

# "Obey Your Leaders"

By Dave DeWitt

I guess what bothers me about this phrase is the fact that it is continually used to tell us we should be under the authority of local church officials, be they called pastors, elders, deacons, priests, fathers or other such titles. The assumption is, if we create a 501(c)3, call it a church, appoint or elect officers, then everyone that 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).

Actually, as we examine the various words for leaders (deacons, elders, overseer/bishops, leader, teacher) in the church, they are always:

1. A plurality – there is never just one in any given location
2. Men having responsibility, not authority – only Christ and the apostles had authority
3. Men who were identified with a city or larger geographic area – never a local assembly, or anything geographically smaller than a city.

[I have discussed this at length in my book "The New Testament Church.]

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* [ἡγεῖομαι (*hegeomai*)] is a very general term, often used of secular leaders. Actually, 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** [ἡγεμόνων (*hegeomon*)] of *Syria*.
- **Luke 3:1** ...when *Pontius Pilate* was **governor** [ἡγεμόνων (*hegeomon*)] of *Judea*
- **Acts 23:24** ...*Felix* the **governor** [ἡγεμόνων (*hegeomon*)]

The form of this word for *leaders*, in Hebrews 13:7 & 17, is a participle meaning “leading, considering, counting, or regarding.” Here are a few examples of Paul’s use of this word and where the author of Hebrews uses this word elsewhere.

- **Philippians 3:7-8** *I have counted [ἡγήομαι (hegeomai)] as loss for the sake of Christ...I count [ἡγήομαι (hegeomai)] all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesu...*
- **2 Thessalonians 3:15** *Yet do not regard [ἡγήομαι (hegeomai)] him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*
- **1 Timothy 1:12** *He considered [ἡγήομαι (hegeomai)] me faithful, putting me into service*
- **Hebrews 10:29** *...and has regarded [ἡγήομαι (hegeomai)] as unclean the blood of the covenant...?*
- **Hebrews 11:11** *Sarah...considered [ἡγήομαι (hegeomai)] Him faithful who had promised.*
- **Hebrews 11:26** *considering [ἡγήομαι (hegeomai)] the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt.*

We are, therefore, impelled to understand the *leaders* of Hebrews 13 as people we have *counted, regarded, or considered*. These are not elected or appointed leaders of an organization, these are those individual believers 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.*

### **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.*
- **Luke 16:31** *If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded [πείθω (peitho)] even if someone rises from the dead.*
- **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.*
- **Romans 14:14** *I know and am convinced [πείθω (peitho)] in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.*
- **Hebrews 6:9** *But, beloved, we are convinced [πείθω (peitho)] of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way.*
- **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*. There is actually a very common word for *obey* [ὕπακούω, (*hupakouo*)] used throughout the New Testament, and it is not the word in Hebrews 13:17. The word in Hebrews 13 [πείθω (*peitho*)] can be translated *obey* but it’s rare. Of the 52 uses of πείθω (*peitho*) in the New Testament, it is translate *obey* only four times. Here are all four.

1. **Romans 2:8** *but to those who are selfishly ambitious...obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.*
2. **James 3:3** *Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their*

*entire body as well.*

3. **Galatians 5:7** *You were running well; who hindered you from **obeying** the truth?*
4. This one in **Hebrews 17:13**.

All of these have the idea of *persuade, confidence, or convinced*, except James 3:3, which a metaphor about controlling the tongue. James' point is ...*no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison* (verse 8). So the point is similar, we can persuade a horse with a bit, but we can't persuade our tongues.

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. Notice that the author of Hebrews used this same word in 6:9, translated *we are convinced* [πείθω (*peitho*)], and in the very next verse (13:18) translated *we are sure* [πείθω (*peitho*)]. It seems that our leaders are people we are to be persuaded of, have confidence in, be sure of, and be convinced of. *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 "Regard as Leaders"?**

So how would we become convinced that someone is a person we can regard 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 considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.*

The word *led* here in verse 7 is the same word for *leaders* in verse 17 [ἡγεομαι (*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 *considering* 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.

So, we can then conclude that *obey your leaders* means to be persuaded, convinced, and have confidence that those leading you speak the Word of God and have a quality lifestyle. When those two qualities are evident, we should *imitate their faith*. I take it that is the same as *submit to them* in verse 17.

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 their faith*.

At the time of the writing of Hebrews (about A.D. 69), the New Testament canon of Scripture was not yet complete, so people could not be directed to a Bible to get God's word. It had to come from leaders they had confidence in. That confidence was to be determined by seeking out those who spoke what the apostles taught, *the word of God*, and by "observing closely" the lifestyles of those who taught it.