

Submitting to Church Leadership

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Hebrews 13:17 — *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.*

In the following essay, I hope to show how God's people can submit to God's leaders in a God-honoring way.

1. Submit Obediently.

An important command given to Christ's Church is the command to submit obediently to the flock (1 Thess 5:12). This means that submission begins in the heart and it manifests itself in obedience to what the leadership decides on a given issue. To submit to the leadership is to obey the leadership with a heartfelt, eager, positive spirit. God's people should follow their leadership and submit obediently to their godly and wise counsel.

2. Submit Joyfully.

Since submission begins in the heart and manifests itself in outer conduct, the people of God should submit to their leadership with joy (Col 3:23; Heb 13:17). Steadfast joy in Christ's church should permeate every aspect of the ministry. Joy should come because of the sovereignty of God. Joy should come because Jesus Christ is the Head of His Church and He is the One who holds all things together and works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph 1:22). Christ's people should submit joyfully because joyful obedience is always better than a sour attitude.

3. Submit Confidently.

Since God rules the universe, God's people can have unshakable confidence (Ps 47:1-4). Since the Lord Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the Father and who is the only Head over His Body — the Church — His people must submit with confidence knowing that nothing can spiral out of control since Christ holds all things in His control. Nothing can spiral out of control since it is the Lord of the Church who rules and reigns over every event in history — including His church, and its servant leaders.

4. Submit Honestly.

Submission is an attitude of the heart (1 Pet 3:4-5; Eph 6:6). To submit to the leaders that God has appointed thus means that a Christian should serve His church without deceit, manipulation, flattery, or adverse motives (Ps 5:9). To be honest is to act like God since God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). God shows Himself to be truthful at all times and to all people because He is a true, faithful, and reliable God. He cannot deceive, break a promise, or be at fault. So, to submit to the leaders of Christ's church with this kind of attitude would require one to honestly and humbly follow those whom God has appointed in a way that exemplifies Christ.

5. Submit Edifyingly.

To edify in the New Testament means to build up, to strengthen, to fortify (1 Cor 14:12). Every believer should have as his continual mindset to fortify and establish other believers in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess 3:12-13). To edify other believers, especially within the same local fellowship, requires that a number

of vices be eliminated entirely. To submit edifyingly to leadership means that believers must never slander their leaders to other believers — especially within the same flock (Prov 10:18). To slander a pastor, an elder, a deacon, or anyone else who oversees a particular ministry of the church is to squash all opportunities of edification and to enhance all opportunities for division and disunity (Ps 15:1-3). Believers must not talk bad out or speak against those servant leaders that God has raised up and appointed as shepherds over His church (Prov 19:1; Prov 22:11).

6. Submit Knowledgeably.

The Bible calls all Christians to know their leaders (1 Thess 5:12). Many English translations speak of ‘appreciating’ those who diligently labor among the flock. The word here speaks of knowledge. The flock must know their leaders. They must pray for them (1 Thess 5:25). They must bear them up and assist them in any way possible. Saints can follow their leaders and submit to them by knowing who they are, the goals for the near future, the struggles that can be prayed for, and how they can best encourage all the elders who serve Christ and His flock together.

7. Submit Prayerfully.

Perhaps the greatest way that a believer can serve Christ’s church and submit to his leadership is to pray fervently for them by name, for their wives by name, for their children by name, for the spread of the gospel by name, for their purity and theological fidelity, and for their encouragement in the midst of hardships and discouragements (2 Thess 3:1; Rom 15:30; Heb 13:18). To pray for church-shepherds is to do one of the most neglected ministries of the church today. Sadly, many see elders as a prominence position or a position of prestige rather than as a position of lowly, servant, humble leadership (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45). There is nothing self-admiring about being a church leader. A church leader worth anything knows that he is wholly undeserving of such a monumental privilege and that he must daily submit to and surrender to the mighty power of God’s Spirit working in him, through him, and in spite of him. A praying Christian for servant leaders is one of the mightiest weapons in a local church. Furthermore, to pray for church leadership is to submit to them. It’s hard to slander for whom you pray (Eph 4:31-32).

8. Submit Optimistically.

To submit to under-shepherds who desire to follow Christ, love Christ, treasure Christ, and worship Christ in their own hearts, lives, and families can also include a spirit of optimism and a positive outlook in situations and various decisions (Heb 13:7). To find the negative features in decisions, the missing element in church-functions, and to find the ‘better way’ to ‘do’ ministry is to throw cold water on the fire of servant leadership. Leaders need Christ’s people to help them in their goals, ambitions, and guiding and directing the church. Thus, to submit to church leaders in an optimistic way can include each believer looking for ways to serve and help the overseers in achieving the ministry goals — both short term and long term (Eph 4:11-16). This can include prayer, action, giving, discipleship, change, and even sacrifice.

In today’s evangelical and ecclesiastical landscape, I surmise that talking about Christ’s people submitting to church leadership is the white elephant and the oft-neglected topic in a typical Sunday-sermon series. Nevertheless, the Word of God commands it and churches today demonstrate that many do not understand what biblical submission to God’s leaders entails. To submit is an attitude of the heart which is itself an outflow of one’s attitude toward Jesus Christ Himself — the Lord over His church. May the Lord’s people submit with joy, gladness, expectancy, zeal, knowledge, confidence, and prayerfulness to the undershepherds designated by God Himself, to serve the body of Christ, appointed by the Spirit Himself.