

## The Myth of the Sovereign Consumer

Ezra 6:13–18, 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13

Think of the wide array of choices that confront us when we go shopping. Since I was a little boy, grocery stores have consistently gotten bigger and bigger. Many are huge and carry thousands of items. No matter what kind of food you like, odds are you can find exactly what you're looking for. No one ever tries to shame you for choosing one kind of cuisine over another. Customer is king!

Many people view the church in much the same way: parishioners are customers; church should give me what *I* want—my style of music, theology that makes me happy, topics that are important to me, choices in small groups. Church ought meet my felt needs. The church grows by giving customers what they want. The best churches are the biggest. Let the churches compete with one another to provide what the people want. Customer is king!

But the fundamental fact of theology is that God, not man, is sovereign. Sovereign means *possessing supreme or ultimate power*. When you think about it, that's just a fact of life in our Father's world. "All the gods of the nations are idols: but the LORD made the heavens" (Ps. 96:5). There's only one God who made the heavens and the earth. All other so-called gods are frauds—figments of human imagination. That's the way it is. You can like it, or you can dislike it, but you can't change it. The God with whom we have to do is sovereign. At the final judgment we don't get the choice of standing before the god of our own choosing. Before Christ *every* knee shall bow, and every mouth shall confess that he is Lord. Now if you're born again, the Holy Spirit has made you into a lover of the God who is. He has convinced you of your sin and misery, he has enlightened your mind in the knowledge of Christ, he has renewed your will, he has persuaded and enabled you to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered in the gospel. He has made you into a new creature in Christ—and you wouldn't have it any other way. Jesus Christ is Lord, and you are happy with that. You intuitively know that church ought to be teaching you the truth about God, not whatever happens to make you happy. You gather with God's people to worship the God who *is*, not the god that man wants. We do not live in a world where man is king. This is *God's* world, and pleasing him is everything.

In our New Testament text this morning there is an uncomfortable truth that goes against the grain of consumer Christianity. Paul writes, "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 very highly in love for their work's sake." Paul is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The whole Bible is the word of Christ that is supposed to dwell in us richly in all wisdom. This is the word of Christ: *recognize those who are over you in the Lord*. This is not have-it-your-own-way Christianity. This is solemn instruction from the sovereign Lord of the

church. Our job is to accept it and bring our lives into conformity with it. We cannot change it. We have three points this morning: (1) *identify* your leaders, (2) *respect* your leaders, (3) *esteem* your leaders. Christian, this is your solemn duty. The Bible is not a grab-bag of things that you can choose or set aside at will. It's a package deal. It's the word of our sovereign King. Let's look at these commands in turn. First,

### **1. Identify your leaders**

The apostle speaks of “those who are over you in the Lord.” What's he talking about? This sounds frightening. It goes against the grain of the American psyche. “Somebody over me? No way! Am I not a sovereign consumer? I'll read the Bible and decide for myself what I want to accept, thank you.”

The reigning philosophy in America is *individualism*. This philosophy focuses on people as unique individuals, rather than as members of a group. It emphasizes independence, individuality and autonomy. It is a deeply American philosophy—something as it were baked into American culture. “Don't tread on me!” Individualism is pervasive. It teaches that you are who you choose to be. You can be whoever or whatever you want. If you see yourself as a man born in a woman's body or a woman born in a man's body, no problem; you can change that. Be yourself. There are no absolutes.

Yet in our text Paul speaks of “those who are over you in the Lord.” The “you” is plural. That is important. The apostle—a man called by Christ and appointed to carry his gospel to the Gentiles—is writing to a *church*. Remember how the epistle begins: “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the *church* of the Thessalonians.” The word “church” means *called-out assembly*: those called by the Spirit of Christ out of the mass of humanity lost in their sins and on their way to eternal perdition. To be part of the church is a tremendous blessing. It is to be blessed with the gift of salvation. It is to have Christ as your Savior. “Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift.” If the Spirit of Christ has brought you to himself, then you *want* to be part of his worshiping community. You want to gather with his church to sing God's praises. You want to be part of the community of the blessed, worshiping together in anticipation of the great day when the whole company of the redeemed from every age will be gathered in heaven, surrounding the throne of the Lamb, singing his praises eternally.

So who are “those who are over you in the Lord”? As I mentioned a moment ago, the “you” (which occurs four times in these two short verses) is plural. The word “those” is plural too. Clearly, “those who are over you in the Lord” are the elders of the church. Every church should have a plurality of elders. God never intended that the church be ruled by a single strongman, whether pope or pastor. Christ alone is King and head of the church. Paul told Titus, “ordain *elders* [plural]

in every city, as I had appointed thee.”<sup>1</sup> He told Timothy, “Let the elders [plural] that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul is speaking of men called by God and ordained by the church with the laying on of hands. Elders are of two types: *ruling elders*, who rule on who has a credible faith in Christ and are qualified to commune at the Lord’s table (and who should be excluded), and *teaching elders*—pastors—who “labor in the word and doctrine.”

Church government has always been by a plurality of elders. Our Old Testament text speaks of “the elders of the Jews” who stepped up to lead God’s people after the seventy-year captivity came to an end. These men “prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah.” They built and completed the temple “according to the commandment of the God of Israel.” They oversaw the work of the priests and Levites as they offered burnt offerings and sin offerings at the dedication of the temple. “They assigned the priests to their divisions and the Levites to their divisions, over the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses.” Theirs was an important work, making sure the public worship was carried out as God had specified.

New Testament church government is a continuation of Old Testament church government. At Pentecost Christ did not appoint an entirely new government for his church. It was a continuation of the same government as that practiced for hundreds of years in the Old Testament. It was church government by a plurality of elders.

When Paul speaks of “those who are over you in the Lord” he was speaking of men who were ordained to oversee the government of the church in Thessalonica. Remember that Paul’s time in Thessalonica had been greatly limited, before he had to leave because of persecution. During his short time there, elders had been appointed. Here is the eminent apostle Paul, chosen personally by Christ himself on the road to Damascus, a man serving as a missionary and apostle to the Gentiles, commending men of modest gifts and abilities whom God had called to oversee the ordinary day-to-day work of the church in Thessalonica: teaching the Word, evangelizing the lost, receiving men and women by profession of faith, baptizing, administering communion. Nothing specific is known of them. Their names are lost to history and known only to God. Their accomplishments will come out only when they receive their “Well done” at the judgment seat of Christ. Clearly, Paul was not saying that men who are over you in the Lord can be identified because of their notable accomplishments or outstanding attainments.

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<sup>1</sup> Tit. 1:5

<sup>2</sup> 1 Tim. 5:17

No! Paul gives the standard in 1 Corinthians 4:2, “It is required in stewards, that a man be found *faithful*.”

I recently read a book about a successful businessman who for over twenty years had been addicted to crack cocaine. Crack cocaine is a highly addictive drug. Somehow, this man kept his addiction secret from his community, from his customers, and even from his family, but it was ruining his life. He would furtively sneak away from family gatherings and business appointments into lonely bathrooms and basements to get his fix. One day he decided to walk away from crack for good, and by the grace of God he was successful. Not many people can do this; the drug has such a hold on its addicts. This businessman now openly professes Christ. It is unclear from the book whether he has become part of a faithful church congregation. As a successful businessman he has a big ego. He was baptized, but not by just anybody, but by a celebrity pastor—and not just anywhere, but in the Jordan river in the Holy Land.

Our text is speaking of the elders of the church—ordinary elders, not celebrities: the ordinary means of grace, the regular week-by-week ministry of the Word. How are such elders identified? They meet the criteria for office: godly character and ability to teach the word. They are called by God, and the church elects them to office. There are mutual vows: the elder publicly vows before God “I accept the office of ruling elder in this congregation and promise, in reliance on the grace of God, faithfully to perform all the duties thereof”; the congregation vows to “acknowledge and receive this brother as a ruling elder, and . . . to yield him all that honor, encouragement, and obedience in the Lord, to which his office, according to the Word of God and the constitution of this Church, entitles him.”

Dear one, are you willing to put yourself under the oversight of faithful elders who are “over you in the Lord”? By the way, that qualifying phrase “in the Lord” is a huge safeguard. God alone is Lord of the conscience. He does not require us to surrender all decision-making ability to any other person. He says, “Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*.” Minor children are required to obey their parents, as long as the things the parents require are right. So it is with church government. As long as elders require obedience to the Bible, they do not exceed their authority and must be obeyed.

Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, *identify* your leaders, the men called by God to watch over this congregation. Second,

## **2. Respect your leaders**

The word that Paul uses is actually the generic word “know.” The King James Version has: “*know* them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord.” The New King James has “recognize”; the English Standard Version has “respect.” All these translations are defensible. We are actually to do all three: we are to “know,” “recognize” and “respect” the officers that our sovereign Lord has placed

over us in our congregation. Clearly, Paul wants more than a bare acknowledgement: “Yes, those men leading the congregation’s worship are our elders; I know that.” He wants us to *act* on that knowledge: “Those men are our elders; and because they are, I gladly submit to them as I submit to Christ.” Church elders are the undershepherds of Christ himself, and as the believer submits to their lawful leadership, he is submitting to Christ. When Jesus sent the twelve on a preaching mission he told them, “He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me.”<sup>3</sup> Here were men who were being sent out to preach Christ’s gospel. They were not experienced preachers. Most of them had never preached before. They must have felt entirely inadequate. Surely, they felt inferior to Christ. *He*, after all, was the main attraction. People were not thronging to see Thaddaeus or Simon the Canaanite—or even Peter or John. The crowds came to see *Christ*. He was the great teacher and miracle worker. People had high hopes that this was the man who would deliver them from the Romans.

So here were a bunch of rookie preachers, and Christ told them, “He who receives you receives me.” In other words, “he who receives my gospel from you is actually receiving *me*—the Messiah.” People were not receiving the disciples because they were such gifted and eloquent men. They received them because they were speaking the truth. Their message carried authority because it was God’s truth.

And so it is today. Christ sends his church into the world with the Great Commission: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”<sup>4</sup> “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.”<sup>5</sup> The church has specific instructions: to preach “the gospel”—that is, the good news of Christ, as taught in the Bible. The church is to teach whatever Christ has commanded. It has no authority to teach anything else. In other words, it is *Christ’s* Christianity that is to be taught; the church has no authority to add anything else to that. As long as the church teaches the word of Christ it is on solid ground. And if people reject that message, they are rejecting Christ, before whom they will stand at the last day to give account.

What our Confession says of synods and councils might be said of sessions as well: that the teachings of faithful elders, “if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God

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<sup>3</sup> Matt. 10:40

<sup>4</sup> Mark 16:15–16

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 28:18–20

appointed thereunto in his Word.”<sup>6</sup> Christ chooses not to preach in person in the present age; rather, he sends out men to preach his gospel with his authority. That is his plan. You cannot say, “Christ, I don’t like your plan. I want to hear you in person.” That is not an option. He wants you to be part of the visible church and to hear the men he has called as his elders.

So what about you? Do you respect and esteem the elders Christ has set over you? Or do you disdain them because they don’t measure up to your expectations? Are you like the man who says, “I am a bigwig. If there’s a celebrity pastor around, I’m going to go to him!”

There’s an analogy in Christian marriage. Paul writes, “Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband” (Eph. 5:33). The husband’s duty is to love his wife as Christ loves the church. The wife’s duty is to submit to her husband. But she must also “respect” him; that is, esteem him highly as her husband. She is not excused from her duty because her husband is not extraordinary. She can’t say, “Lord, I would respect my husband if he were better.” Clearly, she is to respect the husband God gave her—the husband to whom she is joined in marriage. The Scripture doesn’t say, “Wife, respect your husband *if he is worthy*.” In the same way the Scripture doesn’t say, “Church of Jesus Christ, respect those whom God has placed over you, who labor among you, who are over you in the Lord, *if they meet up to your expectations*.” Clearly, every church has imperfect elders. None of us is fully sanctified yet; none of us fully measures up to the perfection of Christ. Don’t wait till you have perfect elders—respect them now. This is the word of Christ. (1) Identify your leaders, (2) Respect your leaders. Thirdly,

### **3. Esteem your leaders**

Let’s read the whole sentence again: “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 very highly in love for their work’s sake.” “Esteem” means *set a high value on, regard highly and prize accordingly*. The only other time this word occurs with this meaning is in Philippians 2:3, “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each *esteem* others better than himself.” In our relations with other Christians we are to esteem them more highly than we esteem ourselves, but in the case of church elders, we are to esteem them “very” highly in love. We don’t show that kind of love by avoiding them or refusing to shake their hand because a sermon or Bible lesson offended us. The Bible doesn’t say, “esteem them very highly in love *because they are deserving*.” No! Rather, we are to esteem them very highly in love “because of their work’s sake.”

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<sup>6</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 31.2, [https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter\\_31](https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_31)

The pastor's work is to feed and tend the flock as Christ's minister; to conduct the public worship of God; to pray for his people, to preach the truth of Scripture with ministerial authority, as a diligent workman approved by God; to administer the sacraments; to bless the people from God; to visit the flock, instructing and counseling people from the word of God; to minister to the poor, the sick, the afflicted, and the dying; and to preach the gospel to the lost.<sup>7</sup>

Ruling elders are to watch diligently over the people committed to their charge; visit them in their homes; instruct the ignorant; comfort the mourning; and nourish and guard the children of the covenant. They should pray with and for the people. They should have particular concern for the doctrine and conduct of the minister and assist him in his labors.<sup>8</sup>

Is this work valuable? To ask this question is to answer it. Ultimately, feeding souls is more important than feeding bodies. One day our earthly bodies will grow old and die, but our souls will live forever, either in heaven or hell. The things that are seen are temporary (πρόσκαιρος, for a time), but the things that are not seen are eternal.<sup>9</sup>

Our Scripture text requires us to *identify* our leaders, *respect* our leaders, and *esteem* our leaders. The church is not a grocery store where we can pick and choose whatever we want and ignore the rest. Christians are not consumers but members of the covenant people, in covenant with the Lord and with one another as we live life in this vale of tears. In the church there is no sovereign consumer but a sovereign Savior who gave his life so that we could live eternally. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://opc.org/BCO/FG.html#Chapter\\_VIII](https://opc.org/BCO/FG.html#Chapter_VIII)

<sup>8</sup> [https://opc.org/BCO/FG.html#Chapter\\_X](https://opc.org/BCO/FG.html#Chapter_X)

<sup>9</sup> 2 Cor. 4:18