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THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHURCH LEADERS

Hebrews 13:7, 17-19, 22-25

By

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Hebrews Lesson 58

The Responsibilities of Church Leaders Hebrews 13:7, 17-19, 22-25

Many writers agree that there is a leadership crisis in the churches of America, but they do not agree on the solution to the problem. Many import American business principles into the local church, without much regard for what the Bible says about the requirements and responsibilities of church leadership.

Thus many modern pastors minimize their responsibility of preaching God's Word and focus rather on being the CEO of the church. As church entrepreneurs, they envision and implement growth plans. They view the church as a product to be marketed to the consumer. As in the retail business, you have to give the customers what they are looking for. Many of these pastor-CEO's are very successful, building impressive church campuses that cater to thousands of weekly "customers." They write "how-to" books that share their proven principles for building the church.

If Scripture is sufficient for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3-4), and it equips God's people for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17), it should say something about the important matter of church leadership. Since Christ promised to build His church (Matt. 16:18), we should look to His inspired Word for direction on what church leaders should be and what they should do. Two weeks ago, we looked at our text from the standpoint of the duties of church members toward their leaders. Today we will reverse this. While our text is not comprehensive, it does give some vital principles about the responsibilities of church leaders. We learn...

Godly church leaders are responsible to lead God's flock by walking personally with God and by working together to help church members do the same.

There are four main aspects of this statement:

1. Godly church leaders are responsible to lead.

That sounds like a tautology, but it needs to be said. The New Testament does not teach a distinction between "clergy" and "laity," in that every believer is a priest with full access to God (1 Pet.

2:9). But it does teach a distinction between leaders and followers in the local church. The New Testament uses different names or titles to refer to church leaders. They are called *elders* (Acts 20:17), which refers to maturity in the faith. At other times, they are called *overseers* (1 Tim. 3:1, 2), which refers to their function of superintending the church. (In Titus 1:5, 7 and Acts 20:17, 28 the two terms are used of the same office.) They are called *pastors* (Eph. 4:11), which means *shepherds*. Peter uses all three of these terms (1 Pet. 5:1, 2) when he exhorts the *elders* to "*shepherd* [pastor] the flock of God among you, exercising *oversight* . . ." He goes on (verse 4) to refer to Christ as "the Chief Shepherd" (or, Pastor).

Another word for church leaders is the Greek verb, *prohistemi*, (lit., "to stand before") which is translated "have charge over" (1 Thess. 5:12). It refers to the function of elders "who rule well" (1 Tim. 5:17). It also refers to a man's responsibility to "manage" his own household (1 Tim. 3:4, 5, 12). The word in our text (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24) is a different word (our English word, hegemony, comes from it) that simply means, *leaders*. It is used of Paul, to distinguish him from Barnabas (Acts 14:12) as "the chief speaker." It is also used of Judas Barsabbas and Silas, who are called "leading men among the brethren" (Acts 15:22).

But the point is, *leaders* should *lead*. Leadership is primarily influence, and the way that church leaders influence others is by their godly example and by their teaching of God's word (Heb. 13:7). Because elders in the local church must lead by example, most of the qualifications for that office in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 are godly character qualities. The one exception is that they should be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2), or to "exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9).

Leadership requires having a clear biblical picture of what the local church ought to be and what it ought to be doing, and continually communicating that to the church. It also requires dealing with problems that arise in the church. President John F. Kennedy observed (source unknown), "No easy problem ever comes to the President of the United States. If they are easy to solve, somebody else has solved them."

Often, out of an attempt to please everyone, church leaders dodge difficult problems. They don't want to confront an influen-

tial church member who is in sin. They don't want to teach on doctrines that are not popular, even if they are biblical. They don't confront someone who is teaching error, for fear of stirring up conflict. They don't want to get involved in resolving relational conflicts in the church or in church families. But to dodge such difficult matters is to fail to lead the church. Church leaders must actively pursue God and His truth, and help others to do the same.

2. Godly church leaders are responsible to walk personally with God.

In 1 Timothy 4:16, Paul exhorts his younger co-worker, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching..." In Acts 20:28, he told the Ephesian elders, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock..." Our text brings out four aspects of the personal walk of church leaders:

A. Godly church leaders must be careful to maintain a good conscience before God and others (13:18).

Paul told Felix (Acts 24:16), "I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men." The conscience is that inner sense of right and wrong that God has put in every human heart (Rom. 2:15). It is not infallible, in that it must be informed by God's Word of truth. It can become seared or hardened (1 Tim. 4:2; Eph. 4:18-19). Even if your conscience is misinformed, it is always a sin to violate it (Rom. 14:14, 23; James 4:17). Thus Paul told Timothy (1 Tim. 1:5), "The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

The main way to keep a clear conscience is to walk in daily obedience to God's Word. If you knowingly sin, confess it immediately to God and seek the forgiveness of the one you sinned against. Personal obedience to God is the prerequisite to leading others in obedience to God.

B. Godly church leaders live with a view of answering to God someday (13:17).

They are continually cognizant of the fact that they will "give an account" to God, both for their own lives and for the church over which God has placed them as overseers. No man or group of men has final authority over the church. We are merely under-

shepherds, accountable to Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd. It is *His* church, not mine! Church leaders are stewards or managers of the church for Christ, who bought it with His blood. Keeping this fact constantly in mind prevents any abuse of authority or any taking advantage of people for personal gain. Every church leader should read often Ezekiel 34, where God confronts the shepherds who have not tended and cared for His flock, but have used it for their own selfish ends. He will call us to account!

- C. Godly church leaders are men of faith and prayer, who encourage others to pray (13:7, 18, 20-21).

In verse 7, the author tells the Hebrews to remember and imitate the faith of the leaders who have gone before them. In verse 18, he asks them to pray for him, and in verses 20-21, he models prayer by praying for them. (See also Hebrews 11 on faith.)

Here is precisely where American business principles do not apply to the local church. The church is not to be run as a business, where we make plans and implement those plans according to the best of human wisdom. The church is to move forward by faith in the living God and by dependence on Him through prayer. Our aim as church leaders is certainly not to lead by our collective wisdom, but rather to seek the mind of the Lord for His church as we wait upon Him by prayer and faith.

Speaking for myself (and, I'm sure, for all of the elders, too), I'm in way over my head! I don't have all the answers that I need to lead this local church. I don't know enough to guide people through complex personal problems. Because of this, prayer isn't just a formality at the beginning of elder meetings or counseling sessions. It's an essential lifeline to the living God! Everything that we do as a church should be done through prayer and faith!

- D. Godly church leaders are willing to suffer for Christ if need be (13:23).

The author mentions Timothy, who has just been released from prison. Paul had exhorted Timothy (2 Tim. 2:8), "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God." Apparently, Timothy had followed Paul's admonition.

We easily could face persecution for our faith in the years ahead, and the leaders are always the main targets for the enemy. Even if we do not suffer persecution from without, leaders must be ready to suffer criticism and personal attacks, often from those in the church. Charles Spurgeon's *Autobiography* ([Banner of Truth], 1:303-327) contains an entire chapter on the early criticisms and slanders that were leveled against him, often by other pastors. Late in his life, he went through many other unfair attacks because he stood against the growing liberalism in the Baptist Union.

Leaders who hold firmly to biblical truth will face such attacks, because no matter how kindly you say it, God's truth always offends someone. They don't dare attack God directly, so they attack the leader who delivered the message. It is never fun, but it goes with the job. Spurgeon's wife helped him deal with the attacks by putting Matthew 5:11-12 on a plaque, which he read every morning, "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Thus godly church leaders are responsible to lead, and a main way that they do so is by walking personally with God.

3. Godly church leaders are responsible to work together.

"Leaders" is plural. The New Testament clearly teaches that leadership in the local church is to be plural (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5). Plural leadership is a safeguard against the abuse of authority. Also, the task of shepherding a local church is far too great for one man, unless the church is very small. There are two implications of this truth:

A. Godly church leaders are called to work together.

In our text, the author works closely with Timothy (13:23) and with the leaders of the Hebrew church. He tells the church to greet their leaders (13:24). It is the leaders (plural) who keep watch over the souls of the flock (13:17). Obviously, they could only do this by working together as a team.

In the New Testament, the only example of one dominant leader is negative. The apostle John confronts Diotrephes, who loved to be first among them, and who took it upon himself to put

people out of the church (3 John 9-10). By virtue of personality, spiritual gifts, and spiritual maturity, there are examples of spiritual leaders who were first among equals. Peter was the spokesman for the twelve. James was a dominant leader in the early Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13-21; 21:18-26; Gal. 2:6, 9). Paul became the leader of the first missionary team, even though Barnabas had been a believer longer than Paul had. But all of these men submitted to one another in the Lord and taught that as believers, we must do the same (Eph. 5:21).

B. Godly church leaders put a priority on godly relationships.

The author is concerned that the Hebrews work harmoniously with their leaders, so that they may lead with joy, not with grief (13:17). He asks for prayer, stating his intention to conduct himself honorably in all things, and his desire to be restored to them soon (13:18-19). He mentions Timothy, and traveling with him to visit them. He asks them to greet both the leaders and all the saints on his behalf. Relationships ooze throughout these verses.

The whole Bible is summed up by the two great commandments, which are both relational: Love God and love others. This means that godly church leaders must work at relating to one another in love, and they must work at helping church members relate to one another in love. This was Paul's concern when he wrote Philippians, that two women, Euodia and Syntyche would "live in harmony in the Lord" (Phil. 4:2). (How would you feel if Paul named you like that in an open letter!) He was concerned for the Corinthian church because Chloe's people had told him of the quarrels that were taking place there (1 Cor. 1:11-13).

Whenever you get several hundred people together, especially when the group consists of those from different backgrounds, ages, and even nationalities, you have a huge potential for conflict. When you throw in different personalities, differing preferences, and the need to confront sin and false teaching, it's a miracle that the church has survived all of these centuries! One of the main responsibilities of church leaders is to be examples of godly relationships and to help others work through relational problems. Thus godly church leaders are responsible to lead the flock by walking personally with God and by working together in godly relationships. Finally,

4. Godly church leaders are responsible to help those in the church walk personally with God.

Again, our text is not comprehensive, but it reveals at least four aspects of this task.

- A. Godly church leaders help church members by keeping watch over their souls (13:17).

The Greek word translated “keeping watch” means “to keep oneself awake,” and thus, “to keep watch, guard, or care for” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Walter Bauer, William Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich [University of Chicago Press], Second Edition, p. 14). The image was drawn from shepherds keeping watch over their flocks (*Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* ([Harper & Brothers], 1887, p. 9). Shepherds had to stay alert in order to guard their flocks from predators. They had to know the sheep and observe them carefully enough to know when a sheep was sick or missing. They had to go after the strays and try to restore them to the flock. They had to lead them to pasture and clean water (see Ezek. 34:1-16).

These tasks require the discernment to know where people are at spiritually and when they are heading toward spiritual danger. Leaders must love God and people enough to have the courage to confront those who are drifting. While you can only lead those who are willing to be led, godly leaders must always make the effort. The task is more difficult in our day when there are many different churches in town. If people get upset at one church, or if the leaders there try to confront some sin in their lives, they just move down the road to another church that welcomes them. Sadly, they usually carry their problems with them.

“Keeping watch over souls” is an overwhelming task, and the responsibility for it does not fall only on church leaders. Every spiritually mature believer is responsible to help restore those who are caught in any trespass and to bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:1-2). If you know of someone in the church who is straying from the Lord, but you don’t know what to do, go to one of the elders for counsel. We do our best to keep watch over the flock, but often we are not even aware when someone is in need. We all need to work together to care for one another spiritually.

B. Godly church leaders help church members by faithfully teaching God's Word (13:7, 22).

In verse 7, the author mentions the leaders who spoke the word of God to the flock. In verse 22, he mentions his own brief "word of exhortation" (the Epistle to the Hebrews). While all elders should be "able to teach," some especially "work hard at teaching and preaching" and should be financially supported for that task (1 Tim. 5:17). I assure you that it *is* hard work, although spiritually rewarding! In one of the strongest admonitions in the Bible, Paul's almost final words to Timothy were (2 Tim. 4:1-5),

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

C. Godly church leaders help church members by aiming at their joy and spiritual profit (13:17).

"Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." This refers first to the leaders' joy, but it obviously extends to the joy and spiritual profit of all of the members. Those who are walking in obedience to Christ will know His joy (John 15:10-11). Godly leaders rejoice to see those in the flock walking in the truth (3 John 4).

D. Godly church leaders help church members by emphasizing God's grace (13:25).

"Grace be with you all" is a salutation, but it is far more than a mere formality. It is a spiritual desire and emphasis throughout the New Testament. In Hebrews, he mentioned that Jesus, "by the grace of God... might taste death for everyone" (2:9). He encouraged us to "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need"

(4:16). He has warned against insulting the Spirit of grace (10:29) and falling short of God's grace (12:15). In 13:9, he cautioned against legalism, adding, "for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace...."

Far too many Christian churches and homes are marked by legalism, but leaders are responsible to create an atmosphere of God's grace. Grace is never a license to sin, but rather, it instructs us "to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:11-12). When we sin (and we all do!), God's grace forgives and restores. God's grace is patient with the weak, encouraging them to grow in the Lord.

Conclusion

D. E. Hoste, who was a missionary leader with the China Inland Mission, wrote (cited in *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, by Iain Murray [Banner of Truth], 2:423),

What is the essential difference between spurious and true Christian leadership? When a man, in virtue of an official position in the church, demands obedience of another, irrespective of the latter's reason and conscience, this is the spirit of tyranny.

When, on the other hand, by the exercise of tact and sympathy, by prayer, spiritual power and sound wisdom, one Christian worker is able to influence and enlighten another, so that the latter, through the medium of his own reason and conscience, is led to alter one course and adopt another, this is true spiritual leadership.

Before all of our elders (including me!) resign and run for their lives, and no others ever aspire to the office of elder, I conclude by reminding you of Paul's words regarding the ministry. After asking, rhetorically, "Who is adequate for these things?" he stated, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5-6). The responsibility of church leadership is impossible, but with God's strength, all things are possible! As leaders, we join the author of Hebrews in asking you, "Pray for us."

Discussion Questions

1. Why is godly leadership more a matter of influence than of style or technique?
2. Since no leader *perfectly* fulfills the biblical requirements, how can we know when a man is qualified?
3. Since some problems correct themselves, how can leaders know which problems deserve their attention?
4. Would it be gossip for a church member to inform a leader about another member who is having problems? Why/why not? To what extent is the entire body responsible to keep watch over one another's souls?

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