

**Bethel Christian Fellowship
Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (48): The Book Of Better Things
“Last Minute Reminders,” Part Four
Hebrews 13:17**

June 8, 2025

Today’s text is critically important for all of us at Bethel. It raises so many crucial questions about local church leadership that it’s deserving of its own study. Previously our author has said, “*Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith*” (13:7). But now we read, “*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you*” (13:17, ESV). Clearly this exhortation is “a horse of a different hue.” For many it’s troubling, if not frightening.

As Americans living in a constitutional republic, we value our freedom to determine how we want to live our lives. We usually don’t respond well when we hear things like “obey” your leaders, which our author says not once, but twice! Nor are we comfortable with the notion of anyone who might be “watching over” us. After all, our business is our business, and we don’t relish the thought of others messing with our business! What, then, does this verse mean, and what does it *not* mean?

Just who are these leaders? Why should they have any spiritual authority that’s greater than that of others? What is the nature and extent of that authority? What does it mean for Christians to “obey” their leaders? What if church leaders tell people to do something or believe something that they don’t consider to be Biblical? What does the word “submit” mean, and how far should that submission extend? How, exactly, do spiritual leaders “keep watch” over the souls of others in the church, and why? These are just a few of the questions that this verse – and others like it – *should* raise in the minds of all biblically minded Christians.

How we are led, and by whom, and why, are extremely important questions that must be addressed. The big theological word that’s linked with these questions is ***ecclesiology***, (the doctrine of the church). The reason it’s so important to know how a church should be structured and led, according to this verse, and others like it, is because ***bad***

ecclesiology hurts good people (like all bad doctrine). That's why we've got to slow it down and carefully unpack the meaning of this text, line by line. There are at least five questions that we must ask:

1 Q. Who are these individuals that our author refers to as “leaders”? A.

There is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that *any* church was led or governed by *anyone* other than *men* who are referred to as *elders*. We see this pattern emerge early in the life of the New Testament church: **(a)** relief funds were sent from Antioch to the elders of the churches in Judea (Acts 11:29-30); **(b)** Paul appointed elders in the churches he founded on the first missionary journey (Acts 14:23); **(c)** the Council at Jerusalem was led by the elders and apostles (Acts 15:22ff); **(d)** elders appear as part of the normal life of the church at Philippi (1:1) and Ephesus (Acts 20:17-35); **(e)** Paul left Titus in Crete to appoint qualified elders in each of the churches (Titus 1:5-9); **(f)** in both Titus 1:5, 7 and Acts 20:17, 28 the word “elders” and “bishops” (overseers) are used interchangeably, so that an elder is a bishop and a bishop is an elder; **(g)** although men and women are spiritual equals (Gal. 3:26-29), the spiritual oversight and leadership of the church is restricted to men (1 Tim. 2:11-15; 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).

2 Q. What is the purpose of spiritual leadership? A. To promote and protect the spiritual welfare of each individual “soul” entrusted to their care. Simply stated, they are “soul doctors.” They bear an awesome responsibility, for here we are told they “*keep watch over*” the souls within the fellowship. “Keeping watch” conveys the idea of vigilance, tireless effort, self-discipline and a concern that could even lead to a loss of sleep. The concept could easily apply to watchmen of a city or shepherds of a flock. Watching over others’ safety and growth is a highly responsible and essential task – especially since spiritual pitfalls and “*all kinds of strange teachings*” abound (13:9-11).

The book of Hebrews illustrates this critical need for spiritual watchmen. As we have seen, some within the fellowship had seriously neglected the truth. They were spiritually apathetic and were tempted to return to the old ways of Judaism. Thus, the leaders who cared for this needy flock were essential for their spiritual health and growth.

Paul issued the same exhortation to the elders of the church at Ephesus: “***Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from among your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them***” (Acts 20:28-30). Peter issued the same exhortation when he

wrote; “To the elders among you . . . **Be shepherds of God’s flock** that is under your care, **watching over** them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:1-3).

3 Q. How are elders supposed to lead? A. Our text tells us: “*with joy*” and with the understanding that they “*must give an account.*” God wants joyful leaders – men who take great delight in caring for souls. That *joy* comes from *knowing* they have been called to serve, and from *seeing* the fruit of their ministry in those whom they serve. In fact, few greater joys exist than watching people come to Christ, grow in Christ, heed correction and warning, witness to the unsaved and live in harmony with other Christians. The Apostle John felt such joy: “*I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth*” (3 John 4).

Elders must also lead with the understanding that they will have “*to give an account*” to the Lord for the ministry entrusted to them. Here is the simple but sobering truth. There will come a day when *every* person who has served as a spiritual leader in *any* church will stand before Jesus Christ. He will ask them: did you faithfully shepherd the flock entrusted to your care? Did you teach them my Word? Did you warn them about the destructive and deceitful ways of the world? Did you encourage the discouraged and comfort the distraught and draw near to the lonely? Did you expend yourself in caring for their spiritual needs, and the needs of their family? The thought of that coming Day should cause any biblically minded elder to be even more conscientious in his endeavors to be a faithful watchman and shepherd!

4 Q. What is the biblical response of the membership of the church to the leadership? A. Our author mentions two things: “obey” them and “submit” to their authority. These are two of the most understood and misused words in all the New Testament – especially by those given to heavy-handed, dictatorial church leadership.

The word translated “*obey*” your leaders (NIV, 2008) is later translated “*have confidence*” in your leaders (NIV, 2015, 2020). It’s the same Greek verb that’s used in Hebrews 2:13, translated “trust.” In Romans 2:8 it’s translated “follow” and in Luke 11:22 it means “rely upon” or “trust.” It literally means “to be persuaded.” The idea is that people who listen to what their leaders teach *embrace* what is taught.

However, your “obedience” to what is taught is governed by what God’s Word says and not by what any leader says. If any spiritual leader teaches you something *contrary* to

Scripture, or counsels you to act in a way that is inconsistent with Scripture, then don't believe it and don't do it! A Christian's "obedience" to their spiritual leaders is *not* absolute. Our authority is a "delegated authority" – which means our teaching must be based on the authoritative standards of the Word of God. Your responsibility is to listen to and heed our teaching only so far as it is consistent with the B – I – B – L – E.

The same idea is behind the word "*submit*." It means that members of a local church should be inclined to "trust" their leaders. But the elders of any local church have no authority to dictate how you conduct yourselves on matters where the Bible is silent. Further, there are boundaries or limits to this exhortation. Our authority only extends to the doctrinal *and* moral standards of *God's* Word. Elders have no authority to tell you where to live or what job to take, or who to marry. Our task is to provide you with the biblical guidance and wisdom to help *you* make those decisions for yourself!

5 Q. Why should the members of a local church respond to the leaders in

this way? A. Because the difficult work of watching over the Lord's people becomes a joyous work when they heed the watchmen's instruction and correction. That's why our author writes, "*Let them do this with joy, and not with groaning.*" Spiritual elders are deeply concerned about the flock. They "sigh" and "grieve" when the sheep resist their teaching and refuse to grow, learn, change, or receive correction. The sheep's coldness of heart, indifference to truth, senseless disobedience and stubbornness takes its toll on the shepherds. In the end, everyone in the congregation suffers, for our author says that this refusal to submit to their authority "*would be of no advantage to (all of) you.*" That's one of the great understatements in the Word of God.

If that were stated positively, this clause would read, "that would be harmful to you," or "that would be disastrous for you." Why? Because when wayward sheep stubbornly resist the authoritative teaching of God's Word, *all* the God-given benefits of the shepherding ministry are lost. The shepherds become weary, and some eventually step down from their ministry. The wayward sheep become even more wayward and eventually lose their way; and over time, a resistant spirit may settle within the church, halting all growth and maturity. That's why this two-fold exhortation to yield to the spiritual authority of church leaders benefits all Christians. If obeyed, it will greatly bless and benefit everyone within the household of faith.

In Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* there are at least two characters who illustrate just how indispensable spiritual leadership is for any pilgrim traveling to the Celestial City. The first is Evangelist. At the beginning of the story, he directs Christian to the wicket gate,

which leads to the cross. Then he redirects him after Christian listened to the counsel of Mr. Worldly Wiseman, who led him down the wrong road. Then he meets Christian and Faithful to prepare them for the trials they will endure in Vanity Fair. Many believe that Evangelist depicts Bunyan's pastor, John Gifford, who helped lead him to Christ, and then taught him the Scriptures and warned him of the dangers of this world.

The second character is "the very grave person" with "the best of Books in hand" and "the world behind his back," whose portrait Christian saw in the house of Interpreter. He is "one of a thousand" who can "beget children, travail in birth with children and nurse them himself when they are born." He does all this for "the love of his Master's service." Once again, this is undoubtedly a picture of Bunyan's pastor. Without John Gifford, there would be no John Bunyan, and no *Pilgrim's Progress*, the best-selling Christian book of all time (after the Bible).

When God's people are proud, stubborn, or indifferent to their leaders, there's little progress, peace or joy in the local church. It's only when believers submit to the spiritual authority of their leaders that peace and cooperation will exist. Both are essential for our health and growth and joy in the Lord. This is "Ecclesiology 101." He who has ears to hear, let him hear!