

MOVING ON TO MATURITY

The Leadership Factor

Hebrews 13:7, 17

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Hebrews 13:7

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. Hebrews 13:17

The summit of Mount Everest in the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal towers 29,035 feet above sea level. On May 29, 1953, two men were the first to reach its summit. Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary became famous for their accomplishment. By 1970, 24 climbers had reached the top. Since then, another 800 climbers have successfully made it to the summit more than 1,460 times.

A record was set on May 16, 2002, when 54 people conquered Everest on the same day, with many more waiting below at base camps. One of them was Tashi Wangchuk Tenzing, 37, the grandson of Edmund Hillary's Sherpa guide in 1953. Hillary's own son, Peter, was with one of the teams waiting to ascend.

In life, someone always has to go first, and then others will surely follow.¹ That's leadership. And that's what these verses which Ahmed just read are all about.

I'm sure you recognize that it's not easy for me to preach on these verses. In fact, it was probably easier for the one writing this book to say "obey your leaders," than for me. After all, he was one-step removed from the situation. The writer of this letter was not one of the leaders of the Hebrew congregation. [Illus]

On the other hand, this is one of the advantages of preaching through books of the Bible. I and others preach, not what we want to preach, but what the inspired text says. We don't get to pick and choose or cut and paste. We take what is there and let the Word of God speak for itself.

As we approach this passage, I would remind you that we are still talking about acceptable worship. Hebrews 12:28 says, "worship God acceptably with reverence and awe." And all that follows in chapter 13 is telling us how to do just that. Worship is so much more than singing, praying and teaching God's Word. It is loving each other as brothers, it is remembering those who are in prison, it is living in purity with your spouse, it is being content with what you have and it is remembering and following the spiritual leadership that God has established within the local church.

IDEA: We worship God acceptably by remembering and following our spiritual leaders.

REMEMBER YOUR LEADERS (verse 7)

First of all, according to verse 7, we are to remember our leaders.

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Hebrews 13:7 (pew bible page number NIV)

Three times church leaders are referred to in this chapter. In verse 7 the believers are told to *remember* their leaders. In verse 17, they are told to *obey* their leaders. And in verse 24 they are to *greet* their leaders. While in verses 17 and 24, the author is talking about leaders who are yet alive and among them, in verse 7 he's probably referring to those who have already died.

However, these leaders *had* lived among them. In chapter eleven, we are called to emulate the faith of various Old Testament characters who were worthy of imitating. And that's good. We can learn so much from those that we read about or even just hear about. But there's nothing like seeing truth embodied in someone whom you have known personally.

We all know that truth is caught more than it is taught. That's why Paul says, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). And he told Timothy, "Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12).

Sometimes, the leaders who have the greatest impact on our lives are those who have lived among us and have "finished the course." The "jury is still out" on those who are alive; but not on those who have died. Take for example Peter and Paul. These believers had likely had personal contact with both. If so, they saw their faith up close. They witnessed their manner of life. And yet probably just before this epistle was written, both were martyred. This was the "outcome" of their faith. The early church father Jerome writes that both Peter and Paul were martyred on the same day, the fourteenth year of Nero, June 29, A.D. 67. According to this tradition, Peter was crucified upside down and Paul was beheaded on the Appian Way. And now the speaker says, "Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." Even to the point of martyrdom.

But there is a word of caution. Leaders are frail. Leaders can fail. Leaders can disappoint. Is that not why in verse 8 the writer calls our attention to Jesus Christ, the one who is always the same. He never fails us. "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever." Jesus Christ, the leader *par excellence*. Yesterday, during the days of his life on earth, "he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears...he was heard because of his reverent submission" (Hebrews 5:7). Today, he is a high priest who faithfully makes intercession for us (7:25). And tomorrow, he will come and shake not only the heavens but also the earth as he establishes his eternal kingdom (12:26-27).ⁱⁱ

While we are called imitate leaders, we are never called to idealize or idolize leaders. Some of us can remember back in the 1970s when both then President Jimmy Carter and Governor Ronald Reagan had their pictures taken with a well-known pastor in San Francisco who was supposed to be a model of urban ministry and racial reconciliation. Later, both men would have liked to take

those pictures back. That well-known pastor, Jim Jones, later led 914 people into a mass suicide in Guyana, South America.

Before moving on, there's a principle that we need to see both in verse 7 and in verse 17. It's the principle of *shared leadership*. Notice what we are told in verse 7, "Remember your *leaders* (plural)..." And again in verse 17, "Obey your *leaders* (plural)..." In fact, of the 18 New Testament passages that speak of church leadership, 15 of them are in the plural.

Here at Central Bible Church, we believe strongly in a plurality of leadership, in which there is shared responsibility and mutual accountability. We presently have 16 elders here at Central Bible Church. And I cannot think of another group of men that I would rather serve alongside.

There are many benefits to such collegiality in ministry. Working together as a team balances our weaknesses. We all have what C.S. Lewis calls a "fatal flaw." None of our men are perfect; but I believe all of our men are godly. And where we lack we balance one another.

When we first arrived in Portland I had the privilege of riding the police beat with one of our police officers. That night made me deeply appreciate routine challenges and risks undertaken by our local police. On three different occasions that night, which extended well into the early morning hours, I saw the benefits of a "code three backup." When the chips are down or the situation appears to be potentially dangerous, a simple "code three" call for reinforcements brings other policemen who quickly arrive at the scene. Nothing is done until they can work *as a team* in addressing the situation.

Presentation: Muriel Ekdahl

FOLLOW YOUR LEADERS (verse 17)

While verse 7 is telling us to remember and imitate that faith of our leaders who have preceded us, verse 17 is telling us to follow our leaders whom God has presently established among us.

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. Hebrews 13:17

What does it mean to "follow" your leaders? It means to *obey* your leaders. Wow! That sounds awful blunt and straightforward. What if I don't agree with my spiritual leaders?

It's interesting that the word used here is the same word used in verse 18 where it is translated "sure:" "...we are *sure* that we have a clear conscience." It is also at times

Obey = obedience which springs from trust in their God-given authority

translated "be persuaded," "have confidence," or "trust."ⁱⁱⁱ Do you get the idea? It is an obedience that springs from a sense of certainty. And part of this certainty comes, not necessarily being in agreement with all the decisions of the leaders, but because of the role that God has

entrusted to them. That's why the writer goes on to say, "Obey your leaders and submit to their *authority*." Bottom line, it is an obedience to God and his lines of authority.

So what happens when you are *not* persuaded that the direction given by the leadership is correct? I believe that's why the writer adds another command: "submit to their authority." The word means "to yield," "to give way to," or "to defer to."^{iv} The Bible is realistic enough to recognize that there is not always going to be a consensus in the life of the church...on any topic. But God's Word says that we are to "yield," "to give way to," "to defer to" the pace and direction set by the God ordained leaders.

Submit = yield, defer to their authority

Areas of life in which such submission is seen...

But just *why* are we to do this? That's what the writer answers for us in no uncertain terms in this verse. The first reason is this...

Why are we to follow our spiritual leaders?

1. They keep watch over our welfare.

This is the first reason given for such "followership." These spiritual leaders "keep watch over you." Spiritual leaders are shepherds. And as shepherds, they are called to keep watch over the sheep. But that is not an easy role. For sheep are creatures of habit. In fact, no other class of livestock requires more careful management than do sheep. When left to ourselves, we follow the same trails, graze the same fields and pollute our own pasture.

That is why we all need those who "keep watch" over us. To "keep watch" means literally to "lose sleep." And you know what? It's true. I know that the leadership God has given this church loses sleep over those who begin to drift away. I know that our leaders grieve over any divisiveness in the Body. I know that our leadership longs to see this body of believers become all that God intends, as well as each individual within this body.

Follow your leaders, for they keep watch over your spiritual welfare. But there's another reason we are to follow our leaders.

2. They are accountable before God.

"They keep watch over you *as men who must give an account*." But to whom do these leaders give an account? To the congregation? Certainly within the Body of Christ there is mutual accountability. And local church leadership should always hear what God is saying through the larger body of believers. But here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, church leadership is accountable, not first of all to the congregation, but to God.^v This is a much higher standard of accountability.

As spiritual leaders make decisions for the life of the church, our primary criteria is not *what do the people want*, but *what does God want*?

TESTIMONY: BILL WECKS

Luke 12:48

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

3. To follow brings great joy to all involved.

Notice a third reason the writer gives us for following the leadership that God has established: "Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden..."

Leadership can be a great joy! When people progress in the faith, when they don't get stuck and hung up on peripheral issues, when they take steps of growth and move towards maturity...all of this brings great joy to a leaders heart. That's why Paul writes to the Thessalonians saying, "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you."

On the other hand, the situation with the Corinthians was a great burden for Paul. He writes, "I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice." Unfortunately, leaders are sometimes distressed by believers who ought to make them rejoice! The very word that is used here in Hebrews 13:17 for "burden" means "to groan," "so sigh," or "to moan." Moses experienced this in his leadership. At one point he was even suicidal!

I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now--if I have found favor in your eyes--and do not let me face my own ruin." Numbers 11:14-15

Now I don't think any of our leaders have come to that point. But they may have come pretty close! We are to follow our spiritual leaders because it not only brings great joy to them, but to you as well.

4. The result of *not* following your spiritual leaders is disastrous!

There's a final motivation for following spiritual leadership. Verse 17 ends this way, "...for that would be of no advantage to you." That is the understatement of the year! The writer is deliberately understating the case in order to get his point across. Actually, what he is saying is this: "If your attitude, your lack of "followership," your criticism, your suspicion, your independent spirit makes leadership a burden rather than a joy, then the results can be disastrous even for you!"

Here's the principle: The welfare of the church is inseparable tied to the church's response to its leadership.

In the context of this early church, some were choosing to pull away from the church rather than follow the leaders that God had established in the church. And the same can happen today.

Notes

ⁱ Lee Eclow, Lake Forest, Illinois; source: Michael Hirsley, "Some Summit Meeting: 54 Conquer Everest," Chicago Tribune (5-17-02).

ⁱⁱ Cf. Heb 1:12 "you are the same, and your years will not fail." (Psalm 102:27).

ⁱⁱⁱ It is not the same word for "obey" found in Ephesians 6:1 or Colossians 3:20.

^{iv} So also, this is not the same word for "submit" found in Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5; 3:1; 1 Peter 3:5.

^v Cf. 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; 1 Peter 5:2-4.