that the laity cannot be fractious or stubbornly insubordinate.”³⁰ Church Father Chrysostom (345-407) wrote, “Anarchy, then, is an evil and a cause of ruin. But no less an evil is disobedience of rulers, for it comes again to the same. For a people not obeying a ruler is like one which has none, and perhaps even worse. For, in the former case, they have at least an excuse for disorder but no longer in the latter, but are punished.”³¹ Although more passages could be examined at this point we have covered the four passages that directly speak to submission to church leadership. Many of the other passages will be dealt with as we look at a correct understanding of submission and church discipline.

Submission in the Medieval Church

There are many varied opinions as to when the medieval time period can be measured—usually anywhere from 400 AD to 1500. Alister McGrath starts with the fall of Rome in 476 AD and does not explicitly define the end but refers to the fall of Constantinople (1453), invention of the printing press (1450's) and/or Columbus' discovery of America (1492).³² We will just take two round numbers and say it is the period from 500-1500 A.D.

³⁰ Rico Gabriel Monge, “Submission to One Head: Basil of Caesarea on Order and Authority in the Church” *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 54 (2010), 22.

³¹ Chrysostom “The Epistle to the Hebrews 34.1” in, *Hebrews*, vol. 10, *Ancient Christian Commentary New Testament*, ed. Erik M. Heen and Philip D.W. Krey, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 237.

³² Alister McGrath, *Christian History: An Introduction* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers 2013,) 72.

Although some believe the medieval time was generally static, there was actually a lot of social change in the latter part of the Medieval period.³³ Bradley and David Nystrom point out “Economic change brought social change. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, serfs frequently bought their freedom from the lands to which they had formally been bound.”³⁴ This social change also affected the church. At the time before the reformation there were basically two wings of the Christian church, the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Essentially, everyone in Europe belonged to one of these two churches. Church and state were intertwined, there was an official church sponsored by the state. *The Church from Age to Age* states, “That an all-pervading religious atmosphere was present and effective was in part due to the organization of the powerful Medieval Christian Church... an international community of the faithful to which almost everyone in Europe belonged.”³⁵

As a result of this structure, when the Reformers changed the church they did so by working through the existing government. Luther obtained the support of Frederick the Wise who protected him from King Charles and the pope. Both Calvin in Geneva and Zwingli in Zurich worked through the city council.

But in the Reformation were the seeds of more radical change. There had been groups in the past like the Waldenses who broke away from the church, yet even they had sought papal support. This branch of the Reformation is frequently referred to as the Radical Reformation. These Reformers sought to be outside of the government where they believed their scripturally informed conscience led them. The Bible began more and more to be

³³ Edward A. Engelbrecht and Laura L. Lane, eds., *The Church From Age to Age: A History* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House 2011), 251.

³⁴ Bradley P. Nystrom and David P. Nystrom, *The History of Christianity An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishers 2004), 152.

³⁵ Engelbrecht and Lane, 410.

translated into the vernacular which allowed regular people to read it in their own language. This allowed the people to interpret the Bible themselves. This reforming group was wide and varied and it is estimated that there were “more than forty varieties of Anabaptism.”³⁶ Within this section of the Reformation there seem to be some true Christians and some religious fanatics who held bizarre views. These groups would leave the confines of the local church or cathedral and worship on their own. Many were seen as rebels against the state and persecuted, many unto death. This individualism is still with the church today. Today if one disagrees he can seek to do so within his current congregation, join a different congregation or he can separate into his own form of Christianity. Throughout most of the medieval times people knew the church to which they belonged and to which they were to submit, but due to the Reformation and the individualism that went with it, this was no longer true.

Submission in the Modern Day Church

In the United States it is permissible and seen as a healthy thing to leave one church and join another. There are no established churches, although originally many of the colonies/states had their own state church. Today there is much church shuffling in the United States. Many members do not want to submit to the rule of their leaders. When they are challenged or do not like the way the church is being run they simply leave. G.K. Beale writes, “If the church will not meet our needs in the way we think it should, we find another ‘church store’ to attend. Another reason for this situation is that the American church has been so permeated with democracy and individualism that these two great American ideals

³⁶ Nystrom and Nystrom, 253.

have been taken to an extreme.”³⁷ At times, this can be good because if the church is being run in a sinful way and the witness of Christ’s church is harmed, it can be good to move on. Edmund Clowney writes, “But the drift of modern society takes the opposite direction. Church members frown at the suggestion that the church should have authority beyond that of a club to make its own rules.”³⁸ In many ways the church is mirroring the society at large. In America we are a consummate consumers always looking for a better price or better product. This thinking also infiltrates the church. Marlin Jeschke writes, “Many people attending these churches may be church hoppers or perennial visitors, considering themselves free-floating Christians without accountability—and they like it that way.”³⁹ The great evangelistic crusades of Billy Graham and others have fed this thinking despite their attempts to get the ones who come forward to join a local church. Jim Erhard’s church took part in two Graham crusades. He writes, “We received the names of ten converts from one crusade and six from the other. In our follow-up, not one was interested in church, the Bible, or even talking about his ‘new-found faith in Christ.’ Other pastors reported similar results.”⁴⁰ There is a lack of accountability in the church today.

This attitude to submission to leaders and Christian authority is demonstrated by Michael Spencer, the Internet Monk. He wrote only one book in his life and the title itself is descriptive *Mere Churchianity*. It is his contention that there are times when the church is not the best place for believers because there is so much hypocrisy in the church. His main point can be summed up as too much of church and not enough of Jesus. He seems to

³⁷ Beale, 159.

³⁸ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 203.

³⁹ Marlin Jeschke “How Church Discipline Died: The Church should stop taking its cues from the states,” *Christianity Today*, August 2005, 31.

⁴⁰ Jim Erhard, *Dangers of the Invitation System* (Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2008), 13.

believe the church is too in love with the world and is taking worldly standards as its standards. There seems to be no thought that the person could be walking away from the church because they are not a Christian. He writes, “*Mere Churchianity* is written for people who have come to the end of the road with the church but who can’t entirely walk away from Jesus. In the wreckage of a church-shaped religious faith, the reality of Jesus of Nazareth persists and calls out to them. I’m talking to those who have left, those will leave, those might as well leave, and those who don’t know why they are still hanging around.”⁴¹ He even says, “For many of you, leaving the church may have been the most spiritually healthy thing you ever did.”⁴² The church itself is not worthy to be submitted to. The Christian church is so far off from what Jesus started, often the best thing to do is leave the church and have an authentic church experience outside the church. He writes, “If you are a church-leaver, I don’t want to drag you back. I have a better idea: find yourself in God’s great and diverse purpose . . . Can you replace churchianity with a Jesus-shaped spirituality that experiences God’s power as God works toward fulfilling his incredible, history-changing purposes?”⁴³ He believes churches and others have no right to criticize those who have left the church. To him it is unfair to call these people sinful or foolish in their actions. Instead he advocates the right of the individual to leave, “I trust individual Christians—including those who have left the institutional church or are on the verge of leaving—to know where God wants them to be.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Michael Spencer, *Mere Churchianity*, (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2010), 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

Spencer also grounds his views in a deficient understanding of submission. He writes, “The problem does not lie with those who refuse to sit down, be quiet, open their wallets, and do what they are told. I don’t believe for a moment that those who have abandoned organized Christianity have always found something better, but I’m sure they are looking for something better. I know, because I’m looking for the same thing.”⁴⁵ There are a multitude of problems with this kind of statement. What if the leaders are godly men who are shaping the member into the conformity of Christ, but he does not like it? He seems to be free to leave and with blessing according to Spencer. The idea that there is any wisdom in the ages of Christian living is rejected with the individual as the only arbiter of truth. This seems to be what the Catholic Church feared in giving the people the Bible in their own vernacular. The Christian church is not simply a place where the members must be quiet and give their money. This is a caricature of genuine Christianity. There is no thought that the leaders and the church are under the authority of God and responsible to run the church as He commands. Spencer’s comments are disturbing because when a person leaves the church his soul is in danger.

On the other side the church leaders cannot fear this individualism and type of outlook. They are accountable to God. They must rule as God’s representatives in light of the Bible and continue to admonish and lead the church. Roger Beardmore writes, “There is, on the one hand, an abdication of church authority by some. Confronted with the individualistic, anti-law spirit of our time, cowardly church officers refuse to exercise the biblical oversight entrusted to them by Christ. In many circles authoritative preaching and correct church discipline are conspicuously absent.”⁴⁶ The leaders are not excused from exercising their

⁴⁵ Ibid., 65.

authority in a biblical way but must fight against the urge of being authoritarian and unnecessarily driving people from the church. Roger Ventura and Jeremy Walker write:

Take care not to fall into the foolish individualism of the modern West at this point and imagine that you are an army of one: the church is a body, a unit composed of many members. You will find strength and safety in true Christ-centered, Spirit indwelt community, not in apparently splendid but actually foolish isolation. In most instances, the soldier who marches into battle alone, no matter how well armed and armored, will very rapidly succumb to the hordes that oppose him.⁴⁷

The Christian needs the church and its leaders for his own spiritual health. This is the way in which Jesus set up the church.

⁴⁶ Roger Beardmore ed., *Shepherding God's Flock* (Harrisonburg Va: Sprinkle Publications, n.d.) 105-106 quoted in Wayne Mack and Dave Swavely, 52.

⁴⁷ Rob Ventura and Jeremy Walker, *A Portrait of Paul: Identifying a True Minister of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 195.

CHAPTER 5

SUBMISSION RIGHTLY UNDERSTOOD

God has ordained elders to rule his church and has clearly laid out the qualifications for those elders. The member must submit himself to their leadership. The member also recognizes his ultimate allegiance is to God. He must obey God over all others even his elders. Some specific ways a member shows submission to his elders is by supporting them financially, accepting their admonishment and their decisions in areas of disagreement.

Submission to elders

Elders have been ordained by God to help run his church. The member needs to know that his elders have been scripturally qualified and should expect his elders to remain so. He should also be part of the process of selecting new elders.

Should we have elders?

The four main passages discussed in the last chapter did not clearly say the leadership consisted of the eldership or that there was an official office or title in those early churches. The Petrine passage was the only one directly mentioning elders. This has led some to say that elders are not necessary to the local church; therefore the idea of submission to elders is not biblical. They claim we are all equal in the eyes of God and each person in the congregation has equal authority. Wayne Mack and David Swavely have described it this way, “One extreme is an outright denial or ignorance of the need for a functioning authority

structure in the church, and another extreme is the enslaving authoritarianism that cripples the body.”¹ Those who believe elders are not necessary are rejecting the authority of the church as biblically described. In some people there is simply an anti-authority bent and they would like to reject all authority. But the second half of the quote reveals much. Many have experienced the authoritarianism of a local church leader. This type of man is one who says it is my way or the highway or who tries to control large parts of the Christians life. It makes perfectly good sense that those who have been burned by an authoritative person would not seek to be submissive to any church leadership. Just because it makes sense, though, does not make it right or biblical.

One of the more egregious examples of this type of thinking is Harold Camping, cofounder of Family Radio. Camping does not believe the church should have elders at all. He wrote a small pamphlet entitled “Has the Era of the Church Age Come to an End” and argues that indeed the church age has ended and all Christians are called by God to flee their churches.² He essentially argues that men have added to the Bible and read into it erroneous doctrines including some things contained in the creeds. Interestingly enough, he reads quite a bit into Scripture as well taking Jeremiah’s letter to the captives in Babylon as proof that we should leave our churches saying, “No longer are you to be under the spiritual rulership of the church.”³ The church leadership is of no help. They will not change the structure of the church and the confessions but would rather stick to their man-made ideas. He writes,

¹ Wayne Mack and Dave Swavely, *Life in the Father’s House: A Member’s Guide to the Local Church* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1996), 52.

²According to Christian Post, the Family Radio Ministry headed by Harold Camping still holds these views after his death. “Harold Camping’s Death Will Not Change Family Radio, Says Spokesman.” Michael Gryboski, January 23 2014, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/harold-campings-death-will-not-change-family-radio-says-spokesman-113267/> (accessed July 18, 2014).

³ Harold Camping, “Has the Era of the Church Age Come to an End?” (San Jose: Good Message Foundation, 2002), 7.

“The elders and deacons are being guided by their own minds rather than by the Holy Spirit.”⁴ If an entire church agrees that God has departed from the local church they should reorganize their church into a “fellowship of believers...elders will no longer be elders” the same with the deacons and the pastor. “In other words no individuals will have spiritual rule over the congregation.”⁵ According to Camping the true church today should be without the office of elders or deacons.

While Harold Camping believes that we should not even have churches, or at least not the churches fashioned after the previous 2000 years of Christian History, some argue that there was no hierarchy in the early church. Robert J. Banks writes, “We cannot say, then, that Paul’s communities were hierarchical in structure. He did not vest authority in person, or in a group of people, over the remaining members.”⁶ He does not believe they were egalitarian either. Instead he argues that they were theocratic in which God gave each person spiritual gifts. Any authority which is shown in the New Testament “comes from the ministry discharged by them in the community rather than from their status outside it or position within it, and it is not an irrevocable possession.”⁷ Banks believes firmly in the idea of the priesthood of believers and believes that all Christians are equal.

In the entirety of Banks’ book, he mentions the Pastoral Epistles only once before the appendix entitled “The Drift of the Pastorals.” It is only in the appendix that he deals with them. In this section of the book he seems to be implying that the books were not written by

⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁶ Robert J. Banks *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishing, 2009), 148.

⁷ Ibid.,

Paul. He frequently makes reference to the “undisputed letters of Paul”⁸ and then to the Pastorals. He appears to be selectively reading the epistles of Paul and emphasizes the parts where there is no direct authority mentioned while avoiding those texts which directly speak of the hierarchy and church leadership. The two Pauline specific elder passages are in the Pastorals yet he basically ignores the texts. At the end he makes this enigmatic statement, “It is a close call. But even if these letters were written by a follower of Paul, not the apostle himself, they are still canonical and still relevant to church life today, especially to situations encompassing tendencies and problems similar to those these letters address.”⁹ This is fascinating. Either these books are canonical or they are not. *If* they are then the church *must* follow them to be faithful to her Lord. If they are not then the church is under no warrant to obey the Pastorals. Banks hedges his decision by ascribing the books to a disciple of Paul which implies they are not true (“Paul” said he wrote them) which makes them spurious and not a rule of faith and practice for the Christian.

Then should we have elders in the church today? Well, the quick answer is “Yes”. God has ordained them to rule the church. As mentioned above the arguments of Camping are eisegesis as he read his own pre-conceived ideas into the texts rather than what God has clearly revealed. Paul clearly established the church leadership in Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3. It is to this that we must submit. The teaching of the early church also plainly called on the congregation to submit to their leaders. Although authors like Banks have a great point on how the entire church should be involved in the ministry and exercising spiritual gifts, this does not rule out the need for elders. James Denney writes, “Wherever there is a society there must be order. There must be those through whom the society acts, those who represent

⁸ Ibid., 195.

⁹ Ibid., 200.

it officially by words or deeds.”¹⁰ The first chapter of this thesis clearly pointed out there is always somebody in charge and God set up the office elder to make sure the church would be in order. Paul writes to Titus, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you may set in order the things that are lacking and appoint elders as I commanded you” (1:5). Part of the way Titus was to bring order to Crete was through the appointing of elders. If we do not listen to the officers whom God has given to lead the church who do we listen to? James White says, “Now that people are to flee their churches, to whom are they to look for guidance concerning the organization of these ‘fellowships’ in which they are to gather? Who else but Harold Camping?”¹¹ It seems to always end with the group of people looking to someone else and not the elders for guidance.

What about the fact that many of the passages used to demonstrate submission to elders do not explicitly mention elders? Thomas R. Schreiner answers “When we read the Pauline letters carefully, it is evident that leaders and teachers were present in the community from the beginning. The *terminology* used for such leaders varies, showing that normative titles were not in place from the beginning. We cannot argue that structured leadership was nonexistent on the basis of the diversity of nomenclature.” He goes on to point out the sporadic nature of Paul’s letters. We do not have all Paul’s letters and they were usually written for specific circumstances. So it makes sense he does not speak of leadership in each one. He reminds us, “We must remember again that we would not even know that the Lord’s Supper was practiced in the Pauline churches apart from 1 Corinthians.”¹² A further reason

¹⁰James Denney, “1 Thessalonians,” vol. 6, *The Expositor’s Bible*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943), 349.

¹¹ James R. White, “Harold Camping’s Call to Flee the Church,” *Christian Research Institute Journal* 25 (2002): 25.

for the church leadership admonitions in the Pastorals is that Paul knew he was going to die (2 Timothy 4:7). The handwriting was on the wall, persecution had increased and he could see the end coming. He, the preeminent church planter and faithful apostle, wanted to see the church grow even after his decease. Therefore he needed to leave instructions to the church and make sure the men who had authority over the church were appointed. As a result he clearly laid down the requirements for a church leader. Again Schreiner writes, “Perhaps Paul expressed himself more fully on this subject in the Pastorals because he recognized that he was near the end of his life. When a powerful leader like Paul becomes aware that the end of his ministry is near, he naturally thinks of communicating how the work he has accomplished may be maintained in the future.”¹³

Characteristics of Elders

The New Testament gives guidance on the type of elders who oversee the church. Paul lists qualifications of elders in both 1 Timothy and Titus. The passages mentioned in chapter four demonstrated that elders need to acknowledge their service as done to the glory of God. They, too, are to submit to the lordship of Christ, to be examples to the members, to be trustworthy and to be leaders of the flock. They must also work hard, be humble and admonish the flock.

The passages in the Pastorals and 1 Peter support this view. Strauch lists 15 qualifications in 1 Timothy 3, another 15 in Titus 1, and 3 in 1 Peter. In these passages there is a lot of overlap of qualifications. Strauch separates these qualifications into three main

¹²Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 386. Emphasis in the original.

¹³ Schreiner, 384.

sections “relating to moral and spiritual character, abilities, and Spirit-given motivation.”¹⁴

In the first category, elders must be above reproach, husband of one wife, temperate. In the second category, an elder must rule his own household well, be able to teach and be an example to others. In the third category, he must desire the work that is to be an elder.¹⁵

These are the type of men who would deserve the respect of the congregation. They meet the qualifications that God has laid down. Garry Friesen and J. Robin Maxson sum up the qualifications by saying, “According to the New Testament, a church leader must be a *spiritually mature Christian man who desires a position of leadership in the church, and is able to lead God’s people and teach God’s Word.*”¹⁶ The position of elder is not one to be given to someone who is unqualified. A man might be a great businessman, be wealthy, be a leader in the community, but none of these things qualifies him for leadership. The church gets itself into trouble when it appoints unqualified men to fill the leadership. It must rely on God to supply the leaders for His church.

Two major characteristics most missed or most enjoyed by a congregation are trustworthiness and humility. If the congregation trusts the leadership then they will know that their submission is for their own good, the good of the church, and to the glory of God. The qualifications lead the church to trust the elder. If he has met these qualifications then he is worthy of trust. The major sins of today; sexual immorality, drunkenness, greed, and anger are part of the qualifications for elders. Referring to Hebrews 13, Phil Newton writes, “*Obey* carries the idea of obediently following someone because you trust that person. The

¹⁴Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*(Colorado Springs: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995) 73.

¹⁵ Strauch, 72-83.

¹⁶Garry Friesen and J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making & the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980), 317. Emphasis in the original

implication is that the church hears the elders' teaching of the Word and sees their seriousness in following the teaching of Scripture, so they obediently do likewise."¹⁷ Again, the congregation trusts its leaders since it both hears the truth and sees the truths in their lives. Trust breeds submission.

The elder must be a humble man lest he fall into the "snare of the devil" (1 Timothy 3:7). If the elder demonstrates humility then the congregation will follow him. If he lords it over people then the members will be turned off from his leadership. Humility is essential to a godly leader. In his article "Suggestions For Pastors When Your Church is Not Happy with You" Jim Elliff writes, "The really critical factor was my humility rather than a defense. I tried to be truly humble, and this was disarming, as it should be. It also revealed my genuine desire to become a better leader at any cost, provided that I was moving in the direction God wanted."¹⁸ Some in his congregation were not content with his leadership and he called them together and humbly gave them a written chance to evaluate his ministry. This humility was able to unite the church and allowed them to get past the issues.

These two attributes are clearly displayed in the scriptural model of the shepherd. Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd, demonstrated his humility by His death on the cross. This example of humility was used to teach Christians to be submissive to one another and to be willing to count others better than themselves (Philippians 2:1-11). It should come as no surprise that God calls his elders or undershepherds to give of themselves to the sheep, His church. A shepherd is someone whom the sheep trust. They know that he looks out for their

¹⁷ Phil Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 91. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁸ Jim Elliff, "Suggestions For Pastors When Your Church is Not Happy with You", Christian Communicators Worldwide, <http://www.ccwtoday.org/article/suggestions-for-pastors-when-your-church-is-not-happy-with-you/#sthash.EnlmqJ3S.dpuf>, (accessed May 30 2014).

welfare and cares for them. They have absolute trust in him and they come when he calls for them. Although seemingly glorified in some Christian books, the job of a shepherd was difficult and smelly, not glamorous in the least. To be a shepherd was to be on one of the bottom rungs of the social ladder. This humility and trust is demonstrated in the lives of the leadership. The work is not easy. Strauch writes, “Caring for people’s spiritual welfare is stressful work. It is emotionally draining, time-consuming, and often monotonous and discouraging. It requires a great deal of personal dedication and sacrifice.”¹⁹ As the congregation sees the elder’s diligent work and love for the church they will submit to their rulings. Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out “The question of trust, which is so closely related to that of authority, is determined by the faithfulness with which a man serves Jesus Christ, never by the extraordinary talents which he possesses. Pastoral authority can be attained only by the servant of Jesus who seeks no power of his own, who himself is a brother among brothers submitted to the authority of the Word.”²⁰

The leadership of the church must be qualified, scripturally qualified. They must follow the Lord Jesus Christ in being trustworthy and humble. They must also work hard as undershepherds over the flock of God. One of the main ways in which they fulfill their duties as shepherds is to protect and defend the flock. God’s people are always under attack. They can be lead astray in moral areas and in doctrinal areas. The job of the elder is to protect their entire congregation from both errors. As Paul warned the Ephesian elders, “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:29). How does the eldership protect the church? Newton writes, “The elders who

¹⁹ Strauch, 166-167.

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* trans. John W. Doberstein (New Your: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1954), 109.

labor at teaching, preaching, instructing, exhorting, and admonishing the flock fulfill this duty. They must at times reprove those who are in sin. They must admonish those who are toying with compromising the faith. They must instruct and exhort the church to walk in sound doctrine. They must recognize error and not be afraid to address it.”²¹ When many hear the word protect they think of wolves and false doctrine and this is correct but protecting the flock is more than just protecting from outside forces. They look for wolves in sheep’s clothing among the congregation. They practice instruction and admonishment before a false shepherd appears. They warn of heresies and false living before they appear or are practiced. The job of the elder is not merely to react to bad situations but to equip for future battle. Rob Ventura and Jeremy Walker warn, “We will be answerable for its use and abuse. Disregard of our duty and brutality in our shepherding are equally fearful crimes. Neglecting or attacking the sheep is just as bad as ignoring or encouraging the wolves.”²² This provides a check on the work of the shepherd. When he is going through a difficult time he cannot simply disregard his oversight of the sheep but still needs to care for them. An elder must not neglect the sheep or ignore the wolves. If he does not protect them by constant care then he is sinning against the congregation and the Lord.

An elder does not rule in his own authority. An elder who demonstrates these characteristics and has been selected by the church is permitted to rule with authority-but this authority is from God, not his own. Does an elder even need to possess authority? Does not God possess the authority and it is to Him alone that we owe authority? Jay Adams writes, “If Christ expects the members of His flock to obey His undershepherds, then they must *exercise*

²¹ Newton, 75.

²² Rob Ventura and Jeremy Walker, *A Portrait of Paul: Identifying a True Minister of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 125.

that authority.”²³ God has appointed the elders to help run the church. This authority and power is not in a vacuum. D.A Carson reminds us “Christians who exercise authority in the church do not mark their discipleship to Jesus by abandoning all exercises of authority, but by exercising it within the constraints of a life sacrificially lived for the sake of others.”²⁴

The elders must acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the ruler of His church. They must perform their duties as servants and not as lords. In response to Harold Camping’s call to leave the churches and continue on without any leadership James White warns of being deluded by cults and anti-Christian thought. Of those who deny leadership he writes that he “is also in clear rebellion against the revealed will of God, who places elders in the church to provide guidance and places believers in the fellowship for their own benefit and growth.”²⁵

Some fear if we acknowledge the authority of church leaders then we will be treated like a doormat. They can simply order us to do anything they want. Newton writes, “We tend to shy away from any use of the word *authority* in our day, perhaps fearing dictatorial maniacs. No one denies that such egotistical despots exist in church ranks, yet we must never abandon a biblical direction because of a few poor examples.”²⁶ If their authority is from God then they will rule well. Mark Dever, contrary to much modern day thinking writes, “It is a great privilege to be served by godly leaders! To have godly authority modeled and practiced for our benefit is a great gift! To reject authority, as so many in our

²³Jay Adams, *Shepherding God’s Flock* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 331. Emphasis in the original.

²⁴D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 168.

²⁵ White, 41-42.

²⁶ Newton, 104. Emphasis in the original.

day do, is short-sighted and self-destructive.”²⁷ The Christian should train himself to rejoice in his leaders knowing them to be representative of the rule of Christ in their life. He should be confident in their character, trusting them, observing their humility, and watching their labor for the flock. Instead of grudgingly obeying they should submit and obey with joy.

Selection of Elders

One point in the life of a church where the congregation and leaders must submit to one another is in the selection of new leaders. Churches have different ways of choosing new leaders. In some churches the leaders are only selected for a certain period of time while in others the selection is for an indefinite period of time. In all situations when a new leader is selected both the congregation and leaders must work together. It is neither to be done entirely by the leadership nor entirely by the church members.

In the New Testament a case can be made for the appointment of leaders being carried out by the church. A case can also be made to demonstrate they were appointed by others outside the congregation. The selection of the deacons in Acts 6 was done by the apostles and the church. The church, apostles, and elders were also involved in sending out the message of the Jerusalem decree in Acts 15. In the same book, Luke recounts how Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders in every church” (Acts 14:23) which could lead some to think the elders appointed new leaders on their own without input from the congregation.

When the Bible is read in context, it should be evident that both the leaders and the congregation worked together to choose the leaders in the church. The church no longer has the apostolic leaders (Paul and Barnabas) nor the transitional figures (Timothy and Titus). Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles to help the church choose their leaders-qualified leaders.

²⁷Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory* (Washington: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 27.

Also consider that oftentimes Paul and Barnabas did not and could not spend much time in a particular city whether by choice or persecution. So when they were appointing elders in every church how could they adequately screen the candidates? The answer is the congregation knew the character of the men and whether or not they were qualified. Grudem writes, “Yet, even these verses need not imply that the apostles alone made the selection. But we could certainly include congregational consultation and even consent before an official appointment or installation was made.”²⁸ Although the exact process is not worked out in Scripture both sides were involved.

The congregation cannot simply leave it up to the current leaders to select the new leaders. They must be involved. They need to look at the qualifications from Scripture and ensure those selected meet God’s qualifications. If they have an issue with the potential elder they need to discuss it with that person first. They are not to speak to other members and gossip. If the issue is not resolved and/or cannot be resolved before the time for the official appointment of the elder then the member needs to approach the current leaders and explain why he has an issue with the applicant. Sometimes the congregation can see aspects of character that are missed by the leaders. People are adept at hiding their true actions from others, whether for sinful purposes or the desire to impress others. Aubrey Malphurs writes, “The time to oppose a leader is during the candidating process, not after that leader is in place.”²⁹ It will only harm the church if a member waits until after a leader has been appointed to bring up concerns or character flaws. At the same time if a sin pattern has

²⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 921.

²⁹ Aubrey Malphurs, *Being Leaders: The Nature of Authentic Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 122-123.

become evident after appointment takes place it would be the duty of the member to bring it up.

The leadership of the church, though, knows more about the congregation than anyone else. For the most part they are also the most mature members of the congregation. Therefore they need to guide the congregation through the appointment process. If they have found a man to be unworthy of the position, the congregation needs to accept their decision. The exact reason for the non-appointment need not be given to the congregation. Again the congregation needs to trust the elders and know that they are acting in humility when they reject a candidate.

Since the Bible instructs the church to submit to their elders it is vitally important that those appointed to the leadership must be worthy men. The selection process is an important time when the church has a say on who enters into leadership positions. The process of checking a prospective elder's qualifications is spoken of by Paul, "Some men's sins are clearly evident, preceding them to judgment, but those of some men follow later. Likewise, the good works of some are clearly evident, and those that are otherwise cannot be hidden" (1 Timothy 5:24-25). The church must guard against appointing unqualified men. Paul says it takes time. To the church members Ventura and Walker have a good reminder, "Observe them with a gracious caution rather than a suspiciously critical spirit, in order that you might know what manner of men they are, not just in the pulpit but out of it-in their homes, with their wives and families and friends."³⁰ The church needs to observe the candidates in a manifold of situations, but they must do so in the correct attitude. They are not on a hunt to find the man's weak spots and point out inefficiencies but to see the general tenor of his life. Is the man, generally speaking, above reproach? This is the goal of a waiting period. It does

³⁰ Ventura Walker, 196.

make good common sense but Strauch points out, “Sadly, too many churches expend the least amount of time and effort possible when selecting and examining prospective elders or deacons.”³¹ Both the leaders and the members have oftentimes failed in this respect. But in submission to God both groups must honestly evaluate those who would become leaders. The autocratic self-centered leader will destroy both the leadership and the members of the church.

Decision Making in the Church

In the decision making process there must be some give and take. The elders cannot simply cram a decision down the throat of the congregation nor can the congregation run rampant over the elders. Both of these situations are unhealthy to the church. They must work towards a consensus. If the elders were to force something on the congregation they cannot force them to stay at the church. If the members are not given a say in the issue many of them will vote with their feet by leaving the church. If the congregation runs roughshod over the elders then they will simply resign and leave the church without any appointed leaders and thus without God ordained protection. The elders are appointed by the congregation to rule the church, but they must do so before the Lord and with consultation of the congregation. Oftentimes in the United States, elected officials make decisions that anger half their constituents yet make the other half joyful. The goal of the elders is to persuade the congregation to accept a certain course of action. Neither does the congregation make every decision for church. Robert L. Reymond writes:

The local congregation must recognize that the church is *not* a pure democracy, that elders/overseers, once elected, do not hold their office simply to carry out the congregation’s will. They are to rule and to oversee the congregation, not primarily in

³¹ Strauch, 288.

agreement with the will of the congregation but primarily in agreement with the revealed Word of God, in accordance with the authority delegated to them by Christ, the head of the church.³²

Both the elders and congregation must work together under the authority of Christ.

Frank Viola believes every decision should be brought before the congregation. In political terms we would consider that a direct democracy. He believes elders did not make decisions for the church and the “New Testament method for decision-making was neither dictatorial nor democratic. It was consensual. And it involved all the brothers and sisters.”³³ He is extremely concerned with elders forcing their will upon the congregation and wants to get far away from that type of church structure. Decisions when finally made must be in 100 percent agreement. “A church reaches a consensus when all of its members have come to a unanimous agreement in support of a particular decision”³⁴ and “a lack of unity and cooperation among the members reveals a failure to embrace the Head (Christ).”³⁵ His idea of consensus does include the reality that there will be different degrees of acceptance but the entire congregation has “come to the place where they have set aside their objections and can support the decision in good faith.”³⁶ He does believe the church should patiently wait for all its members to arrive at the same decision. He believes that with this process “murmuring and complaining are eliminated.”³⁷ Majority rule is ineffective and we cannot rely on a

³² Robert L. Reymond, “The Presbytery-Led Church” in *Perspectives in Church Government: 5 Views on Church Polity*, ed. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2004), 134.

³³ Frank Viola *Reimagining Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook Publisher, 2008) 171.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

³⁷ *Ibid.*,

simple majority to make the right decisions. He points out many examples where the majority has been wrong.

There are many problems with his model of decision making. First, if we must get 100 percent agreement we can be stuck with making no decision at all. Second, the immature Christian has just as much input as a more mature believer. An elder's wisdom is of equal worth as a new believer. The idea that this type of decision making would eliminate all complaining and murmuring is also not true. While it may lessen the typical complaints it does not do away with all complaints. A member may have agreed at one point with the decision because they felt pressured to make a decision. They may still have been against the decision. When the church discussed the issue they may have brought up the problems but went along with the decision because of peer pressure. If the decision was turning out badly they would be tempted to say "I told you so" even if they were involved in the decision. A majority decision is oftentimes the best decision we can get. For instance, when Mark Dever was switching Capital Hill Baptist Church to a plurality of elders, one man disagreed with the decision.³⁸ This one man would have held up the church indefinitely if they had subscribed to Viola's view.

Viola also writes, "Consequently, the idea that elders direct the affairs of the church, make decisions in all corporate matters, handle all of its problems, and supply all of its teaching is alien to New Testament thinking. Such an idea is pure fantasy and bereft of biblical support."³⁹ In the main, this statement is good. Elders should direct the affairs of the church, but they should not make all the decisions, handle all of its problems, and supply all its teachings. The church has many types of teaching ministries and they do not need an

³⁸ Newton, 13.

³⁹ Viola, 187.

elder in each one. The decision making should have a mix of congregational and elder input. Sam Waldron writes, “the elders have authority to arrange circumstances of the church’s life. In many cases the arrangements for such circumstances need not be brought to the church. It may, however, be wise to bring the more major decisions to the church.”⁴⁰ It would be more than wise to bring the major decisions to the church, they should do it. The elders cannot rule without the consent of the congregation, but, in the end, the elders have the final say since they have been given the authority by the Lord Jesus.

In light of the practices of some churches allowing the leaders to make all decisions the words of Viola can be encouraging, although he goes too far down the path of member input. But it must also be acknowledged that the congregation has a huge say in how the church is run. The congregation was involved in the selection of Matthias (Acts 1:23), the 7 deacons (Acts 6:2-3) agreement with the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:22) and church discipline (Matt. 18:17 and 1 Cor. 5:2). In response to arguments such as those set forth by Viola, Schreiner writes:

Paul typically addresses the congregation as a whole, not the leaders. Some scholars use this as leverage to downplay the authority of leaders. The congregation as a whole is addressed because the congregation ultimately determines the direction of the church. Leaders are not autocratic or dictators in Pauline churches. Those who are led, after all, must voluntarily submit themselves to leadership. We see from reading the Corinthian letters that Paul attempts to persuade (not coerce) the Corinthians to obey him.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Sam Waldron “Plural-Elder Congregationalism” *Who Runs the Church?: Four Views on Church Government*, gen. ed. Steve B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 220; Benjamin Merkle writes, “key decisions in the church should not be given only to the elders but should be brought before the entire congregation.” *Why Elders: A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing, 2009), 39.

⁴¹ Schreiner, 385.

Although not explicitly laid out in Scripture the decision making process on the selection of leaders and major decisions must be a shared responsibility of both the congregation and the leaders.

Ultimate Submission

The only way that submission in the church truly works is if all the members of the church acknowledge they are under the authority of God. Jesus Christ is the head of the church and he rules and reigns supreme. All members should be concerned primarily with pleasing Him. Walker and Ventura write, “Is there an ideal pastor? There is one: His name is Jesus Christ. He sets the standard for all who would follow in His footsteps”⁴² If the church is truly united on this account then questions of authority and submission are much easier to deal with. This does not mean there will be no issues with them. All members of the church are sinful so conflict still exists. We are sinful in wanting our own desires and seeking to please ourselves. The elders can seek to lord it over the people, ordering them to do things God has not called them to do. The congregation can rebel against the leaders and not obey commands from the Lord through their mouths.

Our minds have also been tainted by sin. We can attribute impure and improper motives to others, not out of spite, but out of misperceptions. This too, shows our sinfulness and general weakness. At times we just do not understand God like we should. The fall was radical and affected our minds. We do not all hear God saying the same thing and as a result we have different interpretations and ideas about what God wants. We may think a leader is being authoritative when he is just sticking to God’s word and calling the congregation to account. On the flip side the leader may believe the members are rebelling against his

⁴² Ventura and Walker, 1.

authority when the member is only following his conscience and what he believes God would have him do. He believes if he follows the leader in this situation then he would be sinning against God. So, if the entire congregation accepts that Jesus is the head of the church and seeks to follow His will alone; it does make the whole process easier, but by no means does this resolve all the problems inherent in the issue.

The authority of the leadership only comes from Christ since He is the head of the church. Herman Ridderbos points out the balance, “the authority and those who hold it are given by Christ for the upbuilding of the church, and thus the church has to acknowledge, honor, and subject itself to them, and obey them.”⁴³ There are different political descriptions of the church. Some describe the structure of the church as a theocracy. H. Joseph Miller writes, “The local body is a form of theocracy—the rule of God on earth. It is not a true democracy; the majority might be wrong. The principles of authority for this theocracy flow out of the Scriptures through the pastor and finally to the assembly of member believers.”⁴⁴ Others describe the church as a democracy. Although he uses the term with hesitancy Sam Waldron writes, “I believe...that in biblical church government democracy is qualified by the crown-rights of King Jesus in his church and also by the plural-elder principle... It is not the right to vote as one pleases regardless of the will of King.”⁴⁵ Jay Adams would rather call it a monarchy:

It differs, however, from other such monarchies in that the constitution was imposed by the Monarch Himself, not for His own instruction, limitation, etc., but so that every member of the body politic might know the laws and ordinances that He has ordained. By this constitution they may judge the actions and the commands even of the leaders.

⁴³ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul and Outline of His Theology* tr. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 475.

⁴⁴ H. Joseph Miller, *Building the Church Volume II* (Greenville, South Carolina: BJU Press 2003), 610.

⁴⁵ Waldron, 210.

While allegiance is to Christ alone, the terms of that allegiance are set forth in the Scriptures. He alone laid down these terms; they have not been acquired through legislation devised by the leadership.”⁴⁶

So here we have three different options; theocracy, democracy and constitutional monarchy. Which one is correct? Which one is best? First it must be demonstrated that in large part these three separate views are in substantial agreement. Each of the views sees Jesus as the ultimate ruler of the church. All of them have some room for democratic action, acknowledging the congregation has some authority or power in the church. All of them would also agree that the congregation must, in the final analysis, follow Jesus. The best designation for the structure of the church is the Constitutional monarchy as explained by Adams (not as we might think in the political world). God has made known to us what He desires in church and requires His congregation to make decisions, but these decisions are not made in a vacuum. The congregation still has a say in how the church is run, but it is through their understanding of the God’s word. No matter which term is used Mark Dever reminds us, “The elders should be marked by a use of their authority which shows that they understand that the church belongs not to them, but to Christ.”⁴⁷

Again the type of leadership expressed in the church is a servant/shepherd leadership. This demonstrates that all members are under the submission of God-He has the ultimate power. Strauch writes, “They are not a ruling oligarchy. They cannot do or say whatever they want. The church does not belong to the elders; it is Christ’s church and God’s flock. Thus the elders’ leadership is to be exercised in a way that models Christlike, humble, loving leadership. In the local church, there are no rulers who sit above or subjects who stand

⁴⁶ Adams, 329-330.

⁴⁷ Mark Dever, “What is the relationship between elders and the church,” 9 Marks website March 1 2010, <http://www.9marks.org/journal/what-relationship-between-elders-and-church>, (accessed May 28 2014).

below.”⁴⁸ It is not theirs to command the obedience in their own name and power but only in the Lord, only grounded in Scriptures commands and precepts. The true leaders of God’s flock do not do simply what the congregation wants them to do. They must rule as God would have them rule. They are not to take polls to see what the congregation wants but what God wants. This, of course, does not mean they just charge around and make all decisions in the church, but, ultimately, they are accountable to God for how they rule. Peter instructed elders not to lord it over the congregation (1 Peter 5:3). Walker and Ventura counsel leaders, “Let us work within the bounds of our calling and commission and not expose ourselves either to the censure of God or the resistance of good men by overreaching ourselves;”⁴⁹ The leadership must keep a delicate balance, and at all times, must serve God. They must make sure they are ruling in a manner which is pleasing to God and sticking to his words, but there is much gray area. It is at this point they cannot ignore the congregation. There is much wisdom in the congregation leaders can avail themselves to. They must ever be careful to neither issue a command where God has not commanded nor to make a core issue a concern of the conscience.

In the first section when speaking of the different types of submission it was pointed out that there comes a point where obeying the authority is sinful; even obeying one’s own parents or spouse-so too, in the church. When Peter and John did not obey the Sanhedrin in Acts 4 and 5 they were not submitting to their local religious authority. As Peter tells them, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). A Christian is not to follow his leaders unthinkingly or with a slavish devotion. He is to be a slave to no man but to God.

⁴⁸ Strauch, 291.

⁴⁹ Ventura and Walker, 64.

Paul even tells the Galatians that if he or an angel from heaven should preach a false gospel then they should be eternally condemned (Gal. 1:8-9). Edmund Clowney writes, “Church authority, grounded in the Word of Christ, is also limited to it. Christian obedience to church rule is obedience in the Lord, for his Word governs the church, not the other way around. The conscientious freedom to disobey remains if the government of the church commands anything contrary to the Word, which is open to all.”⁵⁰ Since the Word of God is over all things, all things must be submissive to the Word of God. If a church government is corrupt then it should be resisted or fixed. If the leaders are violating the word of God then they should be challenged. It can come to a point where a member needs to leave the church.

Phil Newton speaking of Hebrews 13 writes, “The obedience called for does not imply becoming ‘man-followers’ rather than followers of Christ. Following Christ remains the church’s priority; we are to follow spiritual leadership *only* as it imitates Christ and adheres to the teaching of the Word. We are never to obey and submit in areas that are clearly in conflict with the teaching of Scripture.”⁵¹ There are some, most easily seen on TV, who want to make grandiose claims of their authority. Newton continues, “Some use these verses to claim *absolute authority*, but that belongs only to the Lord. A simple rule of thumb is that ‘sanctified common sense’ must be used in obeying and submitting to spiritual leaders.”⁵² Christians must learn to think for themselves. A good eldership will be teaching the members to think for themselves. They will teach the congregation not to simply accept what they are saying but rather to be like the Bereans and “search the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). In doing so they will develop the sanctified

⁵⁰Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 203

⁵¹ Newton, 90.

⁵² Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

common sense of which Newton is speaking. As their knowledge becomes more informed, their conscience will be more informed thus making it more likely to know when the leaders are commanding things in line with the word of God and when they are not.

Examples of Submission

General Examples of Submission

There are many examples of submission by which congregations show their submission to God through their submission to their leaders. First, we will look at some general ways in which the church is to submit. Then we will look at three more specific ways: financially, accepting admonishment and in areas of disagreement.

In some ways submission to elders is just a practice of Christianity. Those who are in leadership are Christian brothers who should be treated as such. All of the one another's in Scripture need to be demonstrated to them as well. H. Joseph Miller sums up a submissive member as one who "seeks the welfare of the entire body...serves as part of the body...sanctions only that which is good for the entire body."⁵³ The member who is practicing the one another's is submitting to this leadership.

The first one another to consider is that we are all called to love one another. This should also be the attitude taken toward leadership. Jesus Himself said that others would know they are His disciples by the love they have for one another. (John 13:34-35). This should be evident toward all. 1 Thessalonians reminds the congregation to love their leaders. Strauch writes, "In love, believers will be less critical and more responsive to the elders' instruction and admonition. It cannot be emphasized enough that the best thing a congregation can do for its leaders is to love them. Love (and only love) suffers long (1 Cor.

⁵³ Miller, 608.

13:4, 6). Love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).”⁵⁴ Notice, the glue of love holds the congregation and the leaders together. Love needs to flow from both the leader to the congregation and vice versa. Even if a member perceives a leader is acting unfairly toward him a loving attitude shows submission and can cover many problems in the church.

An elder should be a shepherd to the congregation caring for them and seeking to meet their needs. He is to be a servant. Much like with love, a member can be submissive to their leadership by demonstrating a servant’s heart which is full of thankfulness. John MacArthur writes, “But where there is a spirit of willing obedience—a heart of submission—a church is eager to receive and obey the Word of God.”⁵⁵ When a church gladly hears the word and obeys the word, it is showing submission to its leadership and its true head—Jesus. A servant’s heart is one that is seeking to help others and counts others as better than himself (Phil. 2:3-4). They seek to be a blessing to the other members of the congregation and this brings joy to the heart of the leaders. Speaking of Hebrews, Newton writes, “A humble attitude in the members of the congregation is essential if elders are to experience joy in their duties.”⁵⁶ The church will run smoothly and honor God when each member is humble.

The work also needs to be shared between the members of the body. The elders are not to do all of the work. They are to facilitate the doing of the ministry (Ephesians 4:12). Speaking of Grace Church, MacArthur writes, “We see the saints feeding and loving each other, counseling each other, caring for each other, nourishing each other, and even developing, organizing and operating various ministries within the church.”⁵⁷ Each member

⁵⁴ Strauch, 171-172.

⁵⁵ John MacArthur, *The Body Dynamic: Finding Where You Fit in Today’s Church* (Colorado Springs: ChariotVictor Publishing, 1996), 43.

⁵⁶ Newton, 92.

of the church is involved in the ministry in some form. This is God's plan and will bring God's undershepherds joy to see. In fact this is so important MacArthur writes, "Remember, any member who doesn't function cripples the whole Body."⁵⁸ This is a vital part of the church submitting to their elders and to their Supreme Elder, Jesus.

Another less thought of aspect of submission involves communication. Members must communicate with their leaders. Robert L. Reymond states, "Apparently, the members of the congregation should also stay on speaking terms with their leaders since they are instructed by the author of Hebrews to greet them in the author's behalf."⁵⁹ It can often be easy to attend your church and not speak often to your leaders. This tendency must be fought. It will take effort to build a relationship with the leaders, but it is well worth it for all involved. Mack and Swavely write, "Most leaders would like nothing more than to provide timely advice or accountability to their people, but many also battle the frustration of not knowing what is happening in our lives. We need to make an effort to share our growth and struggles with them and give them opportunities to exercise their gifts more fully."⁶⁰ This takes strength, energy, purpose, forethought to build a good relationship and clear lines of communication between the members and the leaders. Depending on the size of the church it can be difficult to impossible to know and share with all of the leaders in the same way or on a regular basis. It is quite possible getting to know two or three in a more personal and intimate way is all that is practical. This is fine, but it is a necessity for the good of the

⁵⁷ MacArthur, 81.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 95.

⁵⁹ Robert L. Reymond, 135. It seems to me he is speaking sarcastically-like this is an obvious point.

⁶⁰ Mack and Swavely, 64-65.

members' soul and for the leadership. When the members make the effort and take the time to work on the relationship they are showing submission to their leaders.

Sam Thorpe points out that we should not only have general communication with them, but we should also encourage them in their decision making. Some of their decision will be easy and some will be quite difficult. They are men like ourselves and feel the pressure of the conforming and it can be difficult to stand on God's word. Sometimes the issue itself is so complex they just cannot know if they have made the right choice. The leaders can face many difficult decisions. Thorpe recommends that "Even if you don't agree with every aspect of the decision, let them know you are glad they will deal with difficult issues head on, and that they have your support."⁶¹ They must know they are appreciated and esteemed by the congregation, this will allow them to serve with joy.

One final observation on submission to elders is obvious, but often skipped—prayer. The congregation should be praying for the elders. They should be praying that the elders would be bold in their faith. They should be praying the elders would be faithful servants within their own family structure. If the any of the elders are bi-vocational they should be praying they would be honoring God in their jobs. The children of the elders also are in much need of prayer as they are subject to the fishbowl treatment. The elders are also in need of wisdom and this can be an area of constant prayer. Another good practice is to look up the passages on elder qualifications and descriptions and pray through them for the elder.⁶² Walker and Ventura sum up the basic idea well, "we urge you to act towards such a

⁶¹ Sam Thorpe "Seven Bright Ideas," *Uplook Magazine*, March, 2001, 10.

⁶² Specifically 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-5. Other useful passages are Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 2:16-23; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; 4:2-5; Hebrews 13:7-9, 17; Acts 20:17-38.

man with Christian love and candor and to do him all the good you can by your words, deeds, and prayers.”⁶³

Financial Submission

One of the ways in which a congregation and church member can submit to their leadership is through their giving. They labor and watch over the church and are deserving of monetary support. The congregation in submission to God helps provide for the welfare of the leadership. This type of provision takes different forms in different churches. It can be a one hundred percent payment in which the leader is paid something comparable to a full time job. It could be given on more of a part time job payment. It is obviously possible that some of the leaders are not paid at all, but are bi-vocational. Some bi-vocational leaders can be paid on a part time scale. The primary text to support the view that an elder can be paid a full time wage comes from 1 Timothy 5: 17-18 “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads of the grain,’ and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’” Simon Kistemaker remarks:

And this implies, of course, that wherever it is necessary (and it would be necessary especially in the case of the “minister”) the work should also be rewarded in a material way. A man who spends all his time and effort in kingdom—work (a “minister”) certainly deserves a good “salary”. . . . But it would be evidence of a lack of honor if the church should demand of a man who devotes himself entirely to spiritual work that he should do it gratis.⁶⁴

Again the exact provision is not explicitly laid out, but the principle is there in this passage.

⁶³ Ventura and Walker, 61.

⁶⁴ Simon Kistemaker, *1 Timothy, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 180-181. 1 Corinthians 9 and Galatians 6 also mention support for those in the ministry.

Some do not think the passage is speaking of financial remuneration at all. Frank Viola writes, “Because of their tireless labor, some elders received double honor from the church. But double honor is just that-extra respect.”⁶⁵ He does believe that this may have included a free-will offering but was not a full time salary. Instead he sees full support only for the apostles.⁶⁶ In *Pagan Christianity* he lists three reasons why the text does not support the traditional Christian view. (1) The Greek words normally used for pay or wages are not used, and every other time in Timothy, this word means respect. (2) Christians are instructed to honor one another and it could not mean that all Christians are to pay each other. (3) Verse 19 supports the idea of honor since there must be two or three witness to be accused or dishonored. “Granted, double honor may have included free-will offerings as a token of blessing from time to time (Galatians 6:6). But this was not the dominating thought. Scripture tells us elders deserve honor (respect), not a salary.”⁶⁷ Therefore although we can from time to time give monetarily to Christian workers there is no need to nor should they expect this from other Christians.

Viola is on to something with the idea of honor, but to exclude the idea of monetary remuneration is not warranted. Robert L Saucy writes, “It is evidence of a lack of honor for a church to fail to support adequately those which are called to devote themselves entirely to spiritual leadership.”⁶⁸ Within the context of 1 Timothy 5 widows are also to be honored and within that context part of the honor they were to receive was financial support either from their family or from the church (3-16). When the word honor is used here it does mean to

⁶⁵ Viola, 120.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 180.

⁶⁷ Frank Viola and George Barna *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of our Church Practices* (United States: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 184-185.

⁶⁸ Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 152.

treat them with respect, but, connected with verse 18, it means more than just that. Thomas Schreiner writes, “Paul argues from the lesser to the greater here, if oxen are free to eat while they work, then those who are involved in the work of the gospel should be supplied with the necessary provisions.”⁶⁹ E. Earle Ellis points out:

The most important evidence that some Christian workers received regular remuneration is Paul’s own boast to the Corinthians that he has not exercised his rights in the matter. Similarly, he reminds mission workers in Thessalonica that, when he was among them. He earned his own living in order not to burden them and to give them an example to imitate. His conduct is represented as exceptional, and it must have been so: it would be no grounds for boasting if his practice had been customary among the workers in the Christian mission. One does not boast that one gets out of bed in the morning.⁷⁰

The testimony of the Apostle Paul clearly shows that the church should show submission to their leadership by supporting them financially, and if practical, they may even do so full-time.

Submission in Admonishment

Nobody likes to get criticized and told they are doing something wrong. The book of Proverbs is full of admonitions that we should be willing to receive in correction. The foolish man rages against all counsel, but the wise man takes any criticism to heart. Both the eldership and the church member would do well to heed Proverbs 27:5-6, “Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed” and “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” The church member must be willing to receive this type of admonishment from their leadership and the leadership equally must be willing to receive it from the church member acknowledging that all mankind is sinful and we all struggle.

⁶⁹ Schreiner, 392.

⁷⁰E. Earle Ellis, *Pauline Theology Ministry and Society* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 100.

The leaders of the church should be an example to the entire congregation in humbly accepting admonishment. The ability to accept just criticism is also a sign of humility. It should be the testimony of all leaders that they are able to accept evaluation of their lives by others. The elders must also be willing to accept correction from the other elders. There should be a mutual submission evidenced to the entire church. Alexander Strauch writes, “The church elders should model for the entire church the one-another commands, including admonishing and exhorting one another. To hold one another accountable for sin is Christlike love in practice. To fail to admonish one another demonstrates not love but cowardice and selfishness.”⁷¹

There is another aspect to admonishment. The leadership of a church must give admonishment to their members as needed. The elders ultimately must be submissive to God. This is not a grey area they must admonish when it is needed. This is not an issue of what type of pulpits is needed in the church or the color of the church sanctuary or any number of other matters which are not clearly delineated in Scripture. They must admonish because they are instructed to admonish. They cannot worry about the effect this will have on the congregation. If this means that some people leave the church or some people stop giving to the church, they cannot let this stop them from admonishing the members of the church. If they cease to admonish they, in some measure, cease to shepherd the flock of God. Walker and Ventura write:

You are not and do not need to be governed by what the church wants, or thinks she wants... They will have varying degrees of influence, authority, and power and you-serving with a Christlike spirit, but conscious of your call and responsibility-will be able calmly and deliberately to advance God’s agenda for the present and eternal blessing of His people... In all this, a sense that you are steward of the house of God, commissioned by the Head of the household for the discharge of His good and perfect will, will make you circumspect yet bold, wise yet faithful, gentle yet determined,

⁷¹ Alexander Strauch, “Bless Those Who Admonish You,” *Tabletalk*, August 2013, 26.

humble yet definite, in pursuing the ends for which Christ has given you to His church.⁷²

The elder must admonish while remembering he is accountable to God.

A main way a church member can show submission to the leadership is by his reaction to admonishment. If they react with violence, shock, anger, defensiveness among others this usually does not show a submissive attitude. The member should patiently take the admonishment trusting the elder and knowing that he is acting in his best interest. If the elder is truly qualified to rule the church then the member is more readily inclined to hear the admonishment. Ventura and Walker speak often of admonishment. They help explain different aspects of what this admonishment looks like and how it should be received. They point out how:

We are ready, perhaps even eager, to see others admonished and instructed, but there will almost certainly come a day when a loving, faithful servant of Jesus will look us in the eye and put something in our mind, will impart truth to us and will not let us shake it off, but will press it home until it penetrates, hold it up until it illuminates. Then what a multitude of excuses we make, what a list of reasons we offer to ignore the truth, how many evasions and self-delusion we will conjure to avoid the truth and its demands.⁷³

We often think of ourselves as humble, but when confronted with our sin we think the other person must be wrong or exaggerating our shortcomings. On Sunday morning or in private counsel how do we receive them? They write, “Do you accept that pastors and preachers are not only entitled but obligated before God to warn, instruct, reprove, correct, and urge all men with this end in view? How, then, do you hear them? It will not always be pleasant and will certainly be, at times, painful to have the cancer of sin addressed and the cross of a crucified Christ pressed afresh into your tender soul.”⁷⁴

⁷² Ventura and Walker, 64-65.

⁷³ Ibid., 108.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 123.

The reaction a member should have to admonishment instead should be thankfulness to God for allowing us to be challenged. James Denney advises those being admonished to, “Take it seriously and kindly; thank God that He has not allowed you to go on unadmonished; and esteem very highly in love the brother or sister who has been so true to you. Nothing is more unchristian than fault-finding; nothing is more truly Christian than frank and affectionate admonishing of those who are going astray.”⁷⁵ The ordering of the church officers is for the good of the church corporately and members individually. Therefore admonishment should be received as something for our good no matter how painful. Denney reminds us, “They do not admonish us because they like it, but because they love us and would save us from harm; and love is the only recompense for such service.”⁷⁶

Submission in Areas of Disagreement

When a member disagrees with his leadership he needs first to figure out if the leadership is correct. He must ask himself how important the issue is. Does it affect the gospel or major teaching of the church? These are fundamental issues which must be resolved before he can figure out how to proceed.

There are four main things to remember when thinking of disagreements between the leaders and the congregation. First, the disagreement must not be on cardinal issues; second, disagreements can be in the so-called grey areas; third, the congregation must still show submission to their leaders; fourth, any disagreements should not adversely affect the church.

⁷⁵ Denney, 350.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 350.

The congregation must remember to esteem them highly even in disputes trusting that they are watching over their souls.

Disagreements between the leaders and a member must not be on cardinal doctrines because this throws the salvation of either the leaders or the member into question. Cardinal doctrines such as the deity of Jesus Christ, resurrection of Jesus Christ and salvation by faith are non-negotiable doctrines. Supposing the member is the one who does not believe these doctrines, he needs to be shown from Scripture where he is wrong. If he will not believe these doctrines then he needs to be refused membership or excommunicated if he is a member. This does not necessarily mean these actions must be immediate. If a member is willing to think about the issues at hand and search the Scriptures then by all means pursue the man in this way-it may lead to his salvation.

If, on the flip side, it is the elders who do not believe cardinal doctrines then the member should instruct them and show them from Scripture their false doctrine. He should also seriously consider leaving the church since those who are in authority over him do not appear to be Christians. If they are not Christians then they cannot properly watch over his soul. Even supposing the elders repent and believe they are still not fit to be elders since Paul warns against new believers ruling the church (1 Timothy 3:6). John Frame reminds us, "Submission is not necessarily blind obedience."⁷⁷ The congregation is not to follow the elders unthinkingly. The Christian must ever search the Scriptures like the Bereans.

The elders and congregation must be on the same page when it comes to cardinal doctrine, but in lesser matters there are areas where disagreements are permitted. Some of these issues can be quite important, but the congregation can agree to disagree and still be a good church that matures its believers and spreads the gospel throughout their region. One

⁷⁷ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2008), 580.

example is in my city. I know of many Baptists who attend a Presbyterian church even though they do not believe in Paedobaptism. They still worship and serve the Lord together.

There are a myriad of topics where a member can disagree with his leadership, but these still must be worked through in some manner. Swavely and Mack would have the member ask himself three questions. (1) “Is our objection a matter of conscience or merely preference?” (2) “Is their leadership causing us to sin, or is it confronting our sin?” (3) “Finally, is the leadership issuing commands or merely offering counsel?”⁷⁸ It must also be noted—how serious is the issue? Do we need to make a big deal about it? What happens if the church follows the lead of the elders? Is the gospel at stake? The members cannot simply bring up a list of petty issues, but must let love cover many issues in the church. The member needs to figure out when to let an issue go and when it is important enough to disrupt the church. The member must be careful to know that the elders are sinning in the matter. If they are sinning they must be confronted as any other brother.

Notice with the above list the elders are also to be submissive to the Lord. They are not to command where God has been silent. They can give recommendations on what they believe the Lord would have the church to do in grey areas, but they should not command.

Jay Adams writes:

Whenever they cannot support their actions with certain assurance of biblical backing or whenever they are unsure about the teachings of the Scriptures concerning a given point of faith or life, shepherds may not require compliance from members of the flock to what can be only a tentative (and possibly erroneous) position. . . it seems clear that in those matters not specifically ordered by the Scriptures, about which the leaders are obligated to make decisions, the members must submit to their leadership *unless what is enjoined plainly violates biblical requirements.*⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Mack and Swavely, 55-56.

⁷⁹ Adams, 332. Emphasis in the original.

Although the member is to be submissive to its leadership, this does not mean they have to follow every decision made by the leaders.

In making decisions the church will sometimes decide to do something a member or group of members does not like. This can be a decision made by the eldership or it could be a vote the congregation has made and decided among themselves. The member must still react when a decision does not go their way. They should not simply take their ball and go home. John Frame has a good reminder, “Of course, it is almost too easy for us, when we simply disagree with an authority, to concoct reasons as to why God would have us disobey. We should remember that for us God’s will is limited to Scripture, and that we need to be rigorously careful in our determinations of God’s will from Scripture.”⁸⁰ The member must be prepared to submit himself not only to the rule of the elders but even to the rule of the church if they have decided against his opinion. G.K. Beale counsels, “Unless the elders are involved in outright sin, believers under their care should acquiesce to their collective wisdom.”⁸¹ The Christian life oftentimes requires that we submit to one another and give up some of our rights for the good of the others and in this case for the good of the church. Mark Dever who moved his church to elder rule writes, “Only one member voted against it; at this writing six years later, he’s still a happy member of the church in regular attendance.”⁸² This is an example of true submission where the member voted and lost. He could have left for another church and but he stayed and was not a hindrance. He is rather a “happy member” aiding the church in its mission.

⁸⁰ Frame, 581.

⁸¹ G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, vol. 13, *IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downer Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 162

⁸² Newton, 13. Dever wrote the introduction to the book.

There may come a point in which a member must submit in a grey area-what should be his attitude? He must show their submission in their countenance, in word and in obedience. Mack and Swavely write, “We can disagree with our leaders on various issues without creating conflict, as long as we hold our opinions with a godly humility and graciousness (cf. Prov. 18:2; 19:27; Eph. 4:15; Col .4:6).”⁸³ Our very language and demeanor should still demonstrate respect for them and their position. The member must be on the watch for a rebellious spirit which does not seek to put itself under authority. Again he must be self checked through his scripturally informed conscience. Michael Kinnamon writes, “A healthy church, as I envision it, will have plenty of room for dialogue, diversity, and dissent; but its members will also recognize that the corporate teachings of the body have a claim on them. Authority implies freely-given obedience to that which is outside the self.”⁸⁴ A member also shows submission by communicating with his leaders. If he disagrees he tells them why he disagrees and is upfront with them about the issues he has. Although we may disagree with a decision the leadership has made we must still submit to them, obey their decision as much as we can and still support them in their ministry.

Finally, our disagreement of their decision and rule must not affect our service to God and the church. We are still called to work for the good of the church. Friesen and Maxson write:

Once a matter has been thoroughly discussed and the decision is made, each member is obliged to put away his personal preferences and join in a wholehearted effort to support the plan selected. For that is how unity is maintained. That unity, which Christ so desired for His Church, is not the product of uniformity of thought which

⁸³ Mack and Swavely, 60.

⁸⁴Michael Kinnamon “Authority in the Church: Naming the Problem” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 40 (2005): 1.

determines an ideal will; it comes through the submission of each member to the authority of the local church by accepting and supporting the wisdom of the group.⁸⁵

We must not pout or hang our heads if our leadership or fellow members disagree with us.

Instead, in humility, we must put our differences behind us and work for His glory.

⁸⁵ Friesen and Maxson, 268.

CHAPTER 6
SUBMISSION AS SIN

A member is not to always submit to their church leaders just as he does not owe absolute allegiance to his government or even his spouse. The member must not allow himself to be ruled over by a leader who is disqualified. This disqualification can be for moral reasons or doctrinal. The member must also make sure his church practices church discipline and is willing to discipline its members and its leaders.

Elder is Disqualified

It is a sad reality today, as in the past, that pastors can become disqualified. The member must ensure that he is not lead by elders who are morally or doctrinally disqualified. He is not required to submit to a disqualified elder. Referring to the Hebrews 13 passage Arthur W. Pink writes, “The subjection required by our text is only unto that office established by Christ Himself. If any usurp that office, and under cloak thereof do teach or enjoin things contrary to what Christ has instituted, then no obedience unto them is required by this command.”¹ He may need to leave the church if the disqualified man is not removed or refuses to resign.

¹ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986) 1242.

Moral Disqualification

Much has been said about the biblical evidence for submission, the need for the congregation to submit to their leaders and the ways in which this submission is evidenced, but there does come a time when submission is sinful. When a Christian realizes that ultimately he is submissive to God, the roots of disobedience to any human authority is implied. If the Christian is to obey God over all else then when a man, in this case a leader, demands submission contrary to God's will then it is his duty to refuse to submit to the man. As has been stated before the leader is to be disobeyed if he offers counsel contrary to God's word.

There are other areas where a member does not have to submit to their elder. Consider first, the biblical case for morality. Many of the designations in 1 Timothy and Titus refer to the moral characteristics of the elder. If he does not meet these then he must be rejected as an elder. Within these characteristics we read of being a drunkard, an adulterer, a fighter and others. Chrysostom writes, "What then, you say, when he is wicked—should we obey? Wicked? In what sense? If in regard to faith, flee and avoid him, whether he is a man or angel come down from heaven."² Carl Volz describes the view of the early church, "Yet authority did not derive from ordination; it was largely associated with interior qualities of aptitude, moral example, and the natural endowments (gifts of the Spirit) of the holder. Clergy who lapsed from these ideals could be summarily dismissed and the ordination invalidated."³ If the man does not have a life of general reverence and good behavior then he is not to be followed.

² Chrysostom "The Epistle to the Hebrews 34.1" in, *Hebrews*, vol. 10, *Ancient Christian Commentary New Testament*, ed. Erik M. Heen and Philip D.W. Krey, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005) 237.

³ Carl A. Volz "The Pastoral Office in the Early Church," *Word and World* vol. 9 (1989) : 362.

Secondly, a leader can become puffed up with pride. J. I. Packer warns:

Exercise of authority in its various spheres is not necessarily *authoritarian*. There is a crucial distinction here. Authoritarianism is authority corrupted, gone to seed. Authoritarianism appears when the submission that is demanded cannot be justified in terms of truth or morality. Nazism, Communism and Jim Jones' cult in Guyana are examples. Any form of human authority can degenerate in this way . . . Authoritarianism is evil, anti-social, anti-human and ultimately anti-God (for self-deifying pride is at its heart), and I have nothing to say in its favor.⁴

When the leaders are acting in authoritarianism, they are not to be submitted to but honorably opposed for the sake of the congregation and their conscience. The congregation should fear a dictator who rules for his own glory rather than a shepherd who serves to the glory of God-with their best interest in mind.

One example in the New Testament who ruled the church in this way is Diotrephes (3 John). John tells us Diotrephes loved to have the preeminence and attacked John with malicious words. He even practiced putting Christians out of the church for accepting the teaching of John. He was selfish and sought his own glory. When men like this rule the church God's name is disgraced and the witness of the church is weakened. Mack and Swavely write, "The apostle, in effect, tells his friend Gaius to disobey Diotrephes, who was apparently a duly appointed or elected leader in the church."⁵ The church must ever listen to God and seek to obey Him rather than man, even if that man is a leader in the local church who normally deserves submission. Ventura and Walker reminds us to "Plead with God that they will never abuse their position or authority but will only labor to make you fit for glory. Pray for the identification and mortification of every sinful or shallow motive that would

⁴J.I. Packer, "Authority and Freedom" Article was originally published as booklet #3 in the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy Foundation Series (Oakland: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy Foundation Series, 1981) can be found http://www.the-highway.com/Authority_Packer.html. (accessed June 12 2014).

⁵ Wayne Mack and Dave Swavely, *Life in the Father's House: A Member's Guide to the Local Church* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1996), 54.

distort their purpose or distract from their goal.”⁶ The church must ever pray for its leaders. God is pleased to answer her prayers.

The leaders can seek to be involved in every aspect of the lives of their congregations, but this is not biblical. Their authority is limited by the Word of God. There are a multitude of areas where the member does not have to submit and should not submit to their judgments. Newton points out that submission does, “not imply that spiritual leaders have authority to dictate the membership’s personal affairs as relates to finances, business decisions, and even marriage partners. Certainly they can offer counsel in these areas, and may even exhort church members in godly wisdom, but never control. ‘They keep watch over your souls,’ not your bank accounts.”⁷

Doctrinal Disqualification

A leader should also be rejected if he does not hold fast the core doctrine of Christianity. Throughout the New Testament the church is instructed to keep and obey the word of God. Jude writes to his hearers to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (3). Throughout the pastorals Timothy and Titus are urged to have sound doctrine to equip the church. For instance in 1 Timothy Paul counsels to “charge some that they teach no other doctrine” (1:3); “if you instruct the brethren in these things you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ” (4:6); “give attention to...doctrine” (4:13); and charges him to teach “the doctrine which accords with godliness” (6:3) and to “withdraw

⁶ Rob Ventura and Jeremy Walker, *A Portrait of Paul: Identifying a True Minister of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 124.

⁷ Phil Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Mode for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 90.

yourself” from those who teach otherwise contrary doctrine (6:5). It is much the same in 2 Timothy. Paul writes, “hold fast the pattern of sounds words” (1:13); “commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others” (2:2); “in humility correcting those who are in opposition” (2:25); and “Preach the word in season and out of season” (4:2). This same advice continues in Titus as the elders are to be “holding fast to the faithful word as he has been taught” (1:9); “in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, and incorruptibility” (2:7); and finally told to “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a man is warped and sinning, being self-condemned” (3:10-11).

They were continually told to preach and act in pure ways to avoid those who act in such manners. Leaders of the church have a duty to be pure in both life and doctrine. Paul even calls out Hymaneus and Alexander in 1 Timothy 1:20 who may have been leaders in the Ephesian church. If the elders are to be followed as shepherds then they must be following the True Shepherd in both deed and doctrine. The congregation is under no compulsion to submit to heretical leaders or those who do not follow the moral dictates of Christianity.

Church Discipline

Church discipline, although not popular in the West, is a historic Christian practice which is mandated by the word of God. In Reformed theology it is usually considered the third mark of the church along with preaching the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Jesus in Matthew 18 established church discipline and this discipline must be administered to both members of the church and the leaders.

Discipline of Regular Members

The church must also not countenance sin among its very own members. It must submit to the gospel in practicing church discipline and, if needs be, to excommunicate a member from the church. At the very front of this process the work of the elders is evident. This is a part of ruling the church. Mark Dever writes, “When we talk about church discipline historically, we talk about formative church discipline and corrective church discipline. Formative discipline is all the teaching we do—the positive statements, the modeling, the instruction and sermons and Bible studies and books that we pass out.”⁸ The leaders must make sure the church knows Christian right from wrong and how the church discipline process should be conducted. They must know they have a need to confront brothers and sisters who are living in sin. Although people usually think about corrective church discipline it should be more formative than corrective, just like it should be when training your own biological children.

Dealing with sin in the church is essential. It seems to be an issue the church has forgotten. A church must be able to regulate the actions of its members otherwise anyone can join the church even if they are a heretic, schismatic, or highly immoral. David Sutton writes, “Guarding and protecting the weak, going out after those gone astray, disciplining wrongdoers, repenting of wrongs done to one another, forgiving one another, humility—all these have to do with building good relationships and good community.”⁹ These are all things the Christian church must do, it is necessary to the truth of the gospel.

⁸ Mark Dever, “Shaping Holy Disciples: Mark Dever says Church Discipline is not about punishment or self-help,” an interview by Mark Galli *Christianity Today*, August 2005, 32.

⁹ David Sutton *Discipline and Discipleship: Accountability in the Life of the Church* *Journal for Preachers* 11 no.2 (1988): 30.

It is here too, that the church must trust its elders for they usually have inside information on the issue. A church should always follow the directives of Matthew 18 with one brother or sister talking to the person individually. Jay Adams mentions one step here that is not usually thought about, self-confrontation.¹⁰ All members should actively be evaluating their lives and when out of step with the revealed will of God they need to repent and turn back to the path of obedience. The members should also take the counsel of James Denney to heart:

Which is better—to speak to the brother who has been disorderly, whether by neglecting work, neglecting worship, or openly falling into sin: which is better, to speak to such a one as a brother, privately, earnestly, lovingly; or to say nothing at all to him, but talk about what we find to censure in him to everybody else, dealing freely behind his back with things we dare not speak of to his face? Surely admonition is better than gossip; if it is more difficult, it is more Christlike too.¹¹

If the person will not listen the confronter is to take one or two more and go to the person again. If the person will not hear them, it then proceeds to the church. If he will not listen to the church then he is to be excommunicated. This excommunication is for remedial purpose, for the salvation of the offender.

Usually, at the second step, someone on leadership joins in confronting the offender. At the third step, before it officially comes before the church, it is necessary for the leadership to be involved. They must make sure the issue is not simply speaking past each other, but the issue is real and does need to be resolved. The church would need to know that when a person is brought before the church, the leadership believes the person is sinning and will not repent for the sin. W.H. Burnett describes it, “The overseers in the church would typically

¹⁰ Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 30.

¹¹ James Denney, “1 Thessalonians,” vol. 6, *The Expositor’s Bible*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943), 350.

present the case to the church with the prescribed discipline, for the affirmation of the local church. Similarly, when repentance and reconciliation have been affected, the offending party should be publicly received back into fellowship in the same manner as a new applicant would be announced and received.”¹² It also needs to be noted that if the person repents before the issue comes before the entire church then the whole process of church discipline stops. Again it must be said the elders are under the lordship of Christ and are to not exercise church discipline because of any pressure from members or any personal distaste in a member but purely for biblical reasons—broadly speaking, for unrepentant immorality and false doctrine.

The leadership cannot simply excommunicate a member, but Scripture makes it clear that the church as a whole must act. Paul told the Corinthians “when you are gathered together...deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Corinthians 5:4-5). In speaking to the Thessalonians in his warning against idleness he says twice “brethren” (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 13) and not specifically to the leadership in the church but to the entire church. The entire church must make sure they are not helping out the idle because if some are, then the idle “workers” will never actually work and the discipline will be ineffective. It must be the entire church who takes action. Phil Newton writes, “If a pastor stands alone in bringing a matter of church discipline to the church, opponents will likely skewer him! But the strength of godly leaders within the church, standing together in dealing with such matters, urges the entire church to recognize the seriousness of discipline.”¹³ If it is merely the leaders almost certainly the church will split and it will be an us verse them issue. In the church of Jesus Christ it should

¹² W.H. Burnett, “Local Church Discipline,” *Uplook Magazine*, March, 2001, 15.

¹³ Newton, 42-43.

be that the Lord Jesus Christ rules his church and it is through church discipline that He accomplishes His will.

If the elders are recommending discipline on a member who is well liked, the church must still submit and trust their leaders. The leaders usually have more knowledge of the issue than the members. Jamie Dunlop points out, “our leaders must make many decisions concerning which we, as members, will have incomplete knowledge... it's downright judgmental and arrogant to assume the leaders had sinful motives for their decision.”¹⁴ If he disagrees with the judgment of the church then he needs to talk to the elders face to face and not grumble behind their back. In the church the congregation and elders must handle things in a biblical way with confrontation and discussion. There needs to be mutual understanding of the issues before judgment is made.

The church of Jesus Christ is responsible to submit to his leadership as explained in the Scripture. As a result the church must confront sin both in an individual way as well as corporately. It is an essential part of its gospel witness to have a pure church. Both the leadership and the members must play a part in this discipline. The elders must teach on church discipline, as well as instruct and admonish on church doctrine and morals. The church must not leave the elders to handle all of the corrective discipline nor should the elders be the only ones who deal with this discipline. Instead both must carry out their respective parts acknowledging they are under the Lordship of Christ and are responsible to make fair judgments based on the facts and not their own personal feeling.

¹⁴ Jamie Dunlop, “Class VIII Church Leadership,” 9 Marks Journal May-June 2008, <http://www.9marks.org/journal/class-viii-church-leadership> (accessed May 28 2014).

Discipline of Elders

Church discipline is not only for the members of the congregation. The church of God is not a dictatorship where the leaders rule in any manner they like. Instead they are all under the Lordship of Christ. 1 Timothy 5 not only informs the Ephesians of how to honor the elders (17-18), how to choose the elders (21-25) but also how to deal with sinning elders. Verses 19-20 read “Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.” The elder is to be protected from false accusations made by members who may disagree with a decision made by the elder or simply do not like an elder. But if they are sinning they are to be rebuked before the entire congregation. The Matthew 18 principle must be followed even with elders. A person should confront the elder first and then take one or two with him. If the elder’s sin violates his qualifications (in this letter 3:1-7), then he must be removed. Hopefully, after the confrontation he will admit his sin and willingly step down. But if not then the church must remove him. He gets no special treatment for being an elder. His sin must be dealt with; his position does not excuse him from discipline. Daniel Akin writes “if my pastor were to do something unbiblical, immoral, illegal, or unethical, I am biblically obligated to confront him and to follow the pattern of 1 Timothy 5:19-20.”¹⁵

This is exceeding difficult to do. Strauch writes, “No part of Christian ministry is more difficult than investigating, confronting or disciplining sin in the life of a church leader. One can easily think of a thousand excuses for evading the correction or discipline of a church leader.”¹⁶ Many churches today do not deal with sinning leaders since it is so difficult. But

¹⁵ Daniel Akin, “The Single-Elder-Led Church: The Bible’s Witness to a Congregational/Single Elder-Led Polity in, *Perspectives in Church Government: 5 Views on Church Polity* ed. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2004), 72.

for the sake of the witness of the Christian church and out of love for the leader in sin, it must be done. When the church submits and allows a leader caught in sin to continue, it is not showing submission to Christ. Submission to ones leaders is under the submission to Christ. The church is to follow Christ and follow its leaders only insofar as they imitate Christ. If the leader refused to step down and the church refused to force the leader to step down then the member would be justified in leaving the church. By his continuance in the fellowship he would be sinning in his submission to the leader.

¹⁶Alexander Strauch, "Bless Those Who Admonish You," *Tabletalk*, August 2013, 27.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In the church of God the members are to submit to their leadership. Submission is continually taught throughout the Bible. There is no place in the Christian church for an anti-authority attitude and rebellion against authority. The teaching within the early church clearly demonstrates the need of the church to submit to their elders. They were told to obey, receive admonishment from and trust their elders. The elders were to be those who lead the church, labor for the church and demonstrate humility. They also must understand they are under authority and are ultimately submissive to God. Although this has been the teaching of the Bible for 2000 years the church has continued to struggle with putting it into application and the church in the United States grapples with obedience in this area today.

The Bible clearly teaches church leadership and the office of elder. The Pastoral letters show the characteristics of the correct qualified elders. The selection of elders is another example where both the church members and the leadership must work in concert with one another. Neither should force their views on the other. The elders are not to force a new elder on the church nor is the church to demand that a certain person must be made an elder. Both sides must acknowledge the need to be submissive to the will of the Lord. The Bible also makes clear the church's need to submit to their leaders like they would any other Christian, generally in the "one another's" of Scripture. In particular, the church must support their leaders financially, accept their admonishment and submit to their decisions even if they disagree.

Finally, the church must acknowledge that submission to God means there are times when they must not submit to their leadership. They must not allow a disqualified man to rule over them whether it be for moral reasons or doctrinal. They must also not allow sin in the church, but must work together to make sure church discipline is carried out in a godly manner. Both the elders and the church must be involved in the process each fulfilling their duty. This discipline is for not only the member but also for the leaders. The church of Jesus Christ must continue to follow its head and show godly submission to its leaders.

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