



Biblical Insights that are “Out of Sight” (Part 3)

Recognizing and appreciating the awesome work of Bible translators, this study spotlights some aspects of God’s truth that rest just below the surface of Bible reading. Even though “out of sight,” these insights are not “out of reach” for those who diligently study God’s Word.

This article looks carefully at the biblical interaction and communication between believers and their church leaders. The focus of this study is Hebrews 13:17. This verse seems self-explanatory on the surface. Remember, however, we are digging into God’s Word for hidden treasure, and this is one of those verses in which we will find it.

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. *(English Standard Version ... all verses printed in this study are from the English Standard Version unless noted otherwise)*

The key to finding hidden treasure in this verse is to examine closely the opening phrase, focusing specifically on the commands “obey” and “submit.”

At least two different Greek word groups are translated as “obey” in the New Testament. One of these words is ὑπακοή (Greek – Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance number G5219), transliterated as *hupakoe* and pronounced *hu-paw-ko-ay*. The word is derived from the preposition ὑπό (G5259), transliterated *hypo* (meaning “under”) along with the verb ἀκούω (G191), transliterated as *akouō* and meaning “hear.” This word means “to follow instructions” or “to do what one is told to do” by someone in authority. This is not the word for *obey* that is used in Hebrews 13:17.

NOTE: Throughout this study, numbers preceded by the letter G refer to the listing in Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance Greek dictionary. You can access Strong’s at <http://biblesuite.com/strongs.htm> or <http://www.elijah.com/lexicon.html>

The Greek word for “obey” in Hebrews 13:17 is πείθω (G3982), transliterated as *peitho* and pronounced *pay’-tho*. According to *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, which can be accessed at <http://www2.mf.no/bibelprog/vines?word=%AFt0001953>, this word means “to persuade” or “to win over.” The verb form (present, imperative, middle) in Hebrews 13:17 means “to listen to.” *Vine’s Dictionary* goes on to say that the “obedience” of this type is not based on submission to authority but results from persuasion.

In addition, the word for “submit” in this passage is ὑπέικω (G226), transliterated as *hupēikō* and pronounced *hoop-i’-ko*. It is derived from ὑπό (G5259) meaning “under” and *eiko* (G1502) meaning “to yield.” This word is not the common word for “submit” and only occurs here in the New Testament. According to *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*, the word means “to resist no longer, but to give way or yield (properly, of combatants).” Metaphorically, it means to yield to authority and admonition and, thus, to submit.

Although most Bibles translate the verbs in the first part of Hebrews 13:17 as simply “obey” and “submit,” some versions try to indicate the unique sense of these verbs in the translation. For instance, the 2011 edition of the New International Version translates: “have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority.” Similarly, the International Standard Version, Release 2.1, translates it as “continue to follow and be submissive to your leaders.” The Common English Bible has “rely on your leaders and defer to them.”

In light of the meaning of these words (*obey* and *submit*), a more literal translation of Hebrews 13:17 would be, “Allow yourself to be persuaded by (be open to) your leaders and stop resisting them (yield/defer 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.” *(underlining and explanations added)*

Rather than a simple command for believers to obey their leaders and submit to them, this verse actually says much more about the responsibilities of leaders and of followers.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF LEADERS

Commenting on Hebrews 13:17, Ray Stedman states the following in the IVP New Testament Commentary on

Hebrews (<http://www.raystedman.org/hebrews2/heb2comm2.html#note48>).

This verse, along with 1 Thessalonians 5:12, has been widely misunderstood because of the faulty translation of the KJV, NIV and other versions. The words *obey* ... and *submit* and the phrase “are over you in the Lord” (from 1 Thessalonians 5:12) have often fueled a harmful authoritarianism that has turned pastors into autocrats and congregations into personal domains. Such a twisted view of authority ignores entirely Jesus’ words to the disciples: “You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. *But it shall not be so among you: but whoever would be great among you must be your servant*” (Mark 10:42-43 RSV).

Perhaps those words, “It shall not be so among you,” have been among the most ignored sayings of Jesus within the churches. Wherever leadership views itself as having God-given authority to impose rules or limitations on individual Christians or a congregation without their willing consent, these words of Jesus are being violated. Warnings against “lording it over the brethren” are given in 2 Corinthians 1:24 by Paul, in 1 Peter 5:3 by Peter, and in 3 John 9-10 by John.

2 Corinthians 1:24, Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

1 Peter 5:1-3, 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: ² 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; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

3 John 9-10, I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. ¹⁰ So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.

With regard to 1 Thessalonians 5:12, Stedman states in a reference note:

The phrase “those who are over you in the Lord” should simply be “your leaders in the Lord.” There is no thought of being “over” anyone, or others being “under” a leader.

The authority of a Christian leader is not command authority, but servant leadership. A servant has authority, as Jesus said he had, because he awakens by his loving service a desire to comply. Or he is persuasive because of his logic or knowledge.

Speaking of leaders referenced in Hebrews 13:17, Matthew Henry states the following in his commentary on Hebrews 13 (<http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/hebrews/13.html>).

They have no authority to lord it over the people, but to lead them in the ways of God, by informing and instructing them, explaining the word of God to them, and applying it to their several cases. They are not to make laws of their own, but to interpret the laws of God; nor is their interpretation to be immediately received without examination.

Thus, leaders are not simply to command the congregation to act, but rather, are to teach biblical truth in a loving manner to guide the congregation into God’s purposes. The verse goes on to specify that the leaders are responsible, not to order the flock to obey them, but rather, to “keep watch” over them. They are to be sleeplessly alert to the needs of those following them. The word in the original Greek is ἀγροπνέω (G69) and is transliterated as *agrupneó* and pronounced *ag-roop-neh’-o*. It occurs only 3 other times in the New Testament, and in each of those cases the context arguably deals with praying in the face of spiritual battle (Mark 13:33; Luke 21:36; Ephesians 6:18).

Mark 13:33, Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.

Luke 21:36, But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.

Ephesians 6:18, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF FOLLOWERS

Leaders must present clear biblical reasoning, persuading the congregation through loving servanthood, and followers must also study diligently to ensure the purpose is consistent with Scripture. In commenting on this passage, Matthew Henry says that the leader’s interpretation of Scripture is not to be “immediately received without examination, but the people must search the scriptures, and so far as the instructions of their minister are according to that rule they ought to receive them, *not as the word of men, but, as they are indeed, the word of God, that works effectually in those that believe.*”

Ray Stedman makes this observation about Hebrews 13:17, “The word ‘obey’ comes from the Greek *peitho*, ‘to persuade.’ The present imperative middle form, used here, means ‘permit oneself to be persuaded’ or ‘yield to persuasion.’ It definitely does not mean to blindly follow orders.”

John Gill, in his commentary on this passage, notes: “The apostle exhorts them to ‘obey’ by constantly tending upon the word preached by them and hearkening to it; by receiving it with faith and love, as it appears agreeable to the Scriptures; and by regarding their admonitions, counsels, and advice.”

Followers, then, are to study the Scriptures diligently with an attitude of confirming the truth presented by the leaders, not with the goal of proving their own point or resisting the leaders. They should prayerfully determine how best to support the leaders in love based on the study of Scripture.

CONCLUSION

On the surface, Hebrews 13:17 seems to say that those in the church are to obey fellow believers who have spiritual authority over them. Scripture teaches, however, there is but One Leader with inherent authority in any church and He is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (*refer to Church Leadership, Part 5 at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Jesus%20Christ%20is%20Head%20of%20His%20Church.pdf>*). All other leaders are to follow Christ’s example and be the greatest servants among fellow believers in Christ.

This passage illustrates that church leaders are responsible to be alert to the perils confronting those they lead and present applicable biblical truth in such a way that the rest of the congregation understands and is persuaded to follow willingly. Members of the congregation are responsible to listen carefully to their leaders, maintain a teachable attitude, and defer to their leaders in the application of biblical truth.

Why should believers be open to the persuasion of servant leaders in the church? Hebrews 13:17 gives four reasons:

- Servant leaders are keeping watch over our souls.
- Servant leaders will have to give an account to the Lord for their ministry in the Body.
- Servant leaders will either experience joy or grief as a result of the responses of fellow believers, so give these leaders opportunity to be joyful through fellow believers’ obedience to God’s truth.
- There is no advantage for believers not to heed and follow the biblically based admonitions and instruction of servant leaders.

Upon closer examination, the emphasis of Hebrews 13:17 speaks more to unity, harmony, and cooperation among those in the Body of Christ in response to biblical truth instead of unwavering obedience to edicts or opinions from those claiming hierarchical church authority.