

# The Obedience to Leaders

To What Extent, In a Biblical Manner

R.L.McNally / May 2025

Below is a quick summary of the different aspects mentioned in this piece. It is my desire that we as Christians move beyond the worldly focus on authority as **power** and **control** and move on toward thinking of authority as mutual **service, submission, and respect**.

Not just intellectual **assent**, but the **actual practice** of these things. And not accepting bad behavior.

LEADERSHIP	What to Avoid...	What to Aspire To...
Hebrews 13:17	People who demand obedience	People who are trustworthy, able to kindly persuade
	"Submit to me" leaders	People who practice mutual submission
	People who don't protect others	People who keep watch over others souls
	Self-focused leaders	Others focused ministry leaders
Jesus' Teaching on Leadership	Lord over / Authority Exercisors	Servants / Slaves of All
	People who love their special roles and leaders or teachers	People who recognize the equality of all in the church / Who recognize God is THE teacher
Peter on Leadership	Not Domineering Ones / Not Greedy	Overseers (not overlords), willing, eager to serve / Power lies in being examples
Paul on Leadership	Not extreme, not cruel or brutal, not violent, not proud or puffed up	Sober minded, self controlled, moderate, hospitable, able to teach, peaceful, a good witness
	Asleep, no desire to help the lesser.	Alert, helping the weak
<<< Other Related Concepts .		
Arrogance	Puffed up, boastful, presumptuous, self-important, wants to look better than others. The original sin, of the devil.	(Humility)
Humility	(Arrogance)	Other's Benefits / Dying for Others
Equality in Christ	Classes, caste systems, some better than others.	Equality in Christ; no Jew or Gentile, no rich or poor, no male or female, one in the Spirit
The Mind of Christ	Not the mind of men or leaders	Have the Mind of Christ, submit to him alone.
Freedom in Christ	People who want others to serve them.	Serve Christ alone / serve other men as a kindness, not out of servitude and command.
Serve God Alone	Those who desires to or takes God's place as Lord.	People who desire people to serve God, not them.
One Mediator	People who desire to be God's intermediary	People who recognize and respect others, let Christ be their intermediary.
Priesthood of Believers	Desire to be New Priests between God and man.	People who know their place as mutual priests.
Who is the teacher?	People who see themselves as special in the area of teaching.	People who recognize the Lord's role as teach in the Spirit of God.
Submitting	This who desire people's submission.	Those who recognize submission is mutual.
Bereans	Unaccountable, unquestioning leadership.	Accountable to the accuracy of the word and deed.
Individual Conscience	People who want to overrule others conscience.	People who respect and allow for other opinions / attitudes.
Authority Contrary	Those who misuse their authority / should not be trusted.	Those who refuse to misuse their authority / can be trusted.
God is Our Judge	Don't try to become other people's judge.	Let God be the arbiter of others.
Paul's View of Authority	Don't show partiality	Elders and Apostles / not particularly more important or special
Avoid Partiality	Prejudice a sin	Judging fairly between men regardless of role or affluence

## First Things / Introduction

When you hear of an organization or an individual who claims that God himself wants you to obey them because they possess a “leadership” status and that that status gives them special authority beyond others in their sphere, and that disobedience to that leadership constitutes “dissension” or “sin,” beware.

I am serious. This is a red flag. This is not a biblical idea, but a worldly idea. It is not of Christ, it is not of the Spirit, it is “of the flesh.” It is not love. It is a twisting of the word, and it is very self serving.

What do we think of authority? Is it “biblically” about “telling others what to do” or rather showing people what a believer is to be like? Are we bosses, or models to each other? Scripture tells us one thing, unmistakably, but we think another even though the scriptures are plain. Authority is a big problem, because it is thought of all wrong. All the worst of the wrong things I have experienced have at its heart people who believe they have the right to do this or that, and think they have the power to do things because God has given them special authority to do them. In a recent book that seeks to answer the question of “why” when it comes to spiritual abuse, Mike Cosper says this.

As I’ve considered these questions, I keep tracing the problem back to one issue in particular: **authority**. If we misunderstand the nature of authority, how it operates, how it collapses, and the healthy limits with which it exists in human relationships (and the church in particular), we’re bound to stumble into disaster.<sup>1</sup>

I’ve personally have seen letters with pushy and manipulative warnings, stating that obedience is expected, but not only expected by them, but that God himself expects such compliance, disobedience to their word is a sin (as if I was disobeying God’s word), and the wrath of God was going to descend on those who do not submit. This is an abuse of authority. It is arrogant. This is in another word just plain abusive.

You would think that such people were Moses himself in the wilderness, that asking questions or seeking accountability were as the blasphemous words of Janis and Jambres in the desert. Maybe a hole in the desert will swallow people up. Where Paul mentions these names above as a metaphor of those who oppose the “truth” God and other obvious arrogant behaviors, these paint the picture now of the fate of those who ask questions or disagree with a person who has a position at a local church.

This overreach of authority is often based upon proof texts such as Hebrews 13:17, and the right to “rule” in the church. This is not a good thing, nor should it ever be a good thing, but a manipulative tactic. Often this is done to hide some status or act that has been done that the leaders of the church desire to keep quiet, or to just simply get their way. What better way to do this than to say that God himself wants what they want, for people to look the other way or just trust the authorities.

This is manipulative at best, and dangerous at worst. It constitutes, by very definition, an abuse of power. This will be considered later.

We will examine herein Hebrews 13:17 and the passage around it below, and also other significant NT passages that deal with authority to make this quite plain. Hebrews 13:17 is but one passage of many that discuss authority and the church, and it mentions one ecclesiastical bit of advice (carefully consider what your leaders tell you), and this bit of advice needs to be nuanced and balanced by other theological concepts and ideas as well. There is a good message in Hebrews 13:17, but it is not the one described above where there is authoritarianism dripping from it.

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Cosper, *The Church in Dark Times: Understanding and Resisting the Evil That Seduced the Evangelical Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2024), 94–95.

Before we get there, I can confidently describe that authority that seeks to lord over others is not God's will, nor is it his example, nor is it his heart, nor is it his very instruction.

We have twisted authority, which constitutes responsibility and accountability, into authority that seeks to avoid both of these things and get — through manipulative means — their will and their way by whatever means necessary. And to justify any means necessary.

Let us understand authority as Jesus lived it and Jesus taught it. Let us expect more of those who claim authority.

## Part One:

### Hebrews 13:17 / Beware Improper Interpretations

Hebrews 13:17 / Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

This is the main proof text of those who would have people in the church become particularly or uniquely obedient to the pastor or the elder(s). But what does it really say?

Let's look at each significant piece of this in turn —

#### To Obey

The first word here is obey. It is not the typical word used here for obedience, *hypakouō*, that is used, it is rather the word *peithō*. Here is the difference of the two words from the Baker Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words —

***hypakouō*** = to obey, be obedient; submit; answer (the door)

***peithō*** = to persuade, to convince, to have confidence in, trust in

The word here in Hebrews 13:17 gives much more the idea of “let yourselves be persuaded by, let yourselves be convinced by” and thus is not so much about “do what they say” but “listen carefully to their words and see if they are right.” It is a very soft word for obedience. It is saying “see if their words are plausible” not “do what they say.” Please read that again.

To say that this verse teaches unassailable obedience to another is a misuse of scripture. This is very dangerous. This is also the only time in scripture any of the words for “obey” are connected with leaders in a church setting.<sup>2</sup>

In abuse of power situations, this verse is a favorite of those who are trying to cover up or keep control of a situation. People who want to hold on to their power or control of others, camp here.

I recently overheard a messianic-type leader preaching to his congregation from Hebrews 13:17: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.” The essence of his message was that the church had to obey him and submit to him; otherwise he would have to give an account. If they did not obey and submit, he explained, God would judge him and send him to hell I was not only amazed at his terrible exegesis and exaggerated sense of self-importance, but stunned that his congregation bought it! They left muttering to one another that now they really must try to become more obedient and submissive.

Once the leader's claims to specialness and importance are established, it becomes very difficult for mere followers to challenge him. In time, this leader breaks free of all accountability. This enables him to act as he pleases while exercising control over followers.<sup>3</sup>

If you are more inclined to trust another name, consider John Piper. Piper recognizes that this verse means not “unassailable obedience” but “yield and listen.”

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<sup>2</sup> <https://airtable.com/appcucn92GwQkco1R/shrFwMyOQbOkxdAga>

<sup>3</sup> Blue, Ken. *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1993. Print.

So with all this background, what I would try to distill as the meaning would be something like this: Hebrews 13:17 means that a church should have a bent toward trusting its leaders; you should have a disposition to be supportive in your attitudes and actions toward their goals and directions; you should want to imitate their faith; and you should have a happy inclination to comply with their instructions.

Now you can hear that these are all soft expressions: “a bent toward trusting,” “a disposition to support,” “a wanting to imitate,” “an inclination to comply.” What those phrases are meant to do is capture both sides of the Biblical truth, namely, 1) that elders are fallible and should not lord it over the flock, and 2) the flock should follow good leadership.

Where these two truths are working, it is a beautiful thing. We have tasted it and we should pray with all our hearts that God preserve it and deepen it among us for the good of the people and the glory of his name in this city and around the world.<sup>4</sup>

Notice the “fallible” side of leadership above. We are very close to coming to the point where we are doubting the scripture that tells us “all have sinned” or “if anyone says he has no sin” and not holding people accountable for wrongdoings from the side of infallibility. Leaders are fallible; they have issues too. Recognizing that will only make the church stronger — denying it will erode the church from within.

I am not denying that leaders in the church should have some sway, but rather that they should not use that word “obey” as a cudgel to bring people in line with their commands. This is not an accurate way to go about it. It is against Jesus’ very simple, basic instructions on power and control found in the gospels (see below).

My friend had great difficulty understanding why, in light of Heb. 13:17 (“Obey your leaders, submit to them”), Timothy had so much trouble “obeying” his spiritual leader. It’s true that obedience is grammatically commanded in the passage, but that is only part of the truth. The word obey is used in the sense of the person being persuaded or convinced; obedience is a result of his or her own decision. The response to the command to obey is clearly volitional. The word submit is used in the sense of the person voluntarily complying. Leaders are guides and examples, not spiritual drill sergeants. Earlier in Hebrews 13 we are told to “Consider the outcome of [our leaders’] way of life, and imitate their faith” (v. 7). That can only come about when leaders inspire that kind of submission rather than demand it.<sup>5</sup>

What should be obeyed is the word of God, not the words of leaders. This is the point of J. Vernon McGee. “...you are to obey the Word of God as [the leader] has given it to you.”<sup>6</sup>

It must be said here that the Berean Christians were praised for not simply swallowing what was taught them but examining it (Acts 17:10-11). The apostle Paul told us to “test everything” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). The idea of this is that we not simply swallow things people say but to put it through some rigorous examination; to examine, to prove for oneself, to study, to be critical. Is this now out the window? Or should we continue to test what comes down from leaders to the people? I believe so.

## To Submit

As with the word “obey” above, the word “submit” is not the typical word for submit in the New Testament as well. While it can be argued that the typical word for “submit” is also dependent upon the context and the mutuality of that submission, this word use in Hebrews 13:17 is the word *hupeiko*. Here is the idea of that word.

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *Sermons from John Piper (1990–1999)* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> *Discipleship Journal*, Issue 60 (November/December 1990) (NavPress, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary*, electronic ed., vol. 5 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 615.

The actual meaning of Hebrews 13:17 is far less daunting and much more practical. The word used here for “submit” is *hupeiko*. W. E. Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* defines “*hupeiko*” as “to retire, or withdraw.” The sense is one of “yielding” or “keeping out of the way” rather than “following an order.”

The author of Hebrews is actually saying, “Don’t hinder or obstruct the leaders in doing their jobs, because they have to give an account to the Lord.” When we understand “submit” in this way, the rest of the verse makes sense: “Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”<sup>7</sup>

Similar to the word obey above (that means not obey, but consider), this word does not mean submit so much as it means have a yielding attitude. Be prepared to listen to them. Let them do their job.

However, this does not mean there is no accountability, and it does not mean “God wants everyone else to sit down and shut up.” Here the writer of Hebrews is telling us to let leaders get about their job.

And what is that job?

### **To Keeping Watch Over Your Souls**

The context of the ministry of elders is “the careful watch of the souls of the people.” When they are doing this, it is beautiful. However, we can all see, and it has been well documented, that people sometimes do horrible things in the name of “eldering” a church.

Infamously, Bill Hybels, the former pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, stepped down in 2018 after allegations of inappropriate sexual relationships with women in his church that he was pastoring. When this first came to light, 20+ elders covered for him and protected him from the charges and told people to “leave it to the elders.” After the allegations were proved, most of those elders recanted their support for Hybels and told others that some in the church were told “do the right thing,” “not be a dissenter,” and “lie” to protect him.<sup>8</sup> Good people can do bad things, and other good people can cover up those bad things — and thus hurt people.

This does not constitute “keeping watch over your souls” but rather the opposite, the abuse of other people’s souls to keep protection in place for a “servant of God.”

To keep watch over others’ souls means to guard doctrine, protect the weak, pray for others, and serve — not overlord. The exposure of sin is not a reason to “guard” a congregation from damage; rather, the exposure of sin is the thing that protects a church and its people so as to

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Alice Chrnalogar, *Twisted Scriptures: Breaking Free from Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 43–44.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Cospoer, *The Church in Dark Times: Understanding and Resisting the Evil That Seduced the Evangelical Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2024), 42.

provide even the offender an opportunity to repent and repair their relationship with God (Eph 5:11-13, Luke 8:17, 1 Corinthians 4:5).

### **What Advantage to You?**

Notice at the end of this passage, that whatever the leaders are doing should be things that would be a blessing and a benefit for those who do them. When abuse is involved, that is not an advantage to you, or anyone. The leaders are not doing destructive things, but building others up and acting like Christ.

The actions and attitudes of Elders should be at first, and foremost to the advantage of those for whom they are watching out for, not for self gain or self advantage, or self achievement.

## Part Two:

### Jesus' Teaching on Leaders and Elders / Lords or Servants?

What did Jesus teach us about leadership and authority? Why do we stray from it so fast, so easily? Are we ignorant, or are we simply sinful in nature? I guess it's a bit of both.

**Mark 10:42–45 (ESV)** / <sup>42</sup>And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.

<sup>43</sup>But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

<sup>45</sup>For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”<sup>9</sup>

In this great passage, Jesus tells the leaders of the church that it was typical in the gentile world for those who are considered “rulers” to “lord it over” others. To “exercise authority.” But Jesus made it quite clear that in his church, in their lives, they were not to be that way. They were to be instead “servants” and “slaves” of each other. The greatest would be judged by Jesus as the one who treated others as servants.

**“Lord it over”** / katakyrieuō / *have power over, subdue, show one's authority*

**“Exercise authority”** / katexousiazō / *have dominion over, rule, tyrannize*

**<< CONTRASTED WITH >>**

**“Servant”** / diakonos / *servant, helper, waiter, messenger*

**“Slave of all”** / doulos / *slave, one in subjection*

The contrast in these passages, and the message of these passages, couldn't be more clear. Yet, those who desire to be “first” can and will shuffle these things off of their thoughts and minds and desire power still. This is Jesus' will.

Not only was this Jesus' will, it was his very example. It is how he led. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

This is not so in many places, and in many churches. We need to repent. Please take more time to study this passage more and drink in its beauty — rather than ignoring it further.

There is one other passage where Jesus speaks to this topic.

**Matthew 23:8-12** / <sup>8</sup>But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. <sup>9</sup>And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.

<sup>10</sup>Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. <sup>11</sup>The greatest among you shall be your servant. <sup>12</sup>Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

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<sup>9</sup> See also the parallel passages of this, found in Matthew 20:25-28 and Luke 22:24-27



This passage revolves around not accepting or assuming titles that make us sound greater than others. This is largely forgotten in our world. Let's examine them.

<b>Title To Avoid</b>	<b>Rational</b>	<b>Further Rationale</b>
Rabbi (teacher, master)	you have <b>one</b> teacher	you are all brothers
Father	you have <b>one</b> father	who is in heaven
Instructors	you have <b>one</b> instructor	the Christ

Jesus is not legalistically telling us to avoid these titles, but rather to avoid the attitudes of pride that come with the titles. If we enjoy our position more than our Lord, we become arrogant and look down on others. Jesus gives us no reason to do so.

Let's bullet point the depth of instruction above.

- Don't go around thinking you are the "teacher," because the people already have a teacher, the "one" teacher, that is Christ.
- Don't go around thinking that you are the source of all the life around you; you are not its progenitor, that is God.
- Don't go around thinking that you are superior to others, for all the others around you are your brothers. There is no inferiority or superiority in Christ.

Similarly to the Mark 10 passage above, Jesus looks at the other side of the coin; if not arrogance and pride that controls and constrains us, then what?

Here are Jesus' conclusions in this section...

<b>Actions</b>	<b>Results</b>
The greatest among you	shall be your servant
Whoever exalts himself	will be humbled
Whoever humbles himself	will be exalted.

There is no perplexity to these ideas; humility is proper, God works against the arrogant, and he will one day exalt the humble ones. The other thing that is noticed here is the actions that are done; we are to actively be "servants" of others, we are to avoid at all costs "exalting" ourselves, and we should be about "humbling" ourselves. God will do the exalting.

## Part Three:

### Peter's Teaching on Elders / No Domineering Individuals, Rather Good Examples

1 Peter 5:1–4 (ESV) / <sup>1</sup>So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: <sup>2</sup>shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; <sup>3</sup>not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup>And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Let's examine the threefold lesson that he gives us on what leaders are supposed to be. These are beautiful words.

Exercising oversight  
(*Oversee, guard*)

Not under compulsion but willingly  
(*not because you think you have to, or others tell you to*)

Not for shameful gain  
(*Shamefully greedy*)

but eagerly  
(*showing keen interest*)

Not domineering over  
(*Exercising control*)

but being examples to the flock  
(*types, patterns*)

Peter's view of eldership and leadership agrees positively with Jesus' words in the gospel, using the same language for "not domineering" as if he was listening to his Lord.

There is no power here outside of the power to share the word. The word has power, the elders are "overseers" not "overlords" and they are not "domineering" but rather examples and patterns of how to live. If the elders are demonstrating dominance toward others the message they are giving is to be great you must be dominant as well. This leads to all sorts of trouble.

These are all couched with the idea of "shepherding." God wants leaders to be shepherds, and this was not a proud profession. The shepherd was more concerned with the flock than himself — whenever we start doing things that protect ourselves and hurt others, we should beware.

Jesus is the chief shepherd, he is overseeing the under-shepherds, he will return, and he will reward them based upon their behavior as shepherds.

## Part Four:

### Paul on Leadership / Qualified and Accountable

Paul takes a different tact on his discussions of leadership. His focus primarily on the ideas of qualifications to leadership. Such qualifications indeed rule out men who are arrogant and bullies, and focus on people who are more in line with Jesus' teaching.

We will examine 1 Timothy 3 as opposed to Titus 3, just for the sake of time. It might be helpful to examine Titus 3 as well in your own convenience .

If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Notice already, it is not a position, but an action.

Above reproach	<b>irreproachable in character</b> (nothing with which to hold on)
The husband of one wife	a one woman kind of man (not a womanizer)
Sober-minded	<b>not given to extremes</b> in behavior, temperate
Self-controlled	keeping <b>self-control</b> over passions and desires
Respectable	befitting propriety or moderation
Hospitable	treats strangers with cordiality and generosity
Able to teach	can teach well
Not a drunkard	not addicted to wine and strong drink
Not violent	<b>a cruel or brutal person, a bully</b>
But gentle	<b>merciful</b> or <b>tolerant</b> of slight deviations of moral thoughts
Not quarrelsome	inclined or disposed to <b>peace</b> (personal relationships)
Not a lover of money	not characterized by greed or wealth
Manages his own household	leads, directs, gives aid
Not a recent convert	not a plant not recently sown
Not puffed up / conceited	<b>not a proud one, puffed up with air, arrogant</b> , stupid
Thought well of outsiders	a witness to outsiders

Taking these qualities in total we see a picture of a person who is circumspect, kind, hospitable, not arrogant, not a bully, caring, self controlled. These are the kinds of people who not only are submitted to, but also can submit to others and not rule over others with iron fists.

The ones like this who “rule well” — this word used in 1 Timothy 5:17 gives the impression of taking leadership, the task of caring for others, not controlling. This is seen as a hard working person who gets double honor (respect and remuneration) because of the task that they do. Ruling is a very strong word here, and connotes a bit more than the Greek, or Paul, intends. It is not an imperial word, but a managerial word.

Of greatest importance to Paul was the concept of a multiplicity of elders, and elders who are willing to watch the behaviors and doctrines of all the other elders around them. This is a key element in endearing, it is keeping each other accountable.

**Acts 20:28–35 (ESV)** / <sup>28</sup>Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. <sup>29</sup>I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup>and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. <sup>31</sup>Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

<sup>32</sup> And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. <sup>33</sup> I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. <sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. <sup>35</sup> In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

The false wolves would arise from “other elders” and they will not encourage people to be disciples of Jesus, but rather follow themselves. They are like fierce wolves who do not care so much about the flock as they do themselves. They will twist scripture, scripture such as we have been talking about, and make themselves greater than even God and command obedience.

Look at the proper focus of these elders;

- Be alert
- Commended to the Word of God / growth and sanctification
- Don't covet gold or silver
- Hard working
- Helping the weak, as it is more blessed to give than receive

Notice in this passage the elders call to watch out for the weak. If they were “helping” the weak, they were not taking advantage of the weak. They were caring for them. There is no “overlording” or “power-play” in their minds. It is about giving — for it is more blessed to give.

We see here Paul's desire that elders are not overpowered, but accountable. They are to be called out when they behave badly. The apostle John had some strong words for Diotrephes because he “likes to put himself first” because he didn't “welcome” John and his compatriots, the English ESV sticks the word “authority” in there, but this is a bit strong. The fact is that Diotrephes puts himself first, did not welcome these other believers, talked wicked nonsense about them, stops those who want to welcome them and chucks those people out of the church. This person was going way beyond his purpose as a leader (see 3 John 9-10).

## Part Five: Other Related Doctrines to Consider

There are a number of other doctrines that are compromised when people believe that obedience to elders should be something that is without limit or without proper accountability. These are very significant when discussing this issue.

Scripture is an intricate web, and you cannot tamper with one strand without bothering many, many others. Please do not make your theological interpretations or applications without seeking the whole span of Scripture and theology. Each idea touches so many other ideas, and a simplistic interpretation is simple to do and dangerous.

### The Utter Disdain God has for Arrogance and Pride

The NT has a plethora of Greek words to describe pride and its effects on people. It was the first sin in the garden, and it is always painted as a bad thing in scripture. A simple search in Bible software can provide five separate word families that would begin a simple study of arrogance in Scripture, we will take a quick look at each.

- physioō / to be puffed up, 1 Corinthians 13:4
- katakauxáouai / to be boastful, to exalt over, Romans 11:18
- hyperēphanos / distinguished, outstanding, looking better than others, 2 Timothy 3:2, James 4:6
- authadēs / presumptuous, arrogant, self-willed, pleasing self, Titus 1:7
- alazoneia / one who makes more of himself, self-important, James 4:16

These words and more make up the large tomb of criticism of God toward prideful attitudes and actions. God himself resists such people.

Arrogance is of the flesh, not the Spirit. It is contrary to God and works directly against him.

***Main Idea:** develop and find leaders who, like God, despise looking down on other people, who despise making themselves great.*

### The Deep Example of Humility in Christ

On the other side of the coin, we have humility. Humility is expressed wonderfully in Philippians 2 as we learn simply to behave a certain way toward others because it was the way Jesus treated people as well.

In summary, we find the following instructive points:

- Do nothing from selfish ambition / focusing on personal success
- Do nothing from conceit / unduly vain and conceited actions
- In humility / recognize your sin and creatureliness, lowliness of mind
- Count others more significant than yourself / hold as above, hold as superior
- Look toward other people's interests / look out for other people's welfare

Have the mind among yourselves / do what Christ did, together, mutually.

Humble yourself / do what Christ has done, consider others more

Become obedient to the point of death / do so to a great extent

When we have done these things, God himself will lift us up. A proper understanding of humility will and can cure theological arrogance. The Holy Spirit, if submitted to, can help bring this about in our lives.

I would encourage all who read this to delve into an in-depth study of humility from Scripture and do your best not to just read the words but put “humility” into practice; become foot washers of each other, not lords and bosses. This is Christ’s will.

***Main Idea:** Good leaders should be men of humility, who put others above themselves.*

## **The Mind of Christ**

Where is unity found? It is found in having the mind of Christ, to have that mind and submit to that mind and not to other people. The mind of Christ is found through the submission to the Spirit, to the submission to the attitudes of Christ; humility, self sacrifice and care of others outside of the needs of ourselves. When we all are submitting to Christ we find humility and unity, when we find ourselves being forced to submit to the subjective and oft wrong wills of human leaders we will not and cannot find unity. Unity is found in following scripture and mutual submission, not a false submission to a human authority. This is, as Jesus called it, a worldly endeavor that Jesus does not smile upon.

You can research this idea in a few different passages: 1 Corinthians 2:16; Philippians 2:5-8, Romans 12:2, Col 3:2, Romans 8:6-7.

***Main idea:** Unity in the Church is not found in following the mind of a human or a group of humans, but rather in adopting and submitting to the Mind of Christ.*

## **The Equality we Enjoy in Christ**

This theological idea is built on the work of Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit. All people are saved and sanctified by the same Lord.

The oneness we all share (Philippians 2:1-2) is evident in Christ. Jesus has broken down the hostility wall between Jews and Greeks, between slaves and free men, between people of different nations so that we can be one in Christ (Col 3:11, Romans 10:12-13, 1 Corinthians 12:13). Each Christian, whether new to the faith or of aged learning, has equal standing with God (2 Peter 1:1). Even the obvious difference between the sexes is somewhat equated through Christ (Gal 3:26-28).

We have no caste system in Christianity. There should be no caste system in Christianity. We have different roles, and obviously these have different responsibilities. To use our different roles to subjugate others under ourselves is against Jesus’ very desire for leadership.

***Main Idea:** We all have equal standing before God in Christ Jesus.*

## Our Freedom in Christ

In Christ we have freedom. The basic bible idea here is that we have been set free to serve God alone. The freedom that Jesus gives is not symbolic but actual (John 8:36). It is the freedom to be set free from the bondages of sin (Romans 6:18), the privilege and honor to have not religious institutions or laws guiding us but rather the freedom giving Spirit of God indwelling (2 For 3:17). We no longer live to please men but God, and our service should be to him alone (Colossians 2:8, 1 Thess 2:4, 1 Corinthians 7:23).

Christian freedom is subject only to the self-imposed constraint of Christian charity. No-one may dictate what Christians must do in indifferent matters such as food or the observance of special days (see *Adiaphora*); it is for them to restrict their freedom voluntarily if its exercise may harm the spiritual life of others. Plainly, true spiritual freedom will not lead Christians into courses of action which enslave them, nor can it encourage practices which are generally unhelpful and not conducive to the healthy upbuilding of the whole believing community.<sup>10</sup>

*Main Idea: we are free to serve God as the Spirit leads, not at the pleasure of men.*

## Serving God Alone

This might seem basic, but it is foundational. We must be people whose attention and service to God is absolute, and such service is to God and his indwelling Spirit — not other organizations, not other men, not other doctrines, but Christ alone.

This is expressed in the Law (Exodus 20:3, Deuteronomy 6:13, 10:20). It is expressed in the historical biblical books (1 Samuel 7:3), it is expressed by Jesus under temptation (Matthew 4:10) and in his teaching (Matthew 6:24), it is expressed by Peter in Acts when people were trying to tell him what to do (Acts 5:29).

Now, it is true that we are to mutually serve one another (1 Peter 4:10-11) and mutually submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21), but we are to serve no man.

Also in this vein is the concept of not being of this “this leader” or “that leader,” but rather seeking Christ and him alone as your leader. To seek followers to follow a particular person, idea, or movement in place of Christ is wrongheaded and dangerous. Paul puts it this way, “For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not being merely human?” The idea here is to serve God alone.

*Main Idea: Our service to God is stifled or twisted if it is through another entity. God wants us to have a mind of singular service. We need to not call individuals to follow us supremely.*

## We Have One Mediator

Again, this is simplistic. We have but one mediator between God and man, that is, the person of Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). He is not only a priest but he is the high and perfect priest

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<sup>10</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 265.

(Hebrews 8:6ff). He is our advocate (1 John 2:1). He is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

To say that any human pastor or any human institution has, in any way, sway or replacement of this mediator relationship we enjoy in Christ is dangerous.

***Main Idea:*** *We have only one mediator between us and God, and it is not any human or institution.*

## **The Priesthood of All Believers**

Another way to describe the equality of all Christians before God is in the phrase “the priesthood of all believers.”

The Protestant doctrine that all Christians stand before God through the High Priest Jesus Christ and without the mediation of other people. In opposition to the mediatorial role of Catholic priests ordained through holy orders, the Reformers affirmed the personal responsibility of all people to hear the gospel and be saved. A corollary is that all church members are divinely appointed and empowered to minister to one another through teaching the Word, praying, and, for some, choosing church leaders. This position does not do away with the office of ministry to which God appoints certain church leaders.<sup>11</sup>

The reverse is also true, the provision of leaders and teachers by God does not negate the role of all Christians to be spiritually active in mutual accountability, mutual love, mutual study and all aspects of the Christian life.

***Main Idea:*** *Elders and leaders need to recognize the “brotherhood” of saints that God has also provided for them, as Jesus taught.*

## **Teaching the Scriptures / Who is primarily the teacher?**

While God graciously gives people in our lives to teach and to train us — fathers, mothers, pastors, teachers — God has seen fit to provide for us the greatest teacher in Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

**1 John 2:27** / But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie — just as it has taught you, abide in him.

We have all we need to be taught the Word in the Holy Spirit. If we replace him with a human teacher, we short-circuit what can be done. A pastor can only be in one place at one time — the Spirit can be active in the lives of all the members of a church and teaching and guiding at any time of the day.

This is expressed by Jesus (John 14:17, 26, John 16:31) as well as the Apostle John (1 John 2:20-21). This is expressed in Matthew 23, which was previously discussed above, where Jesus said we have “one teacher” and “one instructor” (Matthew 23:7-10).

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<sup>11</sup> Gregg R. Allison, “Priesthood of Believers,” in *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 171.



The role of human teachers is to encourage the pursuit of truth and push people into the reliance of the Holy Spirit, not to have them develop in other people a reliance on them for knowledge, that is dangerous. This may actually constitute “drawing away disciples after [themselves]” in Acts 20.

If elders or leaders attempt, intentionally or unintentionally, to suppress or supersede the role of the Holy Spirit as teacher in the lives of their congregation they can do immense damage.

***Main Idea:** If we get the idea that we are the “teachers” of everyone else and push for that role, we short-circuit the Holy Spirit’s ministry in people’s lives.*

## **Submitting as an Individual Act of Will, not Subservience**

1 Corinthians 9:19 (ESV) / For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.

Ephesians 5:15–21 (ESV) / 15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Submission is not subservience.<sup>12</sup> It is the intentional act of the will, when a free being personally (of his own choice, not the choice of others) submits to another. We see this clearly in the Corinthian passage above, where Paul states that from a stance of freedom he “submits” to others. He is not putting himself under their command, but choosing to submit, to give up his own rights and will.

Likewise in the Ephesian passage Paul is encouraging us to all mutually submit to one another — this is not to put ourselves under someone’s command, but to show deference to others. Though we are told to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” most of us would agree that if another believer told you to commit a murder or a lie you could freely and with a clear conscious choose to not submit. This would in this instance be the right thing to do, as a person chooses to follow God as opposed to man.

We can see this even in our command to submit to every authority. When the authority is asking us to do something that is good and for our benefit and in line with the desires of God, it is the principle that we be obedient. If that same government tells us to stop worshipping Jesus or not share the gospel, we should respond like Peter and John did to the powers that be at that time — “we choose to obey God, not men.”

Submission is not subservience. Subservience is not freedom, but tyranny. Submission is beautiful, personal, and volitional. Subservience is forced submission, which is not submission at all.

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<sup>12</sup> **Logos AI Search / What is Biblical Submission?** / Biblical submission to others is described as a voluntary act of putting others first, rooted in love and self-control. It is characterized as an inner quality of gentleness that affirms the leadership of others, particularly in the context of marriage. This concept is not about accepting a superior force, but rather about one equal person voluntarily accepting the authority of another equal person. Biblical submission is likened to Jesus Christ’s example of serving others and submitting to God’s will. It’s important to note that submission does not imply inferiority or require blind obedience in all circumstances. The Bible emphasizes that both men and women are to submit to God and help one another, recognizing each other’s strengths and weaknesses. In essence, biblical submission is described as a voluntary release of one’s rights and privileges for a higher purpose, which can require both the courage to speak truth and the strength to be silent when appropriate.

***Main Idea:** When people ask for your submission, let them know that they need to be submissive back, and that you need to serve God alone.*

## **Mutual Submission**

Submission is not subservience. It is a personal, volitional choice to put ourselves under others. This is a choice we make before God. It must be stressed here that it is a mutual thing — not one that is ever a singular direction only.

In scripture, as stated above, we are called to live in such a way as to be “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” The Greek word for “one another” is a “reciprocal pronoun, necessarily only plural” as it denotes for each person who receives this command to also submit.<sup>13</sup> So, we are always to submit to each other.

In the immediate context of the verse, we see Paul asking wives to submit, children to submit, and children to submit. Within that context, we see also there is a reciprocal plea by Paul to tell husbands to also act in such a way as to submit to them in love, or in the case of childhood, to act in such a way as not to provoke anger, or masters of bondservants to not threaten them. Submission is always mutual.

***Main Idea:** Mutual submission demands mutual submission. If one side is not submitting, it is not submission but subjugation. We must be careful how we treat each other, not abusing one another with words and threats.*

## **Study Like the Bereans**

If we are to just sit down and listen to our leaders and trust them regardless of what they say, why were the Berean Christians praised for their examination of Scripture to confirm the words Paul was saying? This was an apostle we are talking about; they were confirming with their own study the Apostle’s words.

Paul could not have known that the Bereans would become a model for how to study the Bible. Luke gave a threefold description of the Bereans’ response to Paul’s preaching. First, they approached Paul’s teaching with some open-mindedness. The expression more noble-minded than the Thessalonians means that the Bereans were objective in their evaluation of Paul’s message. They judged his message by the standard of Scripture rather than their preconceived prejudices. Second, they also received the Scriptures with great eagerness. They had an appetite to learn. Finally, they examined the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so. They carefully evaluated Paul’s message to determine for themselves if it was true.<sup>14</sup>

The word that Luke uses to describe them was “more noble” — the Greek word here in this context means “open-minded” with a “willingness to learn.” They were also described as “eager” — they were zealous to study God’s word and to get it right.

Trust, but verify. That is what God encouraged in the early church in the book of Acts. Why would we stop this behavior? Why would we want people to not keep us accountable?

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<sup>13</sup> Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical lexicon of the Greek New Testament* 2000: n. pag. Print. Baker’s Greek New Testament Library.

<sup>14</sup> William H. Marty, “Acts,” in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, ed. Michael A. Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 1711–1712.

***Main Idea:** God desires us to keep each other accountable, not just simply swallow everything that everyone says, including what our pastors and elders say.*

## **Individual Conscience**

Another way leaders who overreach their authority can damage the church is found in the concept of individual conscience. During the pandemic era, there were many, many different opinions on how to manage all the differing directives, injunctions, mandates, and perhaps even a few laws that were sent out from local, federal, and state officials. People had varying opinions on what of this to follow; some believed in following everything to the letter, others believed in hardly listening to any of it.

Many people felt that much of this was an overreach by the government on the freedoms of people more than a means of protecting people from harm. I can personally attest to speaking to well over 30 people deeply about these things that some of the claims on both sides were to the level of a Christian conviction — We felt different about how to go forward.

Our small church responded by letting people have individual choice based upon their own convictions; we provided a fully masked service and a second service where you could choose to be masked or not. We tried to respect each other — not condemn each other.

This had its origins in scripture. While some early believers sought to follow every dictate of the Mosaic Law (it's the Law, you know), many Gentiles and some Jews believed that they could make a choice.

**Romans 14:5** / One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

We survived COVID without losing many people at all, while many churches we know were losing scores. Respect for others won the day. God's gracious letters helped us through.

***Main Idea:** If elders overreach their authority, they can play havoc with this plea to respect other people's conscience.*

## **When An Authority Goes Contrary to God or the Word**

Let's say that the harsher idea of "obey your elders" is correct, even for the sake of argument. I believe I've shown that the extreme interpretation of "do what we say, no matter what, sit down and shut up" is not correct, but let's say that it was for a minute. Even if it were right, would it still be true if there was an abuse of power, or an abuse of a person, behind it? Should there be no accountability? Would people be able to investigate carefully the claims of wrongdoing or should those claims be covered up? How far should we take this?

John MacArthur pastors in California. Their COVID injunctions were very restrictive, and also very selective — some groups must shut down, other groups could have large rallies. His church fought legally these injunctions and had to give some sort of rationale to his people, and to the rest of the world. Their church decided to fight the restrictions in real time, and in legal battles. Here is what he wrote in a blog during that time.

Please notice in verses 1 and 2 that government is from God, by God, of God. It is designed as a necessary restraint in a world of sinners. Verses 3 and 4 tell us it is not a threat to those whose behavior is good, but evil. It is those who do evil who should be afraid, not those who do good. In fact, it offers praise to those who do good, and brings wrath on those who do evil. And rulers actually, according to verse 6, are servants of God, devoted to that service.

This is God's design for government. The problem is, when government ceases to function by God's design, it yields up its authority. The same would be true in a family. God's design is that the father lead the family. When the father leads in a destructive and evil way, he yields up the right to exercise that God-given authority...

When government turns the divine design on its head and protects those who do evil and makes those who do good afraid, it forfeits its divine purpose.<sup>15</sup>

MacArthur argued that when a legitimate authority works against its purpose, it yields up its authority. If the church leaders were truly given divine authority (one uniquely above all other people) and they misused it, they too should be ignored at best or held accountable.

***Main Idea:** abuse of authority means a loss of authority.*

## **God as Our Judge**

Another concept that can be trampled upon is the idea that God is our judge. We have no other.

**James 4:12** / There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

Romans 14:4 / Who are you to pass judgement on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. Nd he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

We do a great disservice to God by attempting to become the judges of others. We make decisions, but we do not rule one another.

## **Paul's View of the Equality of Leaders, God Shows No Partiality**

Galatians 2:1–10 (ESV) / Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. 2 I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. 3 But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. 4 Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery— 5 to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. 6 And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. 7 On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised 8 (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), 9 and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

Lest we begin to think the the New Testament puts elders or Apostles on pedestals, we must first be confronted with Paul's own attitude toward the elders and apostles in Jerusalem. Paul's view of the authority of Jerusalem is not

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<sup>15</sup> MacArthur, John. When Government Rewards Evil and Punishes Good

outright, but rather with the respect he had toward any other person — he believed in not showing partiality even to these people. Consider his words above, “... and from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me.”

In other words Paul was saying that God had shared the gospel with him, and he got it straight from the Lord, and he took it to the leaders to compare notes — they didn’t add anything to it. And if they tried, he would have told them no, because it was better to obey God than man.

It was after this passage that Paul discusses his confrontation of Peter for public sin. Paul did not consider these men greater than he, or less than he, but equal. This is the nature of leadership.

## **No Partiality**

The concept of showing no particular partiality to people regardless of their authority, or their lack of authority, is embedded in scripture both in the New and Old Testaments. To come to the conclusion that elders always are right or innocent while others are not is a travesty of Biblical justice. Prejudice and prejudging on basis of authority, riches, or the like is wrong to the core. This is obvious and does not need to be explained more than this. Please consider the following verses.

**Deuteronomy 1:17** / You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.’

**Leviticus 19:15** / You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.

**James 2:1–4 (ESV)** / My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. 2 For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 3 and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

**1 Timothy 5:21 (ESV)** / In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.

## **The Danger of misuse of position and authority**

We must be very, very careful not to misuse the Word of God or positions of authority. We must be more circumspect and honest and open and submissive.

## **Personally / the abuse of other believers**

I want to speak plainly to you. When the term spiritual abuse is used, people tend to conjure up pictures of “sexual” and “predatory” behavior and cannot believe normal people that they know might be involved in such behaviors. But let us take some time to look at definitions — for education is in order, so we don’t just give knee-jerk reactions. Here is a definition from a Seminary president who has written and studied the subject, not from a crackpot.

Spiritual abuse, then, is when a spiritual leader—such as a pastor, elder, or head of a Christian organization—wields his position of spiritual authority in such a way that he manipulates, domineers, bullies, and intimidates those under him, as a means of accomplishing what he takes to be biblical and/or spiritual goals.<sup>16</sup>

Notice the three aspects that constitute spiritual abuse:

- A person with a position of spiritual leadership
- Who desires to accomplish what he believes are biblical / spiritual goals
- Who wields that authority in manipulative, domineering, bullying, or intimidating ways.

This is abusive behavior, no different than a person in the secular workforce wielding his authority to domineer over others. In this instance, it is someone who says “God wants this to happen and I have the right to do it because God gave me that right.”

It is not difficult to imagine a person in leadership who desires to get something done who wields authority in manipulative or domineering ways. That is common. It is, however, abusive. It is not loving. It is not respectful. It is not treating people the way Jesus loved the church. Did Jesus ever manipulate, domineer, bully, or intimidate the disciples when he walked the earth? No, rather he washed their feet. He died for them.

This is dangerous. This is common in the church. I know, I have experienced it. It is a harmful thing. It is harmful every time it happens; it is dangerous enough to desire to bring accountability to bear on it.

This is made possible by the abuse of scripture we have been discussing in this document. When people think they have the right to do whatever they want because they are in authority, and when they think they should not be held accountable, they have made abuse more likely.

Let’s look at another definition.

The word spiritual refers to something affecting a human spirit or soul. Abuse means to mistreat another, to deceive or do harm. When we use the word spiritual to describe abuse, we are talking about using that

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<sup>16</sup> Michael J. Kruger, “What Is Spiritual Abuse?,” Canon Fodder, February 8, 2021, <https://www.michaeljkruger.com/what-is-spiritual-abuse>.

which is sacred—including God’s Word—to control, misuse, deceive, or damage a person created in his image.<sup>17</sup>

Here we see the clarification of the use of “God’s very word” to be the means of control, misuse, deception, or damage of another person. Can you not think of a time when someone has claimed God’s right as leaders to push people around? This is abuse.

Here is one other definition. I want to give a few so you, as a reader, can see it clearly.

Abuse: A pattern of coercive control (ongoing actions or inactions) that proceeds from a mentality of entitlement to **power**, whereby, through intimidation, manipulation, and isolation, the abuser keeps his/her target subordinated and under their control. This pattern can be emotional, verbal, psychological, spiritual, sexual, financial, social, and physical. [next few citations as well] <sup>18</sup>

In this definition, we can see this in various shades of abuse: emotional, verbal, psychological, spiritual, sexual, financial, social, and physical. Abuse comes in many shades; we must learn to recognize it.

It is about control to break the will or change the mind and it is devious.

Coercive control is also an important point to note here. Abusive individuals are engaging in actions that are forcing people in overt or covert ways to accept violations of their own personhood and consciences until their consciences are calloused or they no longer have the will to resist or complain. Abuse inherently seeks to silence, to shut down the voice of the one being abused. Following Webster’s definition, this is the improper “use” of a human being, the exploitation of another for the benefit of the one engaged in the abusive behavior to the detriment of the one being abused.

It is about breaking the spirit and gaining control of another person’s attitudes and actions.

One person objectifying another by failing to honor the mutual dignity and humanity in the other, and misusing power, using exploitation and/or manipulation to coercively gain or maintain control over another.

It is about hiding the real source of authority, keeping it silent, informal, and unelected. It is about hiding the real behavior of people. It is about lording over others.

In dysfunctional churches, the real authority and power bases are frequently informal, unelected, and unaccountable. Concerns for the character and behavior of the leaders are held behind closed doors in confidential meetings, without the full transparency of the church. Decisions are made by a small clique of the powerful, and the layperson is kept out of loop. Often the behaviors of the leaders do not measure up to biblical standards. Their authority is lording over people. People are abused, controlled, and managed, rather than loved, released, and supported. This should never be trusted.

It is buttressed by the theological misinterpretation of verses like Hebrews 13:17 that seem, in a quick and misguided way to give ecclesiastical figures authority that is unquestioned. There needs to be more accountability in the church not less. More transparency. More honesty. Less control and less manipulation.

The New Testament makes clear to spiritual leaders that they have no official or ecclesiastical power by which to lead. They may only appeal to their followers and persuade them to cooperate.

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<sup>17</sup> Diane Langberg, “When the Sheep Are Preyed Upon,” Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, accessed February 13, 2024, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/spotlight-articles/when-the-sheep-are-preyed-upon>.

<sup>18</sup> Keith Gordon Ford, Bitter Fruit: Dysfunction and Abuse in the Local Church (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2021).

By reading the New Testament, followers should understand that they cannot be coerced or shamed into submitting to any leader. They are free to cooperate or not.<sup>19</sup>

This is the real truth. There should be none of this, it should not be tolerated. Such behavior damages people, damages people's thought about church, damages their thoughts about who God is. If elders and leaders are reflecting what God is like, then, if there is abuse, God is not very nice and not very kind. God does not love them.

If there is honesty and confession, God's reputation might be restored.

I would like to point out one other thing. The results of spiritual abuse on people. This I know full well. I will not tell you my experience at this juncture, but what books on the subject say.

In sum, spiritual abuse is prone to create deep and serious mental scars that in turn can produce long-term physiological and spiritual consequences. This is why God desires leaders and elders to behave in certain ways and avoid others. This is why we are called in a true church to keep watch over people's very souls, and guard the weak, and protect the powerless.

When we look at cases of spiritual abuse, we see this truth played out. Abuse victims often suffer from a number of physical ailments consistent with PTSD: insomnia, high blood pressure, chronic fatigue, tremors, heart problems, joint and muscle pain, and even auto-immune disorders.<sup>20</sup>

Survivors of spiritual abuse may experience an array of negative emotional/psychological symptoms, such as shame, guilt, confusion, anxiety, grief, and regret. Survivors may feel shock or disbelief over events during and after the abuse. Spiritual abuse can trigger previous trauma. For example, if a survivor of spiritual abuse is also a survivor of childhood abuse, the negative impact of childhood abuse may be triggered, compounding the impact of the spiritual abuse. The victim may experience anger directed toward the spiritual abuser, toward himself or herself and toward God. There may be disillusionment with faith, church leaders, and religious organizations.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike physical abuse that often results in bruised bodies, spiritual and pastoral abuse leaves scars on the psyche and soul. It is inflicted by persons who are accorded respect and honor in our society by virtue of their role as religious leaders and models of spiritual authority. They base that authority on the Bible, the Word of God, and see themselves as shepherds with a sacred trust. But when they violate that trust, when they abuse their authority and when they misuse ecclesiastical power to control and manipulate the flock, the results can be catastrophic.<sup>22</sup>

**DOUBTS ABOUT CHRISTIANITY.** These doubts about the church are closely related to doubts about Christianity itself. Victims of spiritual abuse often testify to how they struggle to believe what they once did.

**DOUBTS ABOUT GOD.** Even for those who don't doubt the truth of the Christian faith, spiritual abuse can have another adverse effect: it can distort people's image of what God is like. Because of the toxic behavior of an abusive pastor, a Christian might think God himself must be that way. They may think God is never satisfied with them and is perpetually looking for failure and eager to punish and humiliate them if they stumble. This negative (and unbiblical) view of God can have deleterious spiritual effects.

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<sup>19</sup> Ken Blue, Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1993), 35.

<sup>20</sup>Michael J. Kruger, Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2022), 103.

<sup>21</sup> Karen Roudkovski, Understanding Spiritual Abuse: What It Is and How to Respond (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024), 116.

<sup>22</sup>Ken Blue, Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1993), 12.



DOUBTS ABOUT ONESELF. For many spiritual abuse victims, their experience also challenges the way they view themselves. While they may have had a confident Christian identity before the abuse, all that is now called into question.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2022), 107–108.

## Addendum /

For fun I thought it might be interesting to run a question by the AI services available today, to see what machine learning thinks...

### Logos AI summary / does the Bible teach that elders or pastors are to be obeyed without question?

The Bible does not teach that elders or pastors are to be obeyed without question. While there are passages that encourage respect and submission to church leaders, this is balanced with the understanding that leaders are accountable to God and should be evaluated based on their adherence to biblical teachings[1][2]. The Bible acknowledges that elders can sometimes go astray or teach incorrect things, and it provides guidance for addressing such situations[3]. Church members are encouraged to be like the Bereans, testing the teachings of their leaders against Scripture[1]. The authority of elders is not absolute; it is derived from and limited by Christ and His Word[2]. If leaders preach a message contrary to the gospel, they should not be obeyed[3]. The Bible also outlines procedures for correcting and disciplining elders who sin[3]. While elders are to be respected and their leadership accepted, especially when it aligns with sound doctrine and godly conduct[4][5], this does not equate to unquestioning obedience. The church is described as a family where leaders serve as models and exercise authority through the ministry of the word, but this authority is not meant to be abusive or power-hungry[5].

[1] Keith Gordon Ford, *Bitter Fruit: Dysfunction and Abuse in the Local Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2021).

[2] Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 289.

[3] John Piper, *Sermons from John Piper (1990–1999)* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2007).

[4] Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Alresford, Hampshire: John Hunt Publishers Ltd, 2000), 299.

[5] Keri Folmar, *How Can Women Thrive in the Local Church?*, *9Marks: Church Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 33.

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Perplexity / AI search engine

## Biblical Teaching on Obedience to Elders and Pastors

### Key Passages and Their Meaning

The Bible does instruct believers to obey and submit to their spiritual leaders, most directly in Hebrews 13:17:

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." [1235689](#)

This passage, along with similar instructions elsewhere (e.g., 1 Peter 5:5, Acts 20:28), establishes a principle of respect and submission to the authority of elders or pastors within the church.

### Nature and Limits of Obedience

However, this obedience is not described as absolute or unquestioning:

- **Servant Leadership, Not Domineering:** Elders are called to lead by example and humility, not by lording authority over others (1 Peter 5:2-3). Their authority is rooted in teaching God's Word and shepherding the flock, not in personal control or domination<sup>610</sup>.
- **Accountability and Correction:** The New Testament recognizes the reality of false or abusive leaders. It provides mechanisms for accountability, such as the requirement for multiple witnesses to bring an accusation against an elder (1 Timothy 5:19), and the instruction to discipline elders who persist in sin (1 Timothy 5:20)<sup>1267</sup>.
- **Obedience to God First:** When a leader's teaching or commands contradict God's Word, believers are called to obey God rather than men (Acts 4:18-20)<sup>147</sup>. Christians are under no obligation to submit to elders who overstep biblical authority or teach contrary to Scripture<sup>47</sup>.
- **Congregational Responsibility:** The congregation has a role in affirming, appointing, and-if necessary-removing elders who stray from biblical teaching or moral integrity<sup>79</sup>.

## Conclusion

The Bible teaches that elders and pastors are to be obeyed and submitted to as spiritual leaders, but this obedience is not to be without question or limit. Their authority is grounded in faithfulness to Scripture and servant leadership. When leaders abuse their authority, teach contrary to God's Word, or act sinfully, Christians are not required to submit and are called to uphold biblical truth and accountability<sup>1247</sup>.

## Citations:

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3. [https://www.openbible.info/topics/obedience\\_to\\_your\\_pastor](https://www.openbible.info/topics/obedience_to_your_pastor)
4. <https://firmfoundationpv.org/how-to-submit-to-your-pastor-a-biblical-understanding-of-submission-to-elders/>
5. <https://biblehub.com/hebrews/13-17.htm>
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Answer from Perplexity: [pplx.ai/share](https://pplx.ai/share)