

Spiritual Oversight

Proverbs 5:1–14; Hebrews 13:7–17

Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were contemplating leaving the church and returning to Judaism. It focuses on the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. While God spoke in the past “at various times and in various ways,” he has now spoken to us “by his Son,” Jesus Christ. Jesus accomplished salvation for all who trust in him. We, the saints today, together with the Hebrew Christians of the first century, dare not “neglect so great a salvation,” but always “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.” Trials are sure to come, but our ultimate allegiance must be to Christ. As we hold fast our confession, Hebrews teaches us that we are to be under the oversight of godly elders and pastors. Three times this last chapter of Hebrews uses the distinctive phrase “those who rule over you.” The first time it is “*Remember* those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you” (v. 7); the second time it is “*Obey* those who rule over you, and be submissive (v. 17); the third time it is “*Greet* all those who rule over you” (v. 24). Verse 7 speaks of pastors and elders who have gone home to be with the Lord, who have *spoken* (past tense) the Word of God. These are faithful elders who have finished their course and are now with Christ in heaven. They are not to be forgotten, cast into the dustbin of history; the church ought to treasure their biblical insights and remember the truths they have taught us. Verses 17 and 24 speak of pastors and elders who currently shepherd congregations of God’s people. The verbs “obey” and “greet” are in the present tense.

The phrase “those who rule over you” has been variously translated. Does it mean *rule* or *lead*? Most modern translations have “Obey your *leaders*”; that is: those who lead you. Peter uses the word *shepherd*: “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers” (1 Pet. 5:2). What do shepherds do? They lead the flock. Cattle must be driven, but sheep follow a leader. The goal is not to follow blindly but “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21), which is always our duty.

Those who are in view in our Hebrews text are *spiritual* leaders: “they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account.” Calvin qualifies that “the Apostle speaks only of those who faithfully performed their office”—in other words, *unfaithful* shepherds who use their office to *destroy* the church, or lead the church away from Christ and the truth of the Gospel, are unworthy of our obedience. If you are part of a church that has departed from the Gospel or teaches things that are contrary to Scripture, then you are in the wrong church. Christians ought not to leave a *faithful* church, but *must* leave an *unfaithful* church. The apostle here is speaking of faithful shepherds who lead God’s people in the way of truth and righteousness. It is fitting on a day when our congregation received a new

member to consider our responsibilities to faithful elders and pastors called by Christ to lead his flock. I have three points: (1) Limited rule; (2) Representing Christ; (3) Voluntary submission. First,

1. Limited rule

Our text begins, “Remember those who *rule* over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct” (v. 7). This text teaches limited rule in two ways: First, it is exercised by a plurality of elders, not a single, powerful individual; and second, the authority itself is not unlimited but specific and restricted. Let me explain.

First sub-point, let me point out the plural pronoun “those.” The apostle is intentional and consistent: “remember *those*,” “obey *those*,” “greet *those*—plural in every case. *A biblical church is governed by a plurality of elders.* There is no example anywhere in the Bible of an organized local congregation that is ruled by a single individual with sole, unchecked authority.

This is the genius of presbyterian government. Rather than the church being under the sole discretionary authority of any single individual, such as a pastor in Baptist and independent circles, or a Pope in Roman Catholicism, who answers to no man and cannot be deposed, the Bible is clear: it is a plurality of elders who rule in the church. The text does *not* say, “Obey *him*” but “Obey *those* (plural). That should be clear.

This is an encouragement to those who have been abused by an authority figure, whether an abusive parent, abusive spouse, or abusive church leader. The Lord Jesus is the true Shepherd who loves his sheep, who gave his life for his sheep. He is the very example of goodness, kindness, gentleness and sacrificial love. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”¹ The great Shepherd did not come into this world to *take* from his sheep but to *give* to his sheep—to give his very life for his sheep. There is no greater example of sacrifice than the example of Christ, the Savior of the world, who gave his life for our sins. He didn’t die for good people but for sinners. In fact, when we were *enemies*, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. We did not deserve salvation.

Biblical church government is under a plurality of elders. Every single Christian—including the pastors, teachers and elders themselves—is under authority, answerable to ecclesiastical courts. Members of presbyterian churches take vows to submit in the Lord to the government of the church, and to heed the church’s discipline in case of delinquency. Pastors and elders take vows to faithfully perform the duties of their office and watch over the sheep committed to their care, teaching them the truth, exposing error and protecting them from wolves. There is a process for removing them if they abuse their office. God’s word requires that the

¹ John 15:13

officers of the church—those who are called and ordained to special office—be in submission to Christ. They are reminded that when the Chief Shepherd shall return, undershepherds will, if they have been faithful, receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. But unfaithful shepherds will be judged. Their judgment will be the more severe, because they knew better. They sinned against greater knowledge.

Second sub-point, church authority is limited to the ecclesiastical sphere. God has given three institutions of human authority: (1) the family, (2) the church, and (3) civil government. Each institution has limited authority. Christ alone possesses *all* authority. In his great commission he says, “*All authority* has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.”² My dear brother or sister, listen carefully. The only one in all the universe who can say, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” is the Lord Jesus Christ. Anyone else who claims such authority is a fraud and a fake. He’s lying. The true church recognizes that its authority is derived from Christ. Its duty is to proclaim the Gospel, admit penitent sinners who confess Christ, and bar the impenitent who deny the faith—in a word, admit Christ’s true sheep, turn away the goats, and protect the sheep from the wolves.

The church must preach the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27)—everything that’s in the Bible, and nothing that’s *not* in the Bible. Pastors much preach what the Bible teaches. They are not free to ride a hobbyhorse—to focus on doctrines that they like and ignore the ones they don’t like. Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (John 17:17). Rest assured, our Lord was *perfectly* knowledgeable about the whole of Old Testament doctrine—the good, the bad and the ugly, so to speak. In a recent sermon we considered the rights of slaveholders and indentured servants—not easy topics to preach on, but part of the whole counsel of God. What about the hard teaching that child that doesn’t know for certain who his father is could not be admitted into the congregation of Israel till the tenth generation?³ What about the prayer that Babylon’s fall might see its infants dashed upon the rocks? These are difficult teachings that must be faithfully explained and applied to our present situation. Jesus declared the whole Bible to be God’s “truth.” Make no mistake: the *whole* of the Word of God is necessary for our sanctification. And *only* the Word! The church has no authority to invent doctrines that are not taught in the Bible. If the Bible does not teach something, then the church must not teach it either. Purgatory? Not in the Bible. That bread and wine, blessed by a priest, become the true body of Christ which is resacrificed in Holy Communion? Not in the Bible. Christ was offered up once for all at the end of the

² Matt. 28:18ff.

³ Deut. 23:2

age to put away sin.⁴ That's the teaching of Holy Scripture, so that is what the faithful church teaches.

So our text teaches that God's people are to *remember* faithful teachers of God's Word who have spoken to us the Word of God. They have been a blessing to the church. None of them were entirely without flaw, but they have been examples of godliness. If they, like the apostle Paul, can say, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day"⁵; if they were "faithful unto death" and "receive the crown of life "at the Savior's hand,"⁶ then the church ought to remember them—men such as:

Polycarp (AD 69–155), a disciple of the apostle John, and bishop of Smyrna. At age 86, Polycarp was arrested and sentenced to burn at the stake. When asked to renounce Christ to preserve his life, he said, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" That refusal cost him his life.

Athanasius (298–373), bishop of Alexandria, Egypt. During his lifetime, Arius started teaching that Jesus was a created being and not the eternal God. Athanasius showed that Arius's teaching was wrong. Athanasius affirmed Christ's deity and his eternal relationship with the Father. He became the principal author of the Nicene Creed, which declared the Son to be "begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father."

Augustine of Hippo (354–430), the great philosopher and theologian, grew up as a pagan and became a believer in 387 under the influence of his Christian mother. Afterward, he became a priest. His writings include *Confessions*, a personal account of his life, *City of God*, *On the Trinity*, and *On the Christian Doctrine*.

There are many others—worthies whom the church ought to remember. We ought particularly to know and appreciate the Reformed confessions—the Three Forms of Unity: the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and Canons of Dort; as well as the Westminster Standards: the Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms. These are secondary standards, faithful expressions of biblical doctrine that have stood the test of time. Secondly, consider

2. Representing Christ

Throughout his book, the writer to the Hebrews lifts up Christ: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." This is the same Christ as in chapter one: the Son of God through whom the Father spoke to his people, the One who is the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person, and upholding all

⁴ Heb. 9:26

⁵ 2 Tim. 4:7–8

⁶ Rev. 2:10

things by the word of his power. Christ the Lord is the divine Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity. He is the same “yesterday”—that is, during Old Testament times, when all things were made by him, and without him was not anything made.

This is the Angel of the LORD who appeared to Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness, who said, “Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?” She replied, “I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.” The Angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand.” He promised her, “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude. . . . You shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has heard your affliction.” Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, “Have I also here seen Him who sees me?”⁷

This is the Man who wrestled with Jacob until the breaking of day. When the Man saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob’s hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. The Man said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.” But he said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!” So He asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Jacob.” And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked, saying, “Tell me Your name, I pray.” And He said, “Why is it that you ask about My name?” And He blessed him there. Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: “For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.”⁸

This is the Angel of the LORD who appeared to Moses in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. When Moses turned aside to look, behold, the bush was burning with fire, but it was not consumed. Moses said, “I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn.” When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, “Moses, Moses!” He said, “Here I am.” Then the LORD said, “Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.” Moreover He said, “I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God.⁹

This is the Angel of the LORD who came and sat under the terebinth tree which was in Ophrah. He appeared to Gideon, and said, “The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!” Gideon answered, “O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? The LORD said, “Go in this might of yours, and

⁷ Gen. 16:7–13

⁸ Gen. 32:24–30

⁹ Ex. 3:1–6

you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man.” Gideon went and prepared a young goat, and unleavened bread. The Angel said to him, “Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth.” And he did so. Then the Angel of the LORD put out the end of his staff and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire rose out of the rock and consumed them. And the Angel of the LORD departed. Gideon perceived that He was the Angel of the LORD.¹⁰

This is the Angel of the LORD who came to comfort Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. The furnace had been heated up so hot that the fire killed the men that threw them into the furnace. The three Israelites fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished. He rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, “Did we not cast *three* men bound into the midst of the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” “Look!” he answered, “I see *four* men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.”¹¹

This is the Christ who sings with his people in the book of Psalms.¹² He is with his people today, as he builds his church and brings his elect into it, and will be with them forever—that is, eternity future, when his people will be gathered to him in heaven, and he will receive them around his throne, and we will sing his praises forever at the marriage supper of the Lamb. Indeed, he is Jesus Christ, “the same yesterday, today, and forever.” Amen.

3. Voluntary submission

Verse 17 says, “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.”

William Tyndale (1534) rendered it, “Obey them them that have the *oversight* of you,” a translation that is in keeping with the meaning of *bishop* (lit. *overseer*).¹³

Here is our duty to obey those who watch for our souls, as men who will give account—that is, the pastors and elders of faithful churches. The obedience that we owe is not to them personally as fallible humans; rather, we are to obey them as they represent Christ. When a policeman turns on his red, flashing lights and orders us to stop at the side of the road, we do not stop as a courtesy to him as a private individual, but because he represents the law. He is not pulling us over on his own authority but as a representative of the power of the state. So it is when we submit

¹⁰ Judg. 6:11–23

¹¹ Dan. 3:23–25

¹² Heb. 2:12

¹³ “Obeye them that have the oversight of you and submit youre selves to them, for they watch for youre soules even as they that must geve a comptes.”

to the elders of the church, as they who watch for our souls. Just as the congregation receives the preaching of the Word as being the word of *Christ*, coming with *Christ's* authority, so the saints are to obey the men who have oversight over us in the Lord, because they represent Christ. All authority in heaven and earth is invested in Christ. He is the Lord, and we are to obey his every command as his willing servants. When we voluntarily obey those whom he by his kingly authority has put into office in his church, we are obeying Christ. He is glorified as his people voluntarily submit to him for their spiritual good.

Are you willing to submit to the lawful government of the church as an expression of your submission to Christ? He says, "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account." Will you obey Christ?w

Today we heard a young woman take a vow to submit herself in the Lord to the government of this church. What she was saying was, "I belong to Jesus. He is the lover of my soul. He has saved me by his blood. I'm going to submit myself to him, obeying him wholeheartedly all the days of my life." May God grant her—and all of us—the grace to follow through, that Christ might be Lord of *us*, and Lord of *all*. May his Spirit make us willing, and may our willing obedience redound to the glory of God forever and ever. Amen.