

Pastoral Leadership

In a New Testament Church

I've heard a question recently about what Hebrews 13:17 means, and how it applies to a Southern Baptist church in this present day. Because God has called me to "teach what is in accord with sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1), I'll be using my monthly column here in the *Beacon* to answer that question. I could have tried to do this as a Sunday evening sermon, but I need more than just a small portion of the church to be acquainted with these issues. I could have tried to do this as a Sunday morning sermon, but I believe we need to hear from 1 Peter in those services. So the *Beacon* was my other option. I know it's long, but please read it carefully. If you find that you get lost trying to go through it, find a friend who can help you through. Or call me. I mean it. This is one of the most important columns I'll ever write.

Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you." What does that mean for us in this day?

At one end of the spectrum, there are those who think that that verse is a warrant for pastors to have absolute authority over their churches: "what the preacher says is what goes, period." These are often power-grubbing pastors, and I have no use for them. Or sometimes they're just precious people who make it their habit to take the Bible as simply as possible – often more simplistically than God wants it taken. I sympathize with these folks, but I don't quite agree with them. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who say that the verse is simply irrelevant to the present day, because we don't have to obey anyone ever. These are rebels who don't believe the Bible. I have no sympathy or agreement with them – any more than I have with the abusive preachers. Let's be clear about this much: whatever this verse means, it is the Word of God. When we've understood it, we'll understand our Lord's commandment on the subject of pastoral authority. But how should we understand it?

To understand this verse, we need to understand the words "obey," "leaders," and "submit." The word "obey" is the Greek word *peithesthe*. It literally means, "be convinced by." In New Testament Greek, it often should be translated with a strong, absolute word like "obey." In this case, however, I believe the author's original intent would be better communicated by a slightly less absolute word, like "listen to" or "follow." (Although, in fairness, every translation of the Bible that I checked with used the word "obey" here.) I take mild exception to the word "obey" because it seems to carry hints of power and absolute authority that I think the rest of the verse knows nothing of. A word like "follow," for example, seems to fit better with the meaning of the term translated as "leaders." In the old King James translation, the word "leaders" is rendered as "them that have the rule over you." The Greek word is *hegoumenois*. It literally means, "those who are leading you." It is usually used of one who presides and guides in a meeting of peers. It's not usually used of a dictator, or king, or general (although it is used that way sometimes). The word "submit" is *hupēikete*. This is the only time it appears in the New Testament, but in classical Greek it meant "yield," or "give way." The words "to their authority" do not appear in the Greek text. They are supplied by the

translators of the NIV to help communicate that this yielding by the church members is not to the pastors as men, or as masters, or as friends, or as favorites, but as those who hold a place of leadership in the church that has been given to them by God. For church members, keeping an attitude that is ready and eager to follow the pastors is a matter of obedience to God.

The fact that it says "leaders," rather than "leader," can be confusing to us modern Baptists because we're used to having only one pastor at a time. The New Testament churches, however, normally had several pastors, as did most of the early Baptist churches (after all, the Baptist ideal was and still is to be New Testament believers organized into New Testament churches). May God grant that our church can grow over time to the place where we can have other pastors than just me. For now, God has blessed me with a number of competent and godly deacons, who can and do help me lead the church.

(However, the word "leaders" here did not originally refer to "the pastor and the deacons." Hebrews 13:7 shows us this by clarifying that the "leaders" are those "who spoke the word of God to you." They're preachers. And it tells us to "consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." This is an instructive verse, because it points out the two leadership tools that a church's pastors have: their teaching of what God's Word means and how it applies, and the credibility that comes with leading a godly life. Pastors are not to rule by the force of their personal power. They are to lead by the force of their godly teaching and example.

When you put all this information together, a good, clear translation of the command of Hebrews 13:17 would be, "Follow those who are leading you (that is, your pastors), and yield to them." That's the commandment. The explanation is that pastors watch for the souls of the people, and one day must answer to the Chief Shepherd for how they've led the flock ("they keep watch over you as men who must give an account"). The promise is blessing for both pastors and people if the church does follow its leaders ("obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you"). Now how should that apply to a Southern Baptist church in 2003?

Now, as then, a New Testament church is to be led by its pastors, with the final say belonging to the congregation. It's the members of the congregation who are called to follow. They will be the ones who actually will follow. So they are the ones who must make the decision to follow. That's the biblical perspective on pastoral authority. Please consider the following passages.

1. Acts 1:15-26; 6:1-6 (Note 1:23 & 6:3, where the congregation was to choose its own leaders – according to specific God-given criteria, not according to personal preference.)
2. Acts 13:1-3, 14:27 (The missionaries were called by God, and publicly commissioned by the church leaders, yet were accountable to the whole church.)
3. Acts 15:1-31 (Please note vv. 6 & 22, where the crucial debate was carried on by the apostles and elders. Yet also note that the entire church was in some way involved in the final decision, since in v. 23 the letter is addressed from "the apostles, the elders, and the brethren" to all the churches.)
4. 1 Corinthians 5:4-13 (Note vv. 4-5, where Paul says that the final action of church discipline is to be taken by the church in full assembly – yet it will be in response to his instructions.)

Taken together, these passages give the following picture of how New Testament churches were run. Where the congregation was in a better place to make a wise and godly decision than the leaders were, they did so. (For example, in the choice of deacons, the apostles set the criteria in keeping with what God had revealed to them. The church – who were in a much better position to say who were the men “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom,” since they probably knew the men better than the apostles did – made their nominations in keeping with those guidelines. The apostles then ratified the members’ choice by examining the candidates, and ordaining those who passed muster.) Where the congregation saw that they could not reasonably be expected to make a discerning and well-informed decision (as in the reaching of a definitive solution to a thorny theological problem in Acts 15), they deferred to the wisdom of their leaders. The apostles and the pastors of the churches (elders) made a decision, and the congregation ratified their ruling. The initiative, the influence, the leadership were all invested clearly in the pastors; the final say was invested solidly in the congregation.

In our day, it’s the same. While the apostles are long gone, we have their words written down in the Bible. A pastor’s pre-eminent charges are to guard the trust that has been left with us – the pattern of sound teaching given by the apostles – and then to pass that truth on to others, with the goal of their teaching others also. (See 2 Timothy 1:13-14 and 2:1-2.) So I am not to create a new standard of truth in the church; I am to teach and urge the church to keep the standard set by Christ through His apostles. In matters where there is no clear and specific teaching from Scripture, I am to teach the church how biblical principles apply to the situation, and exhort the church to listen. I can and must teach, in season and out, regardless of whether anyone pays attention. That’s my duty. It’s the congregation’s duty to listen and follow. *In our day, it’s the same as it was in Bible times: the initiative, the influence, the leadership are all invested clearly in the pastors; the final say is invested solidly in the congregation.*

In reality, it must be that way in any healthy church: the members must be challenged to choose to follow their leaders. If it’s simply assumed they’ll follow, they may not. They need to say they’ll follow by voting to follow. If not even a majority of the church can be convinced to vote to follow... well, there’s a problem. But a pastor’s better off to know about that problem up front. Then he can begin working at doing some more teaching and convincing.

Incidentally, the only evidence we have of a vote in a New Testament church is in 2 Corinthians 2:6. It doesn’t actually say there was a vote, but it does say that a crucial decision was made by a majority of the members – which certainly seems to imply that there was a vote taken. And please consider this: the vote was on whether to obey a clear command from an apostle of Christ – which would have been the same as voting whether to obey the Christ who authorized that apostle. (An apostle’s command was equivalent to the Lord’s command – see 1 Corinthians 14:37. No pastor today has anything approaching apostolic authority. That authority is in the Bible alone.) What’s so noteworthy is that the vote was not to discover what Jesus wanted (the apostle had already told them that). So the vote had to be for this single, solemn reason: the church had to be confronted with the choice to decide to follow their Lord’s wishes. No leader could have made that decision for them. They had to choose. In the Corinthian’s case they chose wisely; they chose to follow.

So what about Southern Baptists? How do we put these principles into practice? Well, sometimes we don’t. But when we do, it works well, and it works like this. The pastor (it ought to be the pastors, but... well, we’ve discussed that already). Anyway, the pastor sets the tone and the direction for the church by the truth he teaches and the life he lives. As our own constitution here at FBCD says, “the pastor is to lead the church by every teaching and example.” The pastor is the earthly leader of the church.

However, pastors cannot lead alone, and should not try. This is doubly or triply true in churches with only one pastor. When it comes to leadership by example, the pastor needs the deacons, with the credibility they’ve gained by the way they’ve lived, to help him. He needs their wisdom and counsel in private, and he needs their support and enthusiasm in public. A pastor without his deacons is like a piano player without his hands. How I praise God for the deacons we have!

Beyond that, Southern Baptists have struck on a little piece of genius: the committee system. It’s had plenty of jokes made about it, and not without reason. Sometimes, indeed, the system doesn’t work as well as it should. But when it does work well, it can work very, very well indeed. A good committee can and will do work that a pastor could never do himself – finding out facts, looking into issues, and who knows what else. When a committee is working well, it will have a strong chairman and supportive members who will work closely with the pastor to get things done in the church. Committee members need to pay attention to what the pastor says as he speaks from the Word and his own experience, and they need to bear in mind that he is the man that God has called to lead the church. At the same time, a pastor needs to listen to the expertise and experience of committee members. They will help a pastor see the implications and possible consequences of his ideas, and often suggest some ideas of their own that are better than any of his. Together, they can make a powerful team for helping a church find its way even through some intensely complicated issues.

A wise pastor will work with the deacons and the committees, not against them or around them. He will recognize that the committees and the deacons are both the first people he has to convince that his ideas are God’s ideas, and the first people who will support those ideas in the church, once they’ve been convinced. In committees and among the deacons, as in the church at large, a pastor has the influence of what he says and how he acts – but no actual power. That’s why he has no vote in either a deacons’ meeting or a committee meeting – only his voice. That’s as it should be, because that’s all a pastor should want or need: the chance to teach truth into the situations his church faces. How people will respond to the truth he teaches, is not up to him; it’s up to them. That’s why they must be the ones to make the final decision. And they will, indeed, give an account for whether they’ve made it their habit to follow their pastors. But their accounting will not be to the pastors; it will be to the Lord.

This is biblical. This is God’s will. It’s for pastors to convince, not coerce; to teach and train and exhort, not to bully and threaten and order around. Peter says to pastors, “not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.” At the same time, it’s for the congregation to yield, not to resist; to be open and submissive, not closed and suspicious. Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must

give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Now let's address some questions and objections that I'm sure have cropped up in some folks' minds.

“But don't Baptists believe in congregational rule?”

Of course we do – but not because of Baptist tradition. We believe it because the Bible teaches it. So it's the Bible that must tell us how congregational rule – our democratic form of government – ought to work. There can be no doubt that New Testament church government was a kind of congregational church government. Yet it was not a pure democracy, with every issue, no matter how insignificant, decided by vote. It was a kind of republic: the congregation chose its leaders, and then those leaders led. The congregation was expected to choose deliberately to follow, as we've already noted.

So it's troubling to see how many Baptists seem to think of congregational church government as meaning that everything is a free-for-all, with nobody providing any real or definite leadership. Sometimes, some Baptists seem to forget what's really supposed to be happening in a vote of the church. Well, what is happening in a vote? Sometimes, like the Corinthians, we're simply voting to decide whether we're going to do what God has told us He wants us to do. He tells that to a church through the clear teaching of Scripture, or through the scripturally-guided leading of the pastors and those whom the church has elected to help them lead. Where there is no clear teaching from the Scripture or leading from the church's leaders, we vote simply to discover what the church believes God wants (not ever to decide what the church wants). Even then, though, humility (and memory) should serve to remind us that an individual Christian or an entire church can be supremely confident and extremely confused at the same time – and never realize it until the dust settles.

Having been in Baptist churches since I was two weeks old, I'll tell you one peculiar thing I've noticed. Some Baptists seem to think that a majority vote of the church can create reality, or determine truth – as though any idea that the majority votes for is automatically what God desired for the church to do. Of course, in God's sovereign will, each Baptist church will do what the majority votes – and that will indeed be what God has decreed for that church. But what we seem to forget is that God's stated desire (what He prefers and/or commands us to do) is often quite a different thing from His secret decree (what we do, in fact, end up doing, along with the consequences of those actions). God didn't desire or command what Joseph's brothers did to him (in fact, it was sin), but He did decree and plan it for the long-term good of His people. (See Genesis 50:15-20) God never desires faithlessness, prayerlessness, disobedience, apostasy, or judgment for His people. But He has decreed it for churches in the past. For example, in the early 1800's the teachings of a man named Alexander Campbell spread like a plague among the Baptist churches in America. Some associations lost over half their churches to his unbiblical, nearly heretical doctrines. In every church that left us, a majority of members voted to leave us. In that instance, majority rule turned into majority ruin. And none of it caught God by surprise, or in any way overturned or undermined His sovereign plan for each and every one of those churches. You see, what He planned for them was discord, and departure. That was the opposite of what His Word commanded and His heart preferred. But, like the crucifixion and a host of other

evils, it was what His sovereign purpose planned for them. He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches through the Word and history.

So why do we Baptists still believe in congregational church government? Because the Bible teaches it, and because the other available forms of church government are even worse. I think it was Winston Churchill who said that democracy is the worst form of government imaginable – except for all the other ones, which are far, far worse. His words were witty, tragic, and true. Democracy of any sort is always a delicate balance between chaos, inertia, and tyranny. We're in a triangular arena with a monster in each corner. Chaos crouches in one corner, with fangs ready to shred our good order and clear purpose. Inertia slouches in the second corner, covered with complacency and boredom. In the third corner stands tyranny – the absolute rule of one man or a small band. It promises prosperity and ease for the members of the church, just like Hitler promised to the German people in the 1930's. The beginning of tyranny usually looks good, but the end is always ugly. In the middle of it all we find ourselves, with our biblical congregationalism. There must be a proper mix of authority and liberty, structure and flexibility, discipline and freedom, holiness and love. And it's our job to maintain that balance. Congregational government cannot guarantee us to make the right decision. But it can give us a means for making some decision, as well as a way to go back and correct faulty decisions.

“But what about when I believe the leaders are wrong?”

Leaders can be wrong, can't they? And when the church follows its leaders in wrong decisions, damage to the church will result. Normally, though, even worse damage will be done when a church ignores the command of its Lord and chooses not to follow the leaders He has given it. The whole matter is situated smack between a rock and a hard place. The way out is in five truths.

First, the leaders need to do their homework (pray for wisdom and learn the facts), and never try to lead the church to do anything except what they believe is clearly God's will.

Second, the church should trust that their leaders are doing their homework, and not just making it all up as they go along. (If they are found out to be reckless and foolhardy leaders, they need to be rebuked and given a chance to repent. If they persist in being rash and willful, in direct disobedience to the Scripture, their positions of leadership may become forfeit. And I can see two instances in which I think a church should simply refuse to follow its leaders. In those instances where pastors and other leaders try to lead a church away from what the Bible clearly teaches, as in the Campbellite controversy mentioned above, the church should refuse to follow. Or there's this: when the pastors and other leaders of a church want the church to do something completely ridiculous – for example, if the pastors of a church wanted to sell the property and buy land in a totally different community in order to draw the right kind of heavy-hitting givers into the church. Failing those two extremes, though, the church should simply follow its leaders. Jesus says so.)

Third, the leaders should give the congregation the information and the time they need to evaluate a major issue thoroughly, so that they can choose to follow with confidence. Members should be encouraged to contact their leaders with their questions or concerns. And the

leaders should take those questions and concerns seriously. Quite often, they'll hear something they really need to hear, to help the whole church along in the way God wants it to go. At other times, they'll be able to share with the concerned member some further information that will help lay his concerns to rest. Of course, individual members always have the right to appeal to the entire church if they feel that their questions are not being answered. Yet that almost always ends up in hurt feelings, and should only be done when the member is absolutely certain it's absolutely necessary. The Judgment Seat is waiting for us, and the Judge is watching us.

Fourth, trust should reign in the church, along with the passion to remain trustworthy. Leaders (pastors, with the help of deacons and committees) should trust that the church members, if given the information and time they need, will vote to follow their leaders. Church members should trust the wisdom and hard work of their leaders, and follow them. That's God's way. Trust is paramount, because whatever a church sows in suspicion, it will reap in stagnation.

Fifth, as is always true in the Christian life, remembering 2 Corinthians 5:10 is a crucial key: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." Pastors and those who help them lead will stand in the presence of the Lord, and give an accounting for how they led the church. Members of the church will stand in the same awesome place, and answer to Him for how they followed. Let every one of us approach every decision with an eye to that fateful Day.

Yes, leaders can be wrong. But no, church members are not called to resist everything they feel is wrong about how their leaders are leading. I said some things above about two times when I think following the church's leaders is not a good idea. But you need to realize that that thinking comes out of my own reasoning, based on scriptural principles. When it comes down to straight Bible, though, there is no place I'm aware of in the Bible where God's people are told that it's acceptable not to follow those whom God has made leaders among them. By contrast, there are scores of places where they're commanded to be submissive to their leaders. Again I ask the church what the pulpit committee so memorably asked me: do you believe the whole Bible? I know you do.

"But committees are not leaders in the church, according to the Bible."

It's puzzling to me to hear Baptist folks questioning whether committees exercise a leadership role. Are there any committees in the Bible? Of course not. But if the pastor and deacons recognize that we need the expertise, experience, wisdom and just plain help of the committees, and the ministry heads, and the church council, where's the problem with that? It serves only to spread out influence and control in the church, and keep it from collecting in just a few isolated men. At the same time, it preserves the pastors' place as the earthly leaders of the church, and safeguards the deacon's place as the men who are commissioned by the Lord to assist the pastors in their oversight of the church and its ministries. I'm telling you, people can joke about the pitfalls of the committee system all they want, and I'll laugh right along with them. Most of those jokes have a lot of truth in them. But I still say that when the committees are firing on all cylinders, that roadster runs just fine – better than anything else, in fact.

"But isn't it true that there are some areas of the church where pastors shouldn't have any voice or influence?"

Here's another one of those questions that puzzle me. Where does that idea come from? It certainly doesn't come from the Bible. In the New Testament, men of God exercised oversight over the entire work of the entire church. They led in the teaching of the Word both publicly and from house to house (Acts 5:42, Acts 20:20). They were out in front both in bringing people into the church (Acts 2:14-41) and in putting people out of the church (1 Corinthians 5:1-13). They took responsibility for both the collection and disbursement of funds (Acts 4:34-35; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). You can't find any hint in the Bible that there are certain areas of the church's life or ministry that God wants pastors to stay away from. Quite to the contrary, they are to exercise oversight over the entire work of the entire church.

Now that doesn't mean that pastors or preachers are the only or even the best people for handling the details of these kinds of things in the work of a church. For example, all believers are to be involved in bringing new members into the church, not just the preachers. That's what the entire Great Commission is all about. Nor do these passages mean that there aren't serious pitfalls for pastors to avoid in these issues. There are. Consider the following.

1. The Bible tells of a pastor named Diotrephes who abused his office, and led his church to disfellowship some members simply for disagreeing with him. (See 3 John 1:9.) That's why the final decision of church discipline is to be carried out by the whole church, not just one man. Jesus commanded this in Matthew 18:15-17. Paul repeated it in 1 Corinthians 5:4-5.

2. The apostles in Jerusalem found that being the both the bank and the social services agency for the young church ended up keeping them from concentrating on their most important priorities. So they delegated to others a large part of those responsibilities. This is where deacons came from (Acts 6:1-6). In our day, no pastor in his right mind would want anything to do with the actual taking in or paying out of funds. There are other, more qualified church members who can do that.

You see, these scattered references do not prove that New Testament pastors were fully acquainted with every minor detail of church life, nor do they suggest that pastors have to be the ones who actually do everything. What they do show is that every kind of activity in a church falls under the oversight of that church's pastors; they are responsible for everything. Every significant aspect of the church's life and ministry is something for which the pastors must one day give account. So while he'll normally find it advisable simply to let the members of the church carry out the ministries they've been gifted by God to perform, a wise and faithful pastor will be sure he has at least a hand and a voice in any major matter. And he'll look for ways to help all the members of the church to be better equipped for their ministries. (See Ephesians 4:11-12.)

So what should we do with Hebrews 13:17? We should believe it and obey it. It's the Word of God. We should not dodge it, or skirt around it, but accept the truth of it. It's the Word of God.