

Obedience and Submission to Church Leaders

Three Commands And Six Reasons For Obedience To Church Elders



By Stephen Verengerai Mavesere

“Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account, let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17).

The book of Hebrews is made up of warnings, exhortations and encouragements. In the thirteenth chapter, the author gives practical advice to the church about their daily conduct. Here, he encourages brotherly love, hospitality, remembering persecuted believers who are in prison, faithfulness in marriage and imitation of the deceased church leaders. In verse 17, he urges believers to obey and to submit to those who rule over them. Who are those who “rule” over them? Are they civil authorities or spiritual fathers? This writer affirms that the verse refers to spiritual leaders and gives three commands and six reasons the church must obey them. In conclusion, we will discuss how this verse applies to the African church.

In verse 7, the author encourages his audience to follow the examples left by their rulers who have fallen asleep. Verse 17 does not refer to government officials, but to elders in the church. The words “they watch out for your souls” clearly speak of pastors since civil leaders do not watch over souls but the physical body. As John Phillips notes, “the Christian community is not a democracy where the majority rules, nor is it an anarchy where every man does what he pleases. Rather, it is a theocracy where God rules through elders.”¹ What are these Christians commanded to do?

The Commands That They Must Obey

First, they are to obey. These Christians are commanded to “obey those that rule over them.” This obedience is to be given in proportion to the way the leader is executing his duties. If he does things contrary to what His Master has entrusted to him, he should not be obeyed. The obedience here should be done only if it relates to Biblical truths. Why is he to be obeyed? He is to be obeyed because he is God’s mouthpiece and he utters “the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4:11).

¹ John Phillips, *Exploring Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel 2002), pg. 198.

Second, they are to submit. They must submit to him when they find out that the minister's words suit God's Word. They must not think themselves wise enough not to listen to their elder. The pastor should not interpret the Word of God with selfish motives but faithfully. The leader is not supposed to make his own laws.²

Third, they are to let them do it with joy. The believers are to cultivate an atmosphere conducive for the pastor to partake of his duties without hindrances. If the church is in disrepute, it makes his task a lot harder. They should not grieve him since this will, in the end, harm them as the later portion of the verse states.

The Reasons They Must Obey

First, they watch out for souls. That the ministers watch out for the souls of the parishioners is enough to send the whole church into instant submission. There is nothing more valuable in the life of a believer than his soul. Any threat on his soul makes him want to fight. It is like taking away his blood. The ministers have no selfish motives in their duty, but are doing it for the betterment of the church. They do not seek to lord it over God's heritage. This type of leadership should be that which promotes the salvation of the people.³

Second, they must give account. The minister's work will not be finished until he gets to the judgment day. There he will give an account of the work that he has done. Therefore the pastor does that which will enable him to present a good account for his people.⁴

Third, they are to labor with joy, not grief. The church should obey in such a way that the ministers will give their testimonies about them with joy. They are not supposed to give their accounts with tears but happily.⁵ If the pastors were not allowed to execute their duties well, it will not help the church's cause. They have a role to play so as to make it possible for the leaders to stand for them with confidence.

Fourth, they may lose instead of profit. The efforts of the pastor would be in vain if the people do not get rewards at the judgment seat. The leaders will find themselves in a position whereby they have to speak against their people. They are left with no option but to be obedient to God and speak the truth though the truth will be hurtful.

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, (New York: Revell Company), pg. 964.

³ Albert Barnes, *Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1949), pg. 324.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 324.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 324.

Fifth, they receive joy. A church that is in constant turmoil against their pastors and elders learns at a snail's speed because their attention is divided. It brings spiritual barrenness and bitterness. A person who never brings joy will never have joy himself.⁶

Sixth, they are representatives of God. They speak "the oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11). They are to be respected, not for the persons that they are but for the office that they hold. They carry the decrees of God and that should send everyone to his knees since the message they carry profit them.⁷ The pastors do not formulate their own messages, but they are the means by which God speaks to His people. Therefore the obedience and submission the minister gets is given only because he is God's instrument.

Conclusion

Believers are commanded to obey and submit to the leaders of the church. They are urged to respect the elders of the church, not because of their personality but because of the office that they hold. They are to do so because these elders watch for their souls and give account of them to God. They are to be submitted to because disobedience will not profit the believers. Ministers represent God, hence the need for the church to obey them. The people in this verse are not civil leaders because civil leaders do not watch for the soul but for the physical needs of the people in their jurisdiction.

How Does This Affect The Church In Africa Today?

The people in Africa are treating the minister as God. He is the untouchable and is called "the man of God" as if he has some unique attributes that God Himself possesses. He is no longer the servant he is supposed to be. The people no longer do it the way the Bereans did – searching the Scriptures to see if what Paul preached to them was true (Acts 17:11). They knew who was behind these words and where to find them. Their search proved Paul's genuineness. The believers are no longer respecting him for the office that he bears but for the man he is.

On the other hand, the minister no longer has time to prepare for the delivery of messages because he is busy with odd jobs at the church (e.g. picking trash, arranging chairs and tables etc.). The minister is doing his work with grief because of the opposition that he gets from the congregation. He is no longer doing it with joy and this is causing stunted growth to believers. This type of growth is not in accord with the best rewards at the judgment seat. It is up to us, the African Church, to obey and submit to the elders of the church. Will we benefit from their unique

⁶ John MacArthur, *Hebrews*, (Chicago: Moody, 1983), pg. 447.

⁷ M. R. DeHaan, *Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1959), pg. 201.

office, or disregard them and lose rewards at the judgment seat. Where are you today? Are you the kind of person who makes the pastor happy when you are not at the service? If so, revise your conduct. The godly minister is not against you, but for you.

Stephen Verengerai Mavesere is a second-year student studying theology and Biblical exposition at Limpopo Bible Institute (www.lbi.org.za). Stephen lives in Gweru, Zimbabwe with his wife Kiyase and their three children.