

What About ... "Obey Your Leaders"?

BY DR. DAVID A. DEWITT

What bothers me, is the fact that this phrase is continually used to tell us we should be under the authority of local church officials, be they called pastors, elders, deacons, priests, fathers, bishops, or other such titles. The assumption is if we create a 501(c)3, call it a church, and appoint or elect officers, then everyone who is part of (or a "member" of) that organization is obligated to obey those leaders. I want to suggest: **Nothing could be further from the truth.** The phrase comes from Hebrews 13:17.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

Before we look at this passage, let's remember something Jesus said:

Matthew 23:8-11 *But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant.*

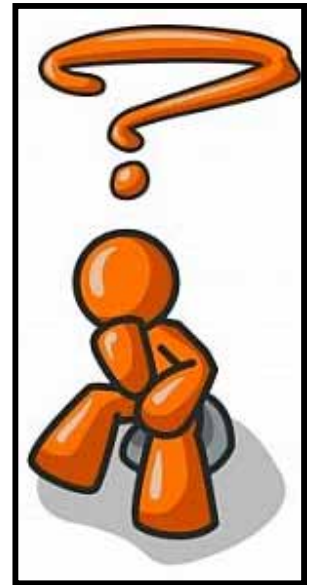
The word Jesus used for *leader* in Matthew 23 only occurs in that chapter (two times in verse 10) in the New Testament. It generally means leader or teacher, but the only contextual definition is that of a Rabbi or father, and Jesus condemns both applications as a definition of a spiritual leader. *Father* is, of course, the very common term for the head of a household. Religiously, we can assume it has to do with the head of a religious grouping of people, the most common of which was the synagogue. *Rabbi* is a term generally used of a teacher, but it was also an official title used by the Pharisees. Jesus never identified with any official leadership title or position in any organization (John 2:18), and condemned any idea of His disciples having positions of religious administrative authority (like a father) or religious teaching authority (like a Rabbi). Jesus' idea of authority is that it came from God, not positions in our organizations (John 19:11).

So it is clear. We should **not** be under the authority of local church officials, such as leaders called pastors, elders, deacons, priests, bishops, or fathers. Such submission is not only unnecessary, **it's wrong**. For those who think it is an option, I would like to ask,

Just what part of **do not** do you not understand?

Who Are the Leaders in Hebrews 13:17?

The word here for leaders [ἡγεομαι (*hegeomai*)] is a very general term, often used of secular leaders. Ac-



tually, if it were not for the context, we would assume the author is referring to secular leaders. For example, the word *governor* is always a translation of the noun form of this word.

- **Luke 2:2** ...while Quirinius was governor [ἡγεομων (*hegeomon*)] of Syria.
- **Luke 3:1** ...when Pontius Pilate was governor [ἡγεομων (*hegeomon*)] of Judea...
- **Acts 23:24** ...Felix the governor [ἡγεομων (*hegeomon*)]...

The form of this word for *leaders*, in Hebrew 13:7 & 17, is a participle meaning "leading, considering, counting, or regarding." Here are a few examples:

- **Philippians 3:7-8** I have **counted** [ἡγεομαι (*hegeomai*)] as loss for the sake of Christ...
- **2 Thessalonians 3:15** Yet do not **regard** [ἡγεομαι (*hegeomai*)] him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.
- **Hebrews 11:26** **considering** [ἡγεομαι (*hegeomai*)] the reproach of Christ greater riches...

We are, therefore, impelled to understand the leaders of Hebrews 13 as people we have thought about and examined, taking the possibility of their leadership under consideration. Since it is a participle, we can put an -ing on it. So the phrase *Obey your leaders* should be understood as

Obey those who you are considering and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.

So What Does "Obey" Mean in Hebrews 13:17?

Actually, the word *obey* in this phrase has a very similar meaning to the word *leaders*. *Obey* is an imperative verb. The word translated *obey* is *πείθω* (*peitho*), the common word for *persuade*, *confidence*, or *convinced*. Here are some examples of it:

- **Matthew 27:20** *But the chief priests and the elders persuaded [πείθω (peitho)] the crowds to ask for Barabbas.*
- **Romans 2:19** [We] are **confident** [πείθω (peitho)] that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness...
- **Romans 8:38** *For I am convinced [πείθω (peitho)] that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities...will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*
- **Hebrews 13:18** *Pray for us, for we are sure [πείθω (peitho)] that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things.*

As you can see, it is very unusual to translate this word in Hebrews 13:17 as *obey*.

Taking all of this back to Hebrews 13:17, we have to say that *obey your leaders* has something to do with *being persuaded*, *having confidence in* or *being convinced* as a way of determining leaders. The phrase *Obey your leaders* should, therefore, be understood as

Be convinced of those who you are considering and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.

How Can We be "Persuaded" about Those We "Are Considering as Leaders"?

So how would we become convinced that someone is a person we should be regarding as a leader? How would we make that determination? Actually, the author has already given us the answer earlier in the same chapter.

- **Hebrews 13:7** *Remember those who led you, who spoke the Word of God to you; and con-*

sidering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

The word *led* here in verse 7 is the same word for *leaders* in verse 17 [*ἡγέομαι* (*hegeomai*)]. But in verse 7, the word is described. It's those *who spoke the Word of God to you*. Then we are told to consider (the word *consider* means "observing closely") their conduct (the word *conduct* means "lifestyle"). We can then say that a leader is one who

1. Speaks the Word of God and
2. Has a lifestyle consistent with what they are saying.

Also notice, it is the leader's *faith* that is to be imitated, not their lifestyle.

It's not the idea of Islam that everyone should imitate the lifestyle of Mohammed or the idea in Judaism that students should imitate the lifestyle of the Rabbi.

The author of Hebrews is telling his readers to examine the lifestyle of their leaders. But they are to imitate what the leaders believe, their theology and morality, not to mimic the way they live.

The question is, "Who determines this?" If we obey the leaders in our organizations, then our organizations make the determination.

But who did the author of Hebrews expect to make the determination?

Clearly, it was to be his readers—individual believers. Christ and the apostles never put an organization between the believer and God. The whole book of Hebrews is about individual believers pursuing maturity.

In chapter 13, believers are to be persuaded, convinced, and have confidence that those leading them speak the Word of God and have a quality lifestyle. When those two qualities are evident, the believers seeking maturity should imitate the leader's faith.