

Giving Account for Our Use of Hebrews 13:17

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“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.” – Hebrews 13:17 (KJV)

Introduction

Of all the verses in the New Testament that exhort Christians to honor their spiritual leaders, perhaps the strongest is this verse in Hebrews 13. No other verse, after all, uses the word “obey” to describe the relationship of Christians toward their church leaders. Because this verse contains language that is apparently so strong and clear, it has become an oft-used text. It usually occupies an important position in any discussion of church leadership. Indeed, I have used it in my own teaching, as I have exhorted fellow church members to honor our pastors.

Recently, however, I have encountered some teaching on this verse that has nudged me to think more deeply about what it actually means. What kind of relationship does this verse depict between leadership and the rest of the church? What kind of authority does this verse give to local church leaders? What obligations does it suggest church members owe their leaders? What does it suggest about church membership? Why did the author of Hebrews include this verse for his readers? Who are “them that have the rule over you”? What does it mean to “obey” and “submit”? How faithfully does the King James Version convey the meaning of the Greek text? Here I would like to sketch, as clearly as I can, some of my conclusions about what this verse means and how we should and should not use it today.

Literary Context of Hebrews 13:17

First, let us consider the context in which we find this verse. This verse is found in the book of Hebrews. *What is Hebrews about?* At least three main things may come to mind: (a) the theme of how Christ and the new covenant are better than the old covenant with its sacrifices and priests, (b) the famous “faith chapter,” and (c) the nearly equally-famous warning passages about falling away from faith in Christ. *And what is Hebrews?* Hebrews is a letter. More accurately, it appears to be a sermon that was written down and then sent as a letter. (Consider the unusual “preaching tone” of the warning passages and the lack of a typical letter introduction.) As a written sermon, it was sent from a “pastor” to a specific group of initial readers in a specific historical situation. We don't know for sure who this pastor was, nor where his letter was sent, but our brief survey already enables us to paint a helpful possible scenario: *Hebrews is a sermon-letter that was sent to a group of Christians who apparently were tempted to give up on following Christ, abandoning faith in him and perhaps returning to the old Jewish covenant.* Hebrews 13:17, then, was written to help Christians stay true to faith in Christ.

The immediate context of chapter 13 also fits this picture. After some general exhortations (13:1-6) that serve as examples of how to “serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (12:28), we find a concluding summary paragraph (13:7-17, or perhaps to verse 19). This paragraph ends with a transition to personal comments about the author (vv. 18-19) and is followed by a benediction (vv. 20-21) and final greetings (vv. 22-25). From this brief survey, we

can see that our verse about obeying leaders comes at the end of the concluding paragraph of the entire sermon-letter. This fact suggests the verse's importance. In fact, this paragraph also begins with a reference to leaders (v. 7), so we see that *the topic of leaders frames the entire concluding paragraph*.

Between the two references to leaders, we find a summary of some key themes of the entire sermon-letter: Jesus Christ is unchanging; follow him and be strengthened by grace, not by the old Jewish way with its focus on dietary restrictions, tabernacle worship, and animal sacrifices; be willing, like Jesus, to suffer reproach outside the camp of the Jewish religious community, seeking by faith the heavenly city instead of an earthly one; offer spiritual sacrifices of praise and generosity instead of ritual ones. In summary, *this concluding paragraph provides a final contrast between the two ways described throughout the entire letter: the way of grace through faith in Christ, and the way of the old Jewish Law*.

Similarly, *this paragraph presents a contrast between two kinds of leaders*: those who “spoke to you the word of God” (v. 7 ESV) and those who presented the “diverse and strange teachings” that required Christians to observe the laws of the old covenant (v. 9 ESV). *Hebrews 13:17, then, was not written about just any church leaders, but specific flesh-and-blood people*. This becomes unmistakably clear later in the chapter, when the pastor-author asks his readers, “Greet all your leaders” (13:24). Indeed, the author of Hebrews knew these leaders well enough to know they possessed a certain kind of character. These were leaders who “spoke the word of God,” who had a “way of life” that would lead to a good “outcome,” and who were characterized by “faith” (v. 7 ESV). They held true to Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday and today and forever (v. 8). Finally, these leaders were “keeping watch over” the souls of the readers and were aware that they would “give an account” to God (v. 17 ESV). Clearly, these were exemplary leaders—people worth imitating (v. 7)!

What else does the context suggest about these leaders? First, we should notice that this paragraph apparently mentions both past leaders (v. 7) and present ones (v. 17). The idea that verse 7 refers to past leaders is strengthened by the fact that readers are told to consider the “outcome” (ESV) or “end” (KJV) of their way of life, hinting that these leaders may have already completed their “race” (12:1). (This possibility is presented more clearly in many modern translations.) Second, in both verses (v. 7 and v. 17) a very general term is used for “leaders.” We should note that we find no mention of “elders,” “overseers,” or any of the other specific words used elsewhere in the New Testament about local church leaders. In fact, in verse 7 the term “leaders” probably refers to the missionaries or apostles who first presented the gospel to the initial readers of Hebrews. Author Alexander Strauch confirms this interpretation, and suggests that verse 17 also refers to “a broad spectrum of leaders from apostles to elders” (*Biblical Eldership*, 270).

Let's summarize what we have discovered from our study of the context of Hebrews 13:17. The entire letter, including the immediate chapter, clarifies that *the “leaders” of 13:17 were people of exemplary faith and godly behavior, leaders who watched over the souls of others in order to help them remain true to the gospel of Christ's grace, careful that none fall from faith to works-righteousness. They probably included local leaders but could also have included traveling proclaimers of the gospel of Christ*. These findings will be very important as we consider our own use of Hebrews 13:17.

Key Terms Within Hebrews 13:17

It will also be helpful to closely examine three key terms from 13:17 itself. Hebrews 13:17 is composed of one compound command clause (“obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves”) and several supporting clauses. The command clause is the core of the verse. This clause contains three key terms: “obey,” “them that have the rule over you,” and “submit.” Let’s consider them each in turn, beginning with the second term.

The phrase “them that have the rule over you” (also used in verses 7 and 24) is partially clarified by the context, as we have already seen. But a closer examination of the phrase itself is also instructive. First, we should note that this long phrase in the King James Version actually translates only two Greek words: “them that have the rule” translates one word, and “over you” translates another. Commentator Peter T. O’Brien writes that the first word means “to be in a supervisory capacity, *lead, guide*” and notes that it is “used of men in any leading position” (515).¹ This word is used of a wide variety of secular political and military leaders, as well for Jewish and Christian leaders.

How else is this word used in the New Testament? Besides the three uses of this word in Hebrews 13, there are three other times this word is used to describe followers of Jesus. In Luke we read Jesus’ instructions to disciples: “He that is *chief*, [let him be] as he that doth serve” (22:26). In Acts we read that Paul “was the *chief* speaker” on his missionary team (14:12) and that the Jerusalem council sent “Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, *chief* men among the brethren” with a letter for the Gentile churches (15:22). In some other contexts this word refers to people in official positions of rulership (such as Joseph over Egypt, as in Acts 7:10). But in each of these three references to followers of Jesus, the contexts make no mention of specific office. Rather, these “chief” men were recognized as leaders in a general sense. This fits with the most common use of this verb in the New Testament: to indicate the act of thinking, counting, or esteeming (about 20 of 28 total uses in the KJV carry this sense). For example, servants are instructed to “*count* their own masters worthy of all honour” (1 Tim. 6:1) and believers are urged to “*esteem* [those who labor among and are over them in the Lord] very highly in love for their work’s sake” (1 Thess. 5:13).

Given these definitions and this usage for this word, it is not surprising that many of the most trusted modern English translations simply translate the word in Hebrews 13:17 as “leaders” (thus ESV, NASB, NIV, and NET; compare also Young’s Literal Translation, which has “those leading”). *It appears that the phrase “them that have the rule” may suggest too strongly the function of ruling and rules-giving, rather than a more general function of providing recognized leadership.*

The phrase “over you” is similarly misleading. This phrase translates a pronoun which is usually translated in the KJV simply as “your,” “you,” “ye,” or “your.”² Crucially, there is no word in the Greek text of Hebrews 13:17 that means “over.” Thus, most modern translation simply say “*your*

1 ἡγούμενοι, a present participle—a verb functioning as another part of speech, in this case a noun, much like “leading [ones].” This definition is O’Brien’s summary of two standard New Testament Greek dictionaries: one by Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, commonly called BDAG, and another by Louw and Nida.

2 This accounts for 576 of 583 occurrences in the KJV, according to a search on www.blueletterbible.org. The Greek word is ὑμῶν.

leaders” rather than “them that have the rule *over* you.”³

*In summary, better translations of Hebrews 13:17 make no mention of “ruling” or of anyone being “over” anyone else. A more faithful translation is to simply say “your leaders,” or, less gracefully, “your esteemed, leading persons.”*⁴

The word translated “obey” is not the same word that is used elsewhere about children relating to parents (Eph. 6:1; Col. 3:20), about bond-servants relating to masters (Eph. 6:5), or about Paul’s readers obeying the instructions in his letters (2 Thess. 3:14). The word used here is a different word,⁵ and it is quite instructive to observe how it is used elsewhere in the Bible. For example, this word is used to describe how, after Gamaliel tried to convince the Sanhedrin to release the apostles, “they *agreed*” with him (Acts 5:40; compare with ESV’s “they *took his advice*” in 5:39). This word is also found in King Agrippa’s mouth when he tells Paul “Almost thou *persuadest* me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28). Later, when Paul tries to convince the centurion to stop sailing because a dangerous sailing season had arrived, we read that “the centurion *believed* the master and the owner of the ship, more than those things which were spoken by Paul” (Acts 27:11). In Romans Paul writes, “For I am *persuaded*, that neither death, nor life... shall be able to separate us from the love of God...” (8:38-39). And in Philippians he writes, “Being *confident* of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (1:6).

In Hebrews itself, this word is used four other times: “And again, I will put my *trust* in him...” (2:13); “But, beloved, we are *persuaded* better things of you, and things that accompany salvation... (6:9); “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were *persuaded* of them...” (11:13); and, in the verse right after the one we are examining, “Pray for us: for we *trust* we have a good conscience...” (13:18).

Other examples could be multiplied. Out of the 55 times this word is used in the Greek text of the King James Version, only seven times is it translated “obey.”⁶ One of these times is in James, where we read, “We put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may *obey* us; and we turn about their whole body” (3:3). This example is instructive, for, as any experienced horseman knows, a bit does not force a horse to obey. A bit can only help persuade a horse to willingly agree, and only when a horse trusts its rider will a bit work well. If forced obedience is required, then something much stronger than a bit must be applied. Similarly, when this word is translated “obey” in Galatians, the context indicates that the Galatians did *not* obey, and that they did not

3 It is true that elsewhere church leaders are clearly described as overseers (Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; Tit. 1:7 ESV) and as those who “are over you in the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:12). But notice, from the contexts of those verses, that this position of being “over” is associated not so much with ruling, as with managing and caring for the church. For example, see 1 Timothy 3:4-5 in the ESV and other modern translations, which translate as “manage” the same Greek word that in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 is translated as “over.” Thus 1 Thessalonians 5:12 could also be translated “are managing/caring for you in the Lord.”

4 Side note: It would be interesting to study the translation history of this phrase. Given that Tyndale translated this phrase as “them that have the oversight of you,” that an estimated 90% of the KJV matches Tyndale’s translation, and that King James I’s concern to protect his authority sometimes shaped the translation choices of the KJV translators, one wonders whether the switch from Tyndale’s “oversight of you” to KJV’s stronger “rule over you” might have been, at least in part, politically motivated. Further research could test this hypothesis.

5 πείθεσθε.

6 Acts 5:36, 37; Rom. 2:8; Gal. 3:1; 5:7; Heb. 13:17; Jam. 3:3. The ESV translates it as “obey” only four times, in part because of differences in which Greek manuscripts are used.

because they responded instead to a different “persuasion” (5:8, using derivative of the same word). Thus, this word appears not to imply forced obedience, but willing agreement springing from trust, from having been persuaded.

Given the evidence we have examined, the conclusions of commentators should not surprise us. O'Brien says this word means “to put one's trust in someone” (*The Letter to the Hebrews*, 529). Gareth Lee Cockerill writes that this word “is often used of those who have been persuaded to obey rather than for obedience to constituted authority. Thus, it is an appropriate response from those who hear to those who proclaim God's word” (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 708). Several translations support these conclusions. The New International Version translates the phrase as “Have confidence in.” The Common English Bible is similar: “Rely on.” The Message—though not consistently a very reliable translation—perhaps best catches the sense of this particular phrase by saying, “Be responsive to.”

In summary, this word does not suggest that the leaders of the first readers of Hebrews possessed authority to command people to obey against their will. Rather, this word suggests that the role of these leaders was to effectively persuade people to voluntarily agree to a good course of action. It also suggests that the readers of Hebrews were to possess a teachable spirit. They were supposed to listen to their godly leaders with a trusting attitude, allowing allow themselves to be persuaded by their leaders as they taught the word of God.

The word “submit” is also important. The Greek word behind “submit”⁷ is not found anywhere else in the NT, so it is harder to determine its meaning. But the dictionaries and commentaries that I have checked agree that it carries the idea of “giving way.” For example, BDAG defines this word as “to yield to someone's authority, yield, give way, submit” (1030). O'Brien says this word is the stronger of the two commands “obey” and “submit,” while Cockerill suggests that “it would be a mistake to press the difference between these two imperatives.” He thinks that “‘submit to’ is a more general expression that... demonstrates the breadth of the pastor's vocabulary [referring to the author of Hebrews]” (708). Bible teacher and author Steve Atkerson says that this word is used outside of the New Testament to describe situations involving contestants such as wrestlers. Based on this usage, he suggests that the word presupposes a prior period of disagreement during which both parties are trying to overcome the other.⁸ Given the scarcity of evidence about how this word was used elsewhere, we should not be dogmatic in expanding the definition.

Taken together with the word “obey,” we might say that the “submitting” was supposed to happen in a situation where a faithful leader and another Christian had each been trying to persuade the other, but neither had been successful. In such situations, the readers of Hebrews were instructed to give way to their godly leaders rather than make their leaders' lives miserable. Continual conflict would not be “profitable” for anyone involved (v. 17). Such continual conflict with godly leaders would not allow believers to share in the “outcome” of their first leaders who faithfully and selflessly held to the unchanging Christ (v. 7).

In summary, our research suggests that this command clause in Hebrews 13:17 could perhaps best be translated as “Be responsive to your leaders and defer to them” or something similar.

7 ὑπέίκετε.

8 From “Elder-led Congregational Consensus,” a sermon found online at www.ntrf.org/audio.

Suggested Implications of this Study

What does all this mean for us? How should our study affect how we use this verse in our own churches and teaching? Let me suggest several implications:

*We **should not** use this verse as evidence that church leaders possess authority to command obedience.*

Why not? This approach contradicts what we have learned about the word translated “obey.” This word actually carries a softer connotation of “allowing oneself to be persuaded.” Therefore, this verse does not indicate that church members owe their leaders the kind of “Yes, sir!” obedience that characterizes the relationship of a private to a sergeant, an employee to an employer, or a young child to a parent. Rather, it implies that faithful church leaders will understand their task to feature persuasion by word and example rather than the giving of commands.

This fits well with the tenor of the rest of Scripture. Consider Jesus' words to his disciples: “Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt 20:25-28). And remember Peter's words to his fellow elders: “Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3). Similarly, note that none of the Scripture passages about church discipline even mentions church leaders; rather, Jesus entrusted this authoritative task to the gathered church (Matt. 18:17-20).

*We **should not** use this verse as evidence that all church members everywhere should obey their local pastors.*

Why not? While this approach is perhaps the most common way this verse is used, it overlooks what we have learned from the context of this verse. This verse was not written to “all church members everywhere,” but to some specific Christians who had specific leaders with specific qualities. These Christians—the original recipients of Hebrews—had leaders who possessed exemplary faith and conduct and were faithfully guarding the flock against false teaching, including the false righteousness of Jewish law observance. Therefore, this verse does not directly speak to situations involving unfaithful leaders and should not be used to encourage obedience toward them. After all, the author of Hebrews is exhorting his hearers to submit to faithful leaders *rather than* being “led away” by false teachers (13:9 ESV). The contrast that he is drawing is less between independence and submission and more between following bad leaders and following good leaders. Given the context, the emphasis is not so much that Christians must submit, true though that is, but that *they must be careful to submit willingly and only to faithful leaders*—leaders who understand, teach, and live the true gospel. The object of our submission is of primary importance, or the act of submission itself will be of no value. In fact, responding to and deferring to false teachers is deadly.

In addition, this verse never specifically mentions “local pastors” and quite likely includes a broader group of leaders. Therefore, it gives no special authority to local

church pastors that might not also be shared by other leaders (regional leaders, missions directors, visiting teachers, etc.) who are also actively keeping watch over our souls.

Finally, as in our first example, we must be careful what we mean by the word “obey.”

We should be careful how we use this verse to support our local church membership structures.

Why? Some present this verse and then ask, “How is this leadership and this submission going to work if there is no membership defining who has made the commitment to be led and who has been chosen as leaders?”⁹ Clearly other passages in the New Testament indicate that each church should seek to have officially-recognized leaders and that all Christians should seek to belong to a local body of believers. Yet we have noticed that Hebrews 13:17 makes no mention of elders, pastors, or overseers and thus should not be used to make claims about obligations owed *exclusively* to local church leaders. After all, in other Scriptures we find that Christians have similar obligations to a wide variety of persons. They are exhorted to honor traveling apostolic leaders (Phil. 2:29), to “submit” to an exemplary household of individuals who have voluntarily “addicted [literally, *appointed*] themselves to the ministry of the saints” (1 Cor. 16:15-16) and, in fact, “to be subject... to every fellow worker and laborer” who was similarly serving (1 Cor. 16:16 ESV; see context in 16:10-18). None of these examples mention local church officials. Rather, *in each case submission is urged because servanthood has been demonstrated.* Hebrews 13 parallels these verses, for it, too, urges submission because of the exemplary quality of the leaders' faith, not because of any mention of office.

Taken together, the New Testament evidence shows that believers are to recognize spiritually mature Christians wherever they meet them and to voluntarily submit to them, whether or not any official membership structures are involved. Similarly, other verses suggest that a faithful elder will be concerned to “watch over” and “give account” for more than just an official, limited list of adherents, but over all “the flock of God which is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2; see also Acts 20:26, 28 and 1 Timothy 3:5, which indicate a field of responsibility as large as all the local membership of God's own church). No believer should try to limit his responsibility to submit by joining the membership role of a local church and then disregarding the call to submit to *all* spiritually mature Christian workers. And no church leader should try to limit his responsibility to “give account” by assuming he will do so only for those who have voluntarily joined an official list.¹⁰

9 This quotes John Piper, from a sermon posted online, entitled “How Important Is Church Membership?” See <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/how-important-is-church-membership>.

10 Whatever we may think of the practices of using written membership covenants, standards, and lists, the fact remains that neither Paul nor Peter nor the author of Hebrews thought that they were necessary in order for believers to know who they should submit to and for leaders to know who they were accountable for. Thus we should not use verses like Hebrews 13:17 as hard evidence for such practices. Indeed, the practice of multiple membership standards can actually make it harder for those new to a church to obey the Scriptural instructions to submit to leaders. These newcomers, whether youth or adults transitioning into a new congregation, were not present when many of the existing standards were created by long-term members and former generations and often have trouble understanding them or being “persuaded” of their usefulness. We should aim to not “trouble” potential members with anything beyond “necessary things” (Acts 15:19, 28), so that they may find it a joyful task to obey verses like Hebrews 13:17. There are many good and many bad reasons for why a person may or may not desire to officially join a specific local church. Each situation must be examined on a case by case basis before all of Scripture, without forcing out of context Scriptures such as Hebrews 13:17 that mention neither church offices nor specific membership structures.

*We **should** use this verse as a model for faithful church leaders.*

Here is a clear, consistent way to use this verse. The author of Hebrews paints a picture of the kind of leaders that any Christian should be eager to follow: Leaders who proclaim the word of God, who have a way of life and a faith worth imitating, who faithfully adhere to Jesus Christ and publicly bearing his reproach, who reject any unprofitable teaching that distracts from the heart-strengthening grace of God, who do the hard work of convincingly persuading rather than merely giving commands, who faithfully watch over those in their care, who are preparing to give an account, and who are willing to do this all whether it means joy or grief. These are the kind of leaders who fit the pattern of Hebrews 13:17 and who can share the pastor-author's own confidence of a good conscience (13:18).

*We **should** use this verse to exhort each other to respond well to faithful leaders.*

Here is the best way to use this verse. Whenever there are faithful leaders who substantially match the description given in Hebrews 13, then we can be confident that this verse speaks clearly to us today. Toward such faithful leaders we must demonstrate a teachable, pliable, persuadable, convincible spirit. We should extend trust to such leaders and place confidence in them. They are gifts from God to the church (Eph. 4), given to help preserve our faith and save us from heresy. We should respond to them as eagerly as a trusting horse responds to the nudge of the bit in his mouth. Indeed, their proven track record should make us ready to submit to them even when not completely persuaded by them, on those occasions when circumstances force one or the other to give way.¹¹

Our goal must be to bring much joy to faithful leaders! Those who have had such leaders know the joy that they, too, bring to the church. In the spirit of Christian humility, let us also remember that no leader is perfect, that any leader with a general reputation of being “above reproach” merits our honor (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6, 7 ESV), and that, if a charge must be brought against an elder, there must be at least two or three witnesses (1 Tim. 3:19).

Pastors and teachers, I write as one who has served, imperfectly, as both a pastor and a teacher: we will be called to give account for how we lead the flock. Part of our leadership involves the teaching of “the word of God” (Heb. 13:7). This means that we will be called to give account for how we handle Scriptures such as Hebrews 13:17. Are we ready to give an account for how we use this verse? May we use this verse not to build up our power base but to remind us of our own responsibility to serve. May our faithful lives make it easy for people to trust us and, hence, to be persuaded to join us in bearing the reproach of Christ.

¹¹ I think churches should also remember that many circumstances allow for diversity and do not truly require the “giving way” that uniformity of practice requires. When biblical faithfulness is not at stake, we should not only cease from commanding each other—an approach at odds with our text—but also refrain from judging or despising. Consider Romans 14 and 15.