

EXPECTATIONS OF THE CONGREGATION

HEBREWS 13:17-18 / I TIMOTHY 5:17-20

The congregation is expected to recognize and submit to the authority of leaders, pray for them, respect them, and hold them accountable to the word of God.

I. RECOGNIZING THE AUTHORITY OF CHURCH LEADERS (HEBREWS 13:17)

Church leaders are responsible to god for the well being of the congregation.

- A. OBEDIENCE
- B. SUBMISSION
- C. A HEAVY RESPONSIBILITY

II. PRAYING FOR THE LEADERS (HEBREWS 13:18)

It is important for the congregation to continually pray for its leaders.

- A. TO THINK CLEARLY
- B. TO BEHAVE GODLY
- C. TO LEAD WISELY

III. WORKING TOGETHER WITH THE LEADERS (I TIMOTHY 5:17-20)

A successful congregation works hand in hand with its leaders.

- A. HONORING THE WORK OF LEADERS (17-18)
- B. HOLDING LEADERS ACCOUNTABLE (19)
- C. DISCIPLINING LEADERS (20)

Expectations of the Congregation

For the last couple of weeks, we as leaders have acknowledged that we richly failed you as a congregation. It seems as if the Bible describes leaders as responsible for the health and protection of the congregation. I think we are all more than a little afraid to exercise our duties because it is kind of against our nature to do so, especially in a congregational church. It is interesting that as you read through the literature concerning church conflict, the trend has been for congregational churches to adapt a more elder-run style of church government. I can assure you that no one on the board intends to or even desires to be a board member for life. Most would rather devote their entire church life in participating in ministries rather than having to divide their energies between doing ministry and administration of church affairs. Personally, I would love to spend all of my time preaching, teaching, and training.

But as we have examined the Scriptures, it seems as if we totally missed the concept of exercising church discipline and fighting for the purity of Christian doctrine and behavior. We have confessed that for the past two weeks and have committed ourselves to viewing leadership in a more biblical way.

This morning we are going to look at the biblical expectations of the congregation. We are going to see that basically, congregations are to follow their leaders and pray for them. However, there is a time to hold leaders accountable.

It's almost like school. Students are supposed to respect their teachers. But there is a time to stand up for truth. A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales. The teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human because even though they are very large mammals, their throats are very small.

The little girl stated Jonah was swallowed by a whale.

The teacher reiterated a whale could not swallow a human; it was impossible.

The little girl said, "I believe it because God said so."

The teacher said that a book, even the Bible, could not go against biological facts. And besides, there was no proof that there really was a God anyway.

The little girl said, "When I get to heaven, I will ask Jonah."

The teacher asked, "What if Jonah went to hell?"

The little girl replied, "Then you ask him."

Let's hope that leaders never get that far off course.

Before I get started this morning, I'd like to make a couple of disclaimers.

First of all, the Bible does not dictate which form of government the church should take. For example, one could prove an elder-run form of government or a congregational-run form of government from the Bible. The fact is, it's not that clear on this point.

Secondly, when we talk about congregational forms of church government, we have so intermingled it with our idea of our democratic political system, that it actually becomes unbiblical.

If we are going to define congregational government, we have to do so within biblical mandates. Thirdly, if a church consisted of all godly people, it wouldn't make a bit of difference what form of government the church adopted, it would work fine. The problem is that most churches are made up of both godly and ungodly people, hence the need for any form of government at all. Lastly, since the Bible often runs counter-cultural, we should be left somewhat disorientated and uncomfortable. But working through this carefully should give us food to chew on.

So now let me get to the main idea of this morning's text. **THE CONGREGATION IS EXPECTED TO RECOGNIZE AND SUBMIT TO THE AUTHORITY OF LEADERS, PRAY FOR THEM, RESPECT THEM, AND HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE TO THE WORD OF GOD.**

Let me state this up front. The Bible doesn't always inform us how leaders got to their positions. For example, in the book of Acts, we see people electing the first deacons. In Paul's letters we see leaders being appointed by Paul and other leaders. So I'm approaching these texts neutral as to how people find themselves in leadership positions. Our congregation is a congregationally run church. Therefore, when I was called to pastor this church, the congregation had to affirm my calling with a congregational vote. Chairpersons are voted in by the congregation, and board members are also voted in by a congregational vote. Worship leaders and other leaders are appointed. The point is that we have leaders in place here at church.

RECOGNIZING THE AUTHORITY OF CHURCH LEADERS (HEBREWS 13:17)

Let's pick it up from the premise that it doesn't matter what form of government a church has, it has leaders. In the Hebrews passage, verse 17 encourages the congregation to recognize the authority of church leaders. In other words, **CHURCH LEADERS ARE RESPONSIBLE TO GOD FOR THE WELL BEING OF THE CONGREGATION.**

Believe me, I know these words and concepts are hard for those of us who have been raised in the United States because we have been raised to be proud and independent. It seems to me that the author of Hebrews makes it clear that obedience to the church leaders is the primary way to relate to them. The author went out of his or her way to emphasize obedience. The author repeats it twice in this one verse. Look how the author does this. The first half of the verse gives a theological reason why the congregation should obey the leaders. Biblically, all authority ultimately comes from God. Leaders were put in place by God so the congregation is expected to follow them. Again, let me take this from a congregational point of view. I hope we don't just throw around religious words when we do things. The congregation is expected to pray and seek God's guidance as they vote leaders into positions of authority. If we believe that, then wouldn't we have to say that these leaders are God's choice? If that is so, then the Bible says here that we are commanded to obey the leaders because they are there because of God's will and direction.

But look at the second half of the verse. The author points to an emotional reason. If the congregation cooperates with the leaders and obeys them, it becomes energizing for the leaders and that causes them to work even harder. Is that such a hard concept to grasp? Have you ever

done something for someone who didn't seem to appreciate it at all? Perhaps you sacrificed buying something for yourself to buy something for another person. If the person shrugged it off, wouldn't that make you feel bad? On the other hand, if the person got all excited about it and demonstrated to you how much they liked it and appreciated your gift, wouldn't that want to make you do it again? The sacrifice you made wouldn't even now seem like a sacrifice. Church leaders aren't paid for their service. Board members, chairpersons, and other leaders give up a great deal to serve. They sacrifice time with their families. They often sacrifice a great deal of money out of their own pockets, and they give up a lot of their own personal time. I know every one of them. They don't work for any praise or recognition, but I'm sure they would feel good if people came up once in a while and told them how much they appreciate their sacrifice. I'm sure they would have a great deal of energy if they saw the congregation get on board without a lot of conflict.

I'm sure we can all understand that, can't we? I think obedience is relatively easy. However, what sets biblical obedience apart from simple obedience is the attitude of submission. The word for submission in Greek is *hupеiko*. It is a compound word. *Hupo* means under. *Eiko* means to yield. This concept describes someone who willingly places themselves under the authority of church elders. I know this must sound difficult to us in the United States because we have come to think that we can do and think what we want and that we have a right to our own opinions. One of the reasons we come to a local church is for accountability. What good is it when we only obey and submit to leaders when what they want us to do simply agree with what we want to do? There is no obedience or submission here. It just so happens that my will agrees with the leaders' will. There is no accountability here. Submission and obedience require us to overcome our culture and think in biblical categories. It must even happen between leaders.

Personally, I have made it a practice to be submissive to the board. If I wanted to follow a course of action and several other leaders said they thought differently, I would always submit to their guidance. Believe me, I know this is a hard concept. By the way, this could not become a cult because a person could withdraw their membership from Devon Church or just choose to attend another church. Everything here is voluntary. We have often said that what you give financially is between you and God. We invite you to give or not give as you feel led. We also provide opportunities for people to volunteer in different ministries, but again, this is voluntary. No one will force you to participate. So submission and obedience on the part of the congregation are concepts that are difficult to swallow and implement.

I do think they are clearly spelled out in the Bible. But when we think about the heavy responsibility church leaders carry, it may encourage us to submit and obey as we think about it. Look carefully at the second sentence in verse 17. In referring to the leaders, the author says, "They keep watch over you as men (and women) who must give an account." It is clear that the leaders are not going to have to give an account to the congregation here, they are going to be required to give an account to God. When I think about how we failed to handle the crisis last year, I shudder to think that I will have to give an account to God. The NLT words it like this,

"Their work is to watch over your souls, and they know they are accountable to God."

The church is not like the political system we live in. The congregation does not elect leaders with the intent that the leaders are their elected officials tasked with carrying out their will. In

other words, in democratic political philosophy, the leaders are accountable to the people who elected them. That is not the case. This text clearly states that church leaders are accountable to God for the way in which they watch over the souls of the people they shepherd. The Bible is clear that people in authority are going to be judged by a much stricter standard by God. I can tell you from personal experience that pastors and leaders stress a great deal about the congregation's well being. We worry about if you are getting right theology. I often replay sermons I have preached and lessons I have taught and stressed about the correctness of messages. I worry that people are not reading their Bibles. I worry about people I know are not living according to God's Word. We worry about individuals and we worry about the church. In addition to that, we worry about being judged by God. I don't really know any pastors or leaders that don't take our roles that seriously. **CHURCH LEADERS ARE RESPONSIBLE TO GOD FOR THE WELL BEING OF THE CONGREGATION.**

PRAYING FOR THE LEADERS (HEBREWS 13:18)

Since leaders have to carry such a heavy responsibility, verse 18 reminds us that praying for leaders is a must. **IT IS IMPORTANT FOR THE CONGREGATION TO CONTINUALLY PRAY FOR ITS LEADERS.** When choosing the first deacons, the Apostles told the people to select individuals filled with wisdom and filled with the Holy Spirit.

I know that people have consistently prayed for me all the time I have been a pastor. I have not had to face many temptations because I think people pray for me regularly. But verse 18 gives some guidance when praying for pastors and leaders. First of all, pray that we think clearly. In my opinion, we have a relatively mature board. They are mature theologically and in life. They are all very different thinkers. They are respectful in listening to each other and working with each other. In addition, they are undergoing intensive leadership training. It is important to pray that none of us burn out or get discouraged. Please pray regularly that we think clearly and make good decisions. We realize that we can do nothing without God's empowerment and guidance. For the most part, when we have time to think and pray about matters, we usually make good decisions.

Further, when we face opposition from the world or the government, or some outside force, we are also pretty well prepared to deal with that. However, when things blew up so quickly last year, and the attacks came from within the church, I was not able to think clearly or respond like a leader. I was totally confused and I'm pretty sure the board was just as confused. We knew what was right and wrong, but we didn't know how to act. Please, as we go on from here and build a new work here, please pray for us regularly and passionately. I am sure that I speak for the pastoral staff, the board members, and other leaders in the church, please pray that we think clearly. Pray that God protect us from being blinded by the evil one. Pray that we are able to access God's will quickly, especially when facing chaotic situations.

It seems to me that the most devastating thing that is happening to Christian pastors is that they get involved in sexual immorality, pornography, drug and alcohol addictions, and misusing church funds. I'm sure I told you this before but when I was an Army Chaplain, all our commanding officers used to warn us that many chaplains were serving time in Leavenworth, the Army prison because of SAM. SAM stands for Sex, Alcohol, and Money. Believe me, I am painfully aware of the sin in my life, and I don't say this judgmentally. I am shocked to see how

many pastors are caught having affairs with men and women in their congregations. I am shocked to see the number of pastors who get caught with misusing money. Listen, as I said before, I am sure that people pray for me regularly because I have not been tempted with these kinds of things. But that doesn't mean I can let down my guard nor can you stop praying for me, our other pastors, our board members and leaders. Listen to what the Apostle Paul says:

“¹¹All these events happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us, who live at the time when this age is drawing to a close.

¹²If you think you are standing strong, be careful, for you, too, may fall into the same sin.

¹³But remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it (I Corinthians 10:11-13 / NLT).

There is no leader in this church that is so secure that we cannot be deceived and fall into Satan's trap. Pray that we be vigilant over our own personal lives and vigilant about holding one another accountable. Pray that we as leaders remain humble, teachable, and submissive to God's Holy Spirit.

And finally, pray that we lead wisely. The author of Hebrews in verse 18 stated that the leadership had clear consciences and it was their desire to live honorably. Again let me say that even though our consciences are clear in the sense that we did not lie about anyone, did everything above board, nor did we slander anyone, we did not lead the church safely through the crisis. I can tell you that we wanted to lead wisely, but we just didn't know what to do since everything happened so fast. However, now that we have had to journey through this type of trouble, we now have some understanding how to deal with things in the future. So I'm begging you to pray for all of us in leadership positions. Pray regularly. Pray that we continue to think clearly, that we behave godly, and that we lead wisely. A church that is not bathed in prayer is not going anywhere. **IT IS IMPORTANT FOR THE CONGREGATION TO CONTINUALLY PRAY FOR ITS LEADERS.**

WORKING TOGETHER WITH THE LEADERS (I TIMOTHY 5:17-20)

At this time, I'd like to examine some of the words the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus that was being led by Paul's understudy Timothy. In I Timothy 5:17-20 Paul emphasizes that the congregation must work together with the leaders. **A SUCCESSFUL CONGREGATION WORKS HAND IN HAND WITH ITS LEADERS.** Jesus said that a house divided against itself cannot stand (Matt 12:25). If the congregation and the leadership have different goals and work against each other, the church cannot move forward. I know that it sounds as if the leaders dictate what they want the congregation to do and think and then the congregation has to follow. That seems to me to misunderstand the concepts of obedience, submission, leadership, and friendship. Let's start with friendship.

We Americans have become a nation of narcissists. We vote for people because we like them or we perceive they will carry out our agenda. Many church people think that being friends with someone means that you support them even when they are wrong. If that's your idea of

friendship, then I certainly don't want you as a friend. For the most part, I don't get involved in politics. However, I had a friend who held an important political office. He had been confused by the advisors he had around him. Keep in mind, we had been friends for over 30 years. I told him he was wrong and though I very seldom vote, I told him I would vote against him. He lost the election. I think we are still friends. We see each other once in a while and we are still friends. One of the charges that some of the people made last year were that the board was simply composed of my yes-men and women. But anyone who knows how I choose friends, knows that would be an impossibility. I can't be friends with anyone who won't tell me truth. I want people who will tell me when I'm going the wrong way. If I have boogie hanging from my nose, I want a friend who will tell me to wipe the boogie off. People followed and stuck up for people because they were "so-called" friends. They didn't read or listen to anything. They thought it noble to stand up for people even though they were wrong and harming the church.

Next, let's talk about submission and obedience as described in verses 17-18. As we said earlier, submission is a voluntary act that places someone under the authority of another. Again it doesn't matter if leaders are elected in congregational churches or appointed in elder-run churches. Paul tells the church here that elders who direct the affairs of the church are worthy of double honor. Would you say that the pastors and elders were treated with honor and respect last year? In his report to the church, the mediator rebuked the church for treating a pastor who served faithfully for 18 years with such little respect. I don't want to beat a dead horse here, but it seems that very few people were willing to even question these people if what they were accusing the pastor and board of were even true.

Let me just sum this up like this. Look how Paul ends verse 17. After saying that elders are worthy of double honor he adds, "Especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." My primary task since I have been here is to preach and teach. My sermons are all written down and preached word for word from the transcript. The transcripts are printed and recorded on our church website. If there is any false teaching, please point it out. I have always asked to be held accountable to what I am teaching and preaching. I hand out outlines and I almost always preach through books of the Bible. Speaking of preaching through books of the Bible, I will start preaching through the Gospel of Luke on May 3.

One of the most discouraging things I experienced in dealing with people who acted out sexually, who betrayed the trust of the church, and who taught false doctrine, they would always be stunned that I would be angry and want them to step down. They would say, "You're my pastor," to which I would respond, "Which sermon did I preach that encouraged sexual sin, false teaching, or bad behavior?" It would be nice for people to come and say thank you once in a while or to demonstrate some respect or honor, but it's not really necessary for me. I'm not confused. I know that this is my calling and I will accept the good with the bad. I'm sure the other pastors, board members, and leaders are not looking for thanks or respect ... but it would be nice to hear it and experience it once in a while.

At the very least, the congregation could show their honor, thanks, and respect, by submitting to and obeying the leadership. Verse 18 quotes the Old Testament and Jesus. The thought is that preachers and teachers ought to be paid. Let me take this opportunity to state that I feel you have been generous with me throughout the years. When I came here the church couldn't afford to

pay me very much. But as the church grew and as you were able, you increased my pay accordingly. I think the church has been very generous with my pay situation. Thank you.

So what am I saying about friendship, obedience, and submission when it comes to the congregation's relationship with its leaders? In verse 19 the Apostle Paul recognizes the necessity of the congregation holding leaders accountable. When pastors, board members, or leaders teach or act contrary to Scripture, the congregation is the one who holds them accountable. That is an awesome responsibility the congregation bears. In order to know if board members, leaders, and pastors have strayed from a biblical view or a biblical lifestyle, they must know what a biblical view and biblical lifestyle consist of. Listen to the attitude commended by Luke, one of the Apostle Paul's traveling companions and the author of Acts:

“¹¹ ... the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth” Acts 17:11 / NLT).

The Apostle Paul spoke authoritatively. He was commissioned by Jesus Christ and commanded to preach the Gospel message. But he welcomed people who are willing to search the Scriptures to see if the message is authentic. Holding the leadership accountable requires people to study, know, and understand Scripture. It is amazing to see how surveys state that very few Christians read and study their bibles regularly. If that's the case, then how can the congregation hold the leaders accountable? Verse 19 is clear. The leadership and the congregation are not to entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. And to be sure, the people who evaluate the accusation must be able to know, understand, and apply the Bible. Accusing an elder is a serious matter because it carries serious ramifications. Verse 20 deals with those ramifications when it describes the disciplining of leaders. Leaders who have been shown to be immoral in any way are to be publicly rebuked.

In the past, we have removed people from leadership positions and some of those removals led to last year's problems. As a board, we tried to quietly dismiss people and we tried to preserve their dignity. However, that proved to be the wrong approach. The Bible says here that we should have publicly rebuked these people before the congregation. We are now in the process of drafting a policy in which we state clearly what will happen if any leader is proven to be immoral in their teachings or behavior. Every person who is a chairperson, teacher, board member, or pastor will have to sign a statement that they have read, understand, and agree to the expectations and consequences of not living up to it. Part of that statement will be that if proven to have acted immorally, that person will be rebuked publicly. Certainly part of that rebuke will be that the person be removed from their position and relieved of their duties.

Paul is very specific about the reason here. We know that Paul said church discipline is primarily for the restoration of the offender. But he also is interested in protecting the church as a whole. Here he says the rebuke ought to be public so others will be warned. In order to pull this off, the congregation as well as leaders must understand the Scriptures. In rebuking or correcting people with Scripture, they have told me not to quote the Bible at them. But in reality, as a Christian church, we have agreed to submit to the plain teachings of Scripture.

This sword of public rebuke cuts two ways. During the past year, people spread lies based solely on what they heard others say. They spread all sorts of lies and accusations that were completely false. If someone is going to spread stories about leaders in the church that are not true, the leaders and the congregation must also rebuke these publicly. Notice the balance in these three verses. Paul started out by saying that leaders are to be held in high esteem. People should not be allowed to throw around accusations that are false without consequences. The importance of this is for when it is really needed, the leaders and congregation should have a pristine reputation when it comes to removing a leader who has acted immorally. Leaders need the support of the congregation and both leaders and the congregation must labor together in keeping the church on track. **A SUCCESSFUL CONGREGATION WORKS HAND IN HAND WITH ITS LEADERS.**

During the prior two weeks, I laid out the overwhelming duties and responsibilities of leaders. This week I laid out the important expectations of the congregation. Healthy congregations should be joyfully following the leaders. They should be praying for the leaders to think clearly, behave godly, and to lead wisely. They must search the Scriptures, study the Scriptures, and understand the Scriptures as they help the leaders to lead effectively. After all, the congregation is the accountability partner of leaders. **THE CONGREGATION IS EXPECTED TO RECOGNIZE AND SUBMIT TO THE AUTHORITY OF LEADERS, PRAY FOR THEM, RESPECT THEM, AND HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE TO THE WORD OF GOD.**

I know this series on leaders and their congregation is hard to swallow. Like many of you, I have been raised to think of obedience and submission as dirty words. Listen to what Richard Neuhaus says in his book Freedom for Ministry:

“To speak positively of obedience today is to be profoundly countercultural. The valid suspicion of talk about obedience is grounded in the experience of authoritarianisms, both past and present. Obedience is confused with “blind obedience,” which is morally odious. Obedience is confused with conformity, with going along, with asking no questions. But obedience really means responsiveness; it is related to the Latin audire, to listen, to respond appropriately. Obedience is not the surrender of responsibility but the acceptance of responsibility for what we respond to and how.”

Biblical obedience and submission are powerful words. They are not weak. They are not excuses to just follow blindly along. They carry with them a great deal of responsibility and hard work. I hope we are up to the task.