

INTRODUCTION: The sacred text that we have just read is essential for the spiritual health of the churches of Jesus Christ and, more importantly, for the glory of Jesus Christ, the Head of those churches. Our text is a clear word from God's Holy Spirit about the Lord's people and their relation to their elders. The clear and direct language of the text undoubtedly sounds foreign to modern American ears for at least four reasons: (1) Our inherently sinful condition: In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve cast off the authority of God's Word. Because of this, all Adam's descendants—Christ excluded—are born with a natural opposition to external authority. This sinful condition makes us vulnerable to (2) Our culture's addiction to radical individualism: A self-worshiping culture like ours simply cannot and does not prepare the human heart to respect and submit to another human being. Submission to authority does not resonate with contemporary Americans—Christian or non-Christian. And this is one of the results of (3) The effect of the 60s upon subsequent generations: In 1904, the English occultist Aleister Crowley, known as "the wickedest man in the world," was given a book by a spirit-entity: this spirit channeled the contents of the book through Crowley's wife as Crowley wrote it down. Entitled *The Book of the Law*, its primary precept is "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law," which became the slogan of the 60s: "Do your own thing." While most people had no idea who Crowley was, his "do your own thing" life and writings influenced numerous musicians, celebrities, film makers, college professors, and others, who, in turn, intoxicated our culture with it. By its nature, "Do your own thing" is the antithesis of anything other than self-authority. As one writer puts it, "What Crowley stood for, ultimately, was self-gratification: no mere aimless indulgences but the healthy and liberating pursuit of one's deepest will and desires against the soulless and shallow expectations of authority."¹ That is the satanic worldview and the reigning philosophy of most modern Americans—Christian or non-Christian. And they call it "freedom." Finally, (4) The abuse of authority by church leaders: This is an unfortunate reality far too common, but consistent with fallen human nature and our culture. And when any of us suffers under the abuse of illegitimate authority, it subtly turns us against the use of legitimate authority. Because of the searing pain that abuse produces our hearts, we will do almost anything to avoid being abused by a church leader again. And that can lead churches to some very bad attitudes, decisions, and actions, as well as promoting a life of suspicion and distrust. Because of these four reasons and others, we do not like to submit to another human's authority.

Nevertheless, in the churches of the Lord Jesus, our risen Savior is the Head—the Sovereign Lord and reigning Monarch of His people. He appoints elders to teach and to lead them authoritatively, according to His Word and Spirit. So, our message is entitled *Elders and Authority (Part 1)*. May our loving heavenly Father grant us the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, so that we might hear the voice of Christ the Head of the church with clarity.

1. THE SACRED TEXT BEGINS WITH A COMMAND (13:17a).

- a. Let us consider the command carefully. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the text says, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves." It is important for God's blood-bought people to realize that this is neither a suggestion nor an option—it is a command. This holy command is comprised of two verbs: obey and submit. The basic meaning of

¹ George A T Case, *Devil Music: A History of the Occult in Rock & Roll*, <https://medium.com/cuepoint/devil-music-a-history-of-the-occult-in-rock-roll-3e671a821ba5>, 2/13/18.

the Greek word translated obey is “to persuade² or to be won over as the result of persuasion.³” However, in this context, it means “obey”; and it suggests “continuous action”⁴—“continue to obey.” Next, the text says, “Obey them that have the rule over you”—“them that have the rule” are the church leaders. The apostle first mentions these leaders in verse 7: “Remember them which have the rule over you...” Who are these rulers? John Calvin observes, “I doubt not but that he speaks of pastors and other rulers of the church, for there were then no Christian magistrates; and what follows, for they watch for your souls, properly belongs to spiritual government.”⁵ The English words them that have the rule come from one Greek word that means “to rule over, with the implication of providing direction and leadership.”⁶ These rulers then are pastors and elders. So, the Word of Christ set before us in this command is that believers are to receive the ministry of God’s Word from the elders of their congregation and, persuaded that they have handled the Word faithfully, obey them. However, we must be clear about this: God’s people are to submit themselves to the authoritative Word of God, not the whims of men. Elders have no authority in themselves naturally: they exercise delegated, representative authority as they deliver God’s revelation to His people. Again, Calvin says, “It ought at the same time to be noticed that the Apostle speaks only of those who faithfully performed their office; for they who have nothing but the title, nay, who use the title of pastors for the purpose of destroying the Church, deserve but little reverence and still less confidence.”⁷ Next, the word submit means “to yield to someone’s authority.”⁸ Christ’s command is clear: God’s people are to obey and submit to the elders that have the rule over them.

b. Let us then consider the relation between church members and their elders. Let us hear verse 7: “Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.” Apparently, the apostle was referring to elders who once governed them—probably those whom Christ used to establish the church; some suppose that they may have been martyrs; but the words have the rule are crucial. They tell us that elders are to lead and that members are to follow. The verse commands us to follow the example of their faith, considering the end, that is, the outcome of their way of life. “Conversation” here does not mean the day-to-day exchange “of news and ideas by spoken words”; rather, it means “way of life, conduct.” So, verse 7 tells us that we should always remember those whom the Lord has used in our lives as faithful teachers of God’s Word. And there is more: Furthermore, the apostle wants us to consider, that is, he wants us “to give careful thought to, to continue to think back on” the way those elders lived. For elders to preach sound doctrine without corresponding lives is a corruption of the biblical pattern and dishonor-

² TLNT

³ BDAG

⁴ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, 723.

⁵ John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, 352.

⁶ L&N

⁷ John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, 352–353.

⁸ BDAG

ing to the crucified and resurrected Lord they preach. So then, if we take verse 7 and verse 17 together, it is very clear that elders are to teach, model, and govern Christ's blood-bought people by Christ's Word and Spirit, not their own whims; and, having been persuaded by God's Word, Christ's people are to obey and submit themselves to their pastors.

2. THE SACRED TEXT THEN GIVES TWO REASONS FOR THE COMMAND (13:17b, c): These are (1) the elders' accountability to Christ and (2) the believers' spiritual wellbeing. Consider first,

a. Christ will hold elders accountable (13:17b): The text is clear: "they watch for your souls, as they that must give account." The elders of a church are answerable to the Head of the Church: the Lord Jesus Christ, Who sits at the Father's right hand. God's elect, His eternally loved people, are not the property of the elders. They are Christ's blood-bought property, the apple of His eye, His dearly beloved Bride! Christ's churches do not now nor will they ever belong to any man or group of men in this world! Pastors must always be aware that they are accountable for what they preach to and how they live before God's people. Christ did not appoint them to model their clothes, their style, their brilliance, their opinions, or their education; the Head of the church appointed them to preach His Word and model it for His people: this is what Christ did and the elders are His representatives.

(1) The meaning of "they watch for your souls": First, we need to grasp what this clause means. The word watch means "to keep oneself awake"; so, in this context, it means "to be alert, vigilant."⁹ It also means "to take care of or to look after, with the implication of continuous and wakeful concern for."¹⁰ In other words, Luke 2:8 says, "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night," and in these words we see the shepherds denying themselves sleep and rest to protect the flock. That is an elder's calling. Pastors must know and care for Christ's people, as a shepherd does his sheep. They are not to micromanage them, nor are they to coerce or manipulate them. However, elders must make a continuous watch over the flock's spiritual lives, so that they may appropriately apply God's Word to them. This is part of being an overseer: watching over souls. The soul is "the seat and center of life that transcends the earthly"¹¹; it is that spiritual part of a human being that is immortal and that so powerfully images the Creator. To watch for someone's soul then means that a God-appointed elder preaches the Word, models the Word, and corrects according to the Word to help believers continue in the faith unto eternal life. Men that only want to preach should resign the ministry: they are neglecting the vital work of applying the Word to the lives of God's children. The souls of believers will live for eternity in heaven or in hell; and pastors have the sobering task of caring for sinful, fallible, sometimes stubborn, sometimes arrogant sheep and helping them reach eternity in Christ. We see this in Paul when he said to the Galatians, "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal 4:19). This is often arduous, thankless, exhausting, and sacrificial labor. And it must be done Christ's way! The Day of

⁹ L&N; Thayer

¹⁰ L&N

¹¹ BDAG

Judgment is coming! That is why James warns, “My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation” (Jam 3:1). Pastors must pray earnestly for Christ’s sheep and feed, guide, reprove, rebuke, exhort, and comfort them from Christ’s holy Word in the power of Christ’s Holy Spirit all along the way to the Celestial City. That is why the Lord’s people are to “obey and submit” to them, for in submitting to them, they are submitting to Christ. And they are to do this as those who must give account. And what does that mean?

(2) The meaning of “they must give account”: Pastors are shepherds and watchmen, and they are accountable to God. They are appointed to their work by the Living God. Paul said to the Ephesians elders, “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Act 20:28). Again, Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians that Christ “gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; ¹² For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph 4:11-12). And those Holy-Spirit-and-Christ appointed men have real authority. They have been prepared and gifted by God to administer God’s Word to God’s people, manifesting the rule of Christ by the Word and Spirit of Christ, so that their lives will bring glory to God! Consider what Paul said to the Thessalonians: “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you” (1Th 5:12). Notice: the sheep of the flock should know the elders of the flock. Paul then says that the elders labor—this means they work hard—that they are over you—this means they have authority—and they admonish you—this means they warn and discipline. And to Timothy he said, “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine” (1Ti 5:17). Every elder and pastor throughout the ages will have to explain to God how he applied God’s Word to Christ’s blood-bought people—how and why they have dealt with the sheep, how and why they have encouraged them and disciplined them, how and why they have comforted and discomfited them, how they have urged them on and chastened them, and how and why they have failed them—all has been under the watchful eye and unfailing memory of Almighty God. “Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Heb 4:13). Elders will have a talk with Jesus about how they treated His bride—and He loves His bride. He opened His veins and poured out His life’s blood for her. So, He will be ready to deal with those who have been rough, prideful, negligent, manipulative, and uncaring for her.

b. God desires the believer’s spiritual wellbeing (13:17c): In view of the account that elders must give to God, the sheep have a responsibility to obey and submit to them: “that they may do it with joy, and not with grief.” A man that has been born of God’s Spirit, has repented of his sins and believed on the crucified and resurrected Christ, has grown in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, and has been appointed by the Head the church to feed His flock and watch over them, desires with all His heart to accomplish two things: (1) the glory of His Savior and (2) the wellbeing of His Savior’s eternally-loved people. And the thought of accomplishing these two things fills his soul with joy. The apostle John said, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk

in truth” (3Jo 1:4). And every church member should set in his or her heart on the goal of helping the elders do their work with joy. For it is indeed a work that is often laden with heartache, disappointment, exhaustion, and sometimes failure. They will sometimes pray for and plead with a brother or sister not to make what they know will be bad decision, or not lay their hand to a practice that they know they will later regret, and then watch them do it anyway. They will watch young believers start off so well, only to see them run off the rails, go back to the world, and disappear into darkness of a dying world. They will pray with and enjoy the fellowship of brothers and sisters who profess great love for their pastors, only to watch them later become fearsome enemies. Yet, they will also watch the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth birth sinners into Christ’s kingdom through their feeble preaching. They will watch weak and feeble believers sometimes become strong in the faith and walk faithfully with the Savior. This will bring pastors great joy. Elders will weep in unimaginable loneliness and anguish, often without a single encouraging word from another human being, except for faithful wives. And they will know joy unspeakable and full of glory when they see God’s children growing, maturing, and standing in the evil day. To which will you and this verse concludes with, “for that is unprofitable for you.” What spiritual dangers lie in the path to the Celestial City. To ignore, neglect, or reject the counsel of faithful pastors is a very dangerous endeavor. This is why Paul told Timothy, “And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,^{1 25} In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; ²⁶ And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will” (2Ti 2:24-26).

CONCLUSION: May our blessed Lord Jesus grant us the grace to understand and obey His Word in this vital matter. Our elders are His representatives for a healthy and joyful walk with the Lord Jesus. Amen.