

What is the role of the congregation, since we have Elders?

I. Introduction:

- What roles does the congregation play in the leadership of the church?
- Do the elders have all authority, which the congregation must always follow?
- Or is the congregation the final authority on every issue, able to overturn any decision of the elders?
- How should a member of the congregation think about the elders?

This morning we'll look at several biblical passages that shed light on these questions. We will see clearly that the Bible teaches that members should honor, respect, indeed love their leaders. And they must submit to them.

But we will also see in the end that it is the congregation as a whole (each of us as individuals) that is responsible that the church teaches the truth. Even though we describe one of the responsibilities of the elders as shepherds are they still not sheep, sheep that could wander from the truth and may attempt to lead others astray whether by default or purpose. We, the congregation, must deal with an errant elder. This may be the most important reason why we go through this process that Dan is leading us through. Getting to know those men first as intimately as we can will assure that fulfilling our role will be as natural as possible and if there is a need to address error or mistakes that we can do it in a spirit of love.

We'll look at four responsibilities of the congregation, which will serve as our outline today:

- The congregation must honor and esteem the elders I Thessalonians 5:12-13 and I Timothy 5:17
- The congregation must imitate their elders Hebrews 13:7
- The congregation must obey/submit to their elders Hebrews 13:17

- The congregation must watch over the teaching, purity, and the unity of the church. For some reason I fear that people will struggle with this last point so let me try to clarify what I think needs to be understood when I say that the congregation has a responsibility to watch over the teaching, purity, and unity of the church. In other words if things are going right, going according to Biblical authority, God's authority, the congregation must do something about it. I think another way to see the point here is to realize that having elders doesn't release us from our responsibilities to fulfill the great commission, to do our work as Paul mentioned in Ephesians 4. The bottom line will always be Biblical authority. When I stray from that the elders will correct me, when an elder strays from that I must correct them.

II. Body:

A) First Command

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

12 Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. 13 Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

The very fact that Paul gives this command implies that we are tempted NOT to do this. Some in Thessalonica must have been failing to honor and respect and love the elders.

I fear this is a growing problem in our American culture today where a high value is placed on individualism, on not being just a follower. Often people are suspicious of authority.

Another reason why we may struggle with this responsibility is because of the very nature of the elder's position, as Paul details: They "are over you in the Lord, and admonish you." (warn or reprimand someone firmly) As the word is revealed to us and we are instructed how to apply it to our lives what we learn can often cut and hurt as well as push us out of our current comfort level. As a rule we don't like to be "admonished." We tend to attack the messenger, saying, "Who are they to speak to me that way?"

Paul says: None of that! (or as my grandson would say, “Enough!”) Instead, he uses the most powerful language possible. He says not only, “Respect them,” but, “Esteem them very highly (hold them in the highest regard)” The Greek word translated “very highly” or “highest” is much stronger than the English phrase. One lexicon says this is the “highest form of comparison imaginable.” So we might translate this more accurately as “esteem them infinitely highly.”

In addition to respecting and esteeming them Paul instructs: “Esteem them infinitely highly IN LOVE.” You see, this is not just an issue of the head. It is also an issue of the heart. He is saying, “Hold them in your hearts. See them as God’s gift to you. Love them dearly. Hold them up in prayer. Listen carefully to their teaching. Value their labor.”

This is not Paul’s suggestion. This is a biblical command, for God’s glory and for the good of the church. He says as much in the last phrase in the verse. “Be at peace among yourselves.” That is: When the congregation follows these biblical commands, when elders follow biblical commands to them, then the local church will be at peace. There will be no factions, and there will be no friction. Then the church can be what God intends: A display of His glory for all to see. Indeed, a display of Jesus Christ through the love we have one for another.

B) Second Command

Hebrews 13:7

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

To remember is to keep them in mind, to think about their lives, to see how God’s Word has worked in them, changing them, rooting out sin, equipping them. Learn from their lives, and then imitate them.

In 2 Timothy 3, Paul says the same:

10 You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, 11 persecutions, sufferings, what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them... 14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and

have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it,

What was the outcome of Paul's way of life? He's about to be beheaded! But Paul says: Imitate me. Follow me. Consider the more important outcome of my way of life: God is glorified among the nations!

Just so, the author of Hebrews tells his readers: Imitate your leaders. But he doesn't quite say that, does he? What he actually says is: Imitate THEIR FAITH!

As Paul says in 1Corinthians 11:1, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." Learn from their faith. Focus on the good lessons from their lives. To the extent that they provide a good example of the life of faith, follow that.

He is not saying, "Imitate their actions, their dress, their mannerisms, or their hair style. No. Imitate their following of Jesus. Imitate their letting the Word dwell richly in them. Imitate their love and concern for others. Whatever is God-centered, Christ-exalting in them, imitate that.

C) Third Command: Obey/Submit to elders

Hebrews 13:17

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 perhaps some of you are thinking, "Oh boy, here's the place where he tells us we've got to do whatever an elder says." If that's what you're thinking, please listen carefully to the rest of the lesson. The point isn't to do whatever the elders tell us to do but to do whatever God's word tells us to do.

"Obey your leaders and submit to them." What does the word "submit" imply?

Suppose I tell my grandson Kelan, “You must drink this Sonic strawberry limeade I bought for you!” If he drinks it, is that submission? He may drink it with a submissive and respectful attitude towards me, but his obedience is not really a test of his submission, because he wanted to drink it anyways.

But if I say: “Kelan would you please pick up your toys.” And he does it, that is submission. He didn’t want to do it. He would have preferred that grandpa do it, or anybody else for that matter. But he submitted, hopefully with joy, and he picked up his toys.

The point is this. The test of submission comes when there is a difference of opinion about the way to proceed. Submission is not tested when you agree, or when you are eventually convinced the other person is right.

So Hebrews 13:17 is saying: “There will be times when you disagree with your elders. Submit to them. Follow them. They are there as leaders, as gifts to this congregation.”

Now, the author is NOT saying: “Whenever there is a disagreement, the elders are always right.” Just as in marriage: When the husband and wife disagree about the way or direction to proceed, the wife honors God by submitting to the husband. The same holds true in the church.

We see that in the rest of the verse: “Obey and submit ... SO THAT they might (lead and keep watch) with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no benefit to you.”

Did you catch that? The elders’ joy in their leading and keeping watch is vital for YOUR BENEFIT. It is vital for our ADVANTAGE.

Please bear this in mind: Submission in the church as in marriage is:

- Perfectly consistent with discussion and persuasion about alternatives
- Perfectly consistent with times of brainstorming, allowing everyone to share ideas

- Perfectly consistent with times of advocating, discussing the pros and cons of different ideas
- Perfectly consistent with creativity, and taking initiative

But at times, a decision must be made. Leaders must lead. And if when the elders propose and lead, some are frequently saying, “No, we should go a different direction; they’re not right;” if you are frequently resisting, thereby making their leadership difficult, that diminishes their joy in their labors. Indeed, that can lead to their groaning in their labors. And that is BAD. Bad for whom? Not just the elders. Not primarily for the elders. That is bad, says Hebrews 13:17, for the congregation! The leaders’ joy is vital for the health of the congregation.

So the bottom line is that unity is good, unity requires selflessness. Submission to our elders requires selflessness. Trusting our leaders, our elders, is a good thing, it’s biblical. Respect, love, and esteem of our elders is also biblical. Submission to our elders is good, even scriptural, even if they haven’t made the best decision. These attitudes and the resulting joy and unity is more important than making the best decision in any particular case.

C) Fourth Command: The congregation must watch over the teaching, purity, and unity of the church

Three brief points under this heading:

1) The Bible clearly teaches that the congregation as a whole is responsible to see that the church teaches right doctrine, biblical doctrine, on major issues.

Remember the opening of the book of Galatians? False teachers have arisen in the church. Paul writes this letter to counter their impact. He begins the body of the letter with these words:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel. Galatians 1:6

“YOU are so quickly deserting. “Who is included in “YOU?” That is, who is responsible for the doctrinal purity of the church? Certainly the

elders. But the letter is addressed to “the churches of Galatia.” Then in Galatians 3:1 Paul addresses all of them as “you foolish Galatians.”

We might conclude that had the elders lived up to their responsibilities, this letter would not have been necessary. But given that false teaching on a central issue had entered the church, it was the responsibility of every member to deal with it and they had not done so.

The congregation is ultimately responsible for the biblical purity of the church or local congregation.

2) The Bible clearly teaches that the congregation as a whole is responsible for major cases of church discipline

Consider 1Corinthians 5:4-5. Paul is discussing the case of a man who is sinning openly and publicly. The congregation has not yet done anything about it:

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

Note that Paul holds the entire congregation responsible for this, not just the elders. Should we expect that the elders might lead the way in this matter, sure. But when that doesn't happen it will not be the elders only that will be held accountable for this.

We see something similar in Matthew 18:17. Again, someone is engaged in clear, obvious sin, and is not repentant after entreaties from several people. In this case, Jesus says,

Tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

This discipline can and should extend to elders who clearly go wrong, for the Bible tells us that some in leadership positions will deviate from the truth, and should be disciplined. Consider Paul's counsel to a young preacher:

1 Timothy 5:19-20

Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. 20 Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.

My point is simply this, we, the congregation, are ultimately responsible for the purity of the church/congregation, for the purity of our message and example to the world. When there is a clear case of violation, the congregation as a whole must deal with it.

3) The Bible clearly teaches that the congregation has an important role in affirming leaders

Remember the situation in Acts 6, the church in Jerusalem assists widows, but the Greek-speaking widows feel like they are being discriminated against. So the apostles appoint men we regard as the first deacons to organize the distribution of support.

Is that an accurate summary of the chapter? Look closely at how they appoint these men. Speaking to “the full number of the disciples” they say they shouldn’t take on this task themselves, but:

“Brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty” Acts 6:3

So while the Apostles appoint these men, the entire congregation is involved in the decision.

So when we read eight chapters later, in Acts 14:23, that Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders for them in every church” we shouldn’t assume that this was without congregational involvement. We don’t know exactly what that looked like. But in Acts 6 there is heavy congregational involvement, even though the apostles “appoint” the deacons. So it is no stretch at all to think there was similar significant congregational involvement in the appointment of these elders.

III. Conclusion:

This is behind everything I said today, the congregation's responsibility to our is:

- To Esteem/honor our elders
- To Imitate our elders as they imitate Christ
- To Obey/Submit to our elders
- To Watch over the teaching and purity of the church/congregation

All of this is done for the purpose of displaying Christ to the world, all for the purpose of living as ONE BODY to His glory.

Does this not define our calling in Christ, who we are in Christ?

Today I would like us to step forward in our faith and put into practice one of our responsibilities for our congregations leadership, to pray for them...