

God's Design for Church Leadership, Part 1 (Hebrews 13:17)

Now will you please turn in your Bibles to the book of Hebrews, to chapter 13. Hebrews 13. We're going to begin reading at verse 15, and we'll read through the end of verse 19, 15–19. Hebrews 13, beginning at verse 15:

15 Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.

16 And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

18 Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things.

19 And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner. (NASB)

Well, we are almost at the end of this list of exhortations in Hebrews 13. These are the implications of kingdom citizens, implications for kingdom citizens. We are commanded to obey this series of commands that he's been giving us in chapter 13 because we have been given a kingdom, chapter 12, verses 28–29. And because we look forward to a city which is to come, that magnificent grace, that magnificent future grace promised to us, should so captivate our heart and drive our obedience that we long to glorify Christ through doing what He commands us to do for the reasons that He commands us to do them.

These are the author's parting exhortations. He is about to sign off with a benediction beginning in verse 20 and going through the end of the chapter, but before he does that, as he nears the end of this Epistle, there is one final exhortation that has to do with church leadership, and we find that in verses 17–19. And it has to do with church leadership and our relationship to it, our obligations to it. And as you're going to see, this is an important topic because it is connected to our eternal spiritual well-being and good and even our eternal reward and loss. It is important to the soul of the believer that we understand what the author is describing here in verses 17–19.

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Let us read verse 17 again: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable to you.” Last week, we looked at verses 15–16. Verse 17 now is a rather straightforward command. There's not a lot of background information or detail there. There's a little bit of an assumed understanding between the author and his audience, maybe some assumptions there that I cannot necessarily make with all of us here. There are a number of questions here that beg for answers. For instance, what does it mean to obey church leadership and to submit to them? In what areas of my life am I to do this? Who are these leaders that are mentioned in verse 17? What does it mean that they keep watch over our souls? And what does it mean that church leaders will give an account? And what will be the basis of that accounting? And to whom will they give an account? And when will they give an account? How do I bring church leaders joy and not grief? And how might my conduct in this regard be unprofitable to me? That seems like a rather solemn warning at the end of verse 17, doesn't it? “This would be unprofitable for you”—something of an understatement.

And I want to confess something to you at the outset. This is a difficult topic for me to preach on in my home church. And the reason for that is obvious because this can seem very self-serving because I am a leader here. I'm in the group that is described in verse 17. And most of you are in the group that is called to obey the group described in verse 17. So how does a pastor preach on this with any of the detail to which you have become accustomed over the last number of years without it sounding as if I have some sort of agenda or I am up here to simply reassert my authority? And there's no way that it cannot, at least in the eyes of some, seem self-serving. And maybe that's just the danger of this. But those of you who know me even a little bit know that this would make me—and it does make me—very uncomfortable in my own skin to deal with a subject like this. Not that I have a problem with the command. I don't. I think it's a good command. If I weren't an elder in the church, I would stand up and preach this passage just as I'm about to preach it to you today and next week as well, but being that I happen to be in the role that is described here in leadership, it just feels a little awkward. I cannot tell you how many times I have thought about this verse since I started the book of Hebrews and thought of it with dread, not with any kind of gleeful anticipation whatsoever. There are five warning passages in the book of Hebrews that are considered by some, if not most, to be the five most difficult passages in all of Scripture to interpret and to understand consistently. Five warning passages. I chose to go through the book of Hebrews so that we could address those warning passages. I was

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looking forward to the warning passages. But since Hebrews 1:1, I have been dreading today having to deal with this subject from my position as a church leader.

So, I want to get this out of the way at the very beginning. I'm not preaching this because we as a church need to have this addressed amongst us as a congregation. That's not the point of this. That is not to say that there is nobody here who needs to hear the warning at the end of this verse and give consideration to the command that's given to us here. It's not to say that, but it is to say that the elders did not cherry-pick this verse and have me come up here and preach it because some of you need something that needs to be addressed. That was not it at all. In fact, if this were not the next subject in the next verse, I wouldn't be talking about this at all—if it were not in the text. So, we have a responsibility to deal with the text as it is, and however awkward this is going to be for me, we're just going to—here we go.

So, while acknowledging things, let me acknowledge a few other things about this topic of submitting to authority. This sounds very antiquated to our modern ears, the idea of submitting to authority. Very antiquated to us. We live in an individualistic era where we can feel like we are in contact with everybody while keeping everybody at arm's length because we can do it electronically, and we can feel like we are in front of everybody while really being known and transparent to nobody at all. We can feel like we are not isolated when in fact we are very isolated. Each man can be an island to himself, unaccountable and independent, and that is largely the spirit of the age in which we live. “I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain. It's laughter and it's loving I disdain. . . . Hiding in my room, safe within my womb, I touch no one and no one touches me. I am a rock. I am an island. A rock feels no pain, and an island never cries” (“I Am a Rock”). The great poet, prophet, Paul Simon said those words. That's the spirit of our age. I can be isolated, transparent to no one, accountable to no one. I can do my own thing. I can go from one church to another church without submitting to anybody, without heeding any counsel, without heeding any instruction, without having anybody watch over my soul. And it is possible, unfortunately, in this day and age to do that month after month, year after year, for an entire lifetime, and simply avoid the type of accountability and command that is given to us in verse 17.

This command also seems quite unnecessary to modern life. I mean, why should I be in submission to church leaders? Who are my church leaders? I can just Zoom a church or live stream or listen to the podcast later on if I don't have time to go on a Sunday morning. It is possible for us to sit in and observe almost any church service in the

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country on any given Sunday. Now, that is both a blessing and it is a curse. It's a blessing for everyone, and it is a curse in different ways for everyone. Because we can be tricked into thinking that we have pastors who don't even know we exist. They don't know us. And we can think that John MacArthur is my pastor or R. C. Sproul is my pastor or this guy who pastors a big church in Indiana is my pastor or, for people listening to the live stream and watching the live stream, you're somewhere else in the country and you think that this is your church and that I'm your pastor, and I'm not. I can't be. I can't possibly be that and fulfill the command that is given by implication to church leaders in this passage. And somebody sitting at home simply live streaming a service cannot possibly obey the commands that are in this passage, especially with the Spirit of God's intention behind those commands.

And then third, this command seems quite ridiculous to American ears, doesn't it? Submit to authority? Are you kidding me? We're Americans. We don't submit to anybody. Do you even Fourth of July, bro? We don't submit to any authority. We get to pick and choose our authority. I know what's best for my family. I know what's best for me. I know what's best for my life, and I'll do it. And I don't need anybody telling me what I should do or holding me accountable to do what I don't think I need to do. That is the American spirit-of-the-age attitude in 99% of evangelicalism. And it is sinful and wrong and wicked and evil to the core. It is as the sin of witchcraft. And we need to understand that and recognize it.

So we have a command here, and we're just going to do our best to figure out what this command means and how we are going to submit. In reality, we submit to all kinds of people all the time. You recognize that, don't you? You just don't submit to the ones you don't like. That's how that works for us. But we will submit to the counsel or the instruction of our doctor. We go in, he gives us the results, and he says, "You need to do this. This is your treatment. It's going to cost you a couple of years of your life. You're going to have to be diligent. You have to do it every day. You have to do it every week. And this is what is going to be required if you want to live through this and get through this." And we will do what the doctor tells us to do almost religiously. And we will submit to legal counsel that gives us advice and tells us what we should do and should not do. We'll submit to that. We'll submit to financial advisors who tell us what to invest in and what to avoid and how to use our money and how to structure this for retirement. And we will submit to law enforcement at the scene of a crime or at the scene of an accident. And we do all of that. We submit to all kinds of people all of the time in all kinds of environments. And why do we do it? We do it because we are

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convinced that they know something that we don't know, that they are aware of something that we are not aware of, and that they love us and have our best interest in mind. That's why we submit to them.

And I would suggest to you it is the same thing that we have happening here in verse 17. We are called to submit to church elders not just because they happen to be the oldest guys among us or the best-looking in my case or for some other reason. We are called to submit to them because God in His providence and His wisdom has gifted His church with a leadership structure that we ought to obey and to submit to and to cherish. Good, godly, servant church leadership is God's good gift to His people. Hear that. And a congregation of people who honor, submit to, and cherish that leadership is God's good gift to those leaders. And when that works as it should, it creates the closest thing that you can enjoy to Heaven on earth.

Now, we're going to spend two weeks on this subject. Next week, we'll get into more of the specifics of the text. But today, we're going to deal with some of the generalities here, and I want to lay a little bit of a foundation for our understanding of church leadership. And this is necessary because I would be foolish to assume that everybody in this building, everybody listening to me right now, has the same understanding of the church leadership structure that I have. I would be a fool to assume that. In any congregation this size, we are going to have all kinds of ideas about what church leadership is, how it should be structured, who should be in charge of it, how it is to be chosen, etc. There is no shared understanding here amongst everybody as there obviously was between the author and the recipients of this letter because he doesn't go into a lot of detail about this. He simply gives the command, and you can see from the command that he is assuming that there are certain kinds of leaders there that are worthy of submitting to and obeying. And so he simply reminds them of their duty to do this.

In a large congregation of this size with people from all kinds of different backgrounds, I know that there are people here who come from churches with a biblical structure of church leadership. You were in one before, and you now have moved to this area, and one of the things that attracted you to Kootenai is that you saw the same thing here that you had in a previous church. I understand there are people here who are like that. And there are people here who come from churches with unbiblical church structure and unbiblical church leaders. And you aren't even really aware, some of you, even what a biblical church structure should or would look like if you stumbled across it because

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you've never thought about it. Some of you here have a church background of one painful experience after another and one example after another of people in positions of spiritual authority who abused that authority and neglected their people and used it for their own ends. And there are people here who have nothing but great church backgrounds where you went from one church to another and all the Lord ever gifted you with was biblical structure and biblical people who cared for your soul. There are people here who have never given any thought or ever considered what an elder is, what a deacon is, what the relationship between them are, what they do, why they should be qualified, who should be doing it, and what they should be doing.

And you read *elder* and *deacon* in the New Testament, and then you think, OK, I see those two things, but I'm not sure what the difference is between them. Do they work with each other, in competition with each other? Do we get to pick and choose which kind we have and what assignments we give to them? And I don't even know how the pastor fits into that because he's not an elder or a deacon. He's this other entity out here that's sort of floating by himself. And sometimes he takes instructions from the elders and deacons, and sometimes he gives instructions to the elders and deacons. And the whole thing can be quite confusing, honestly, if you've never given any thought to what biblical church structure should be. There's almost no end to the variety of ways that church leadership is structured and operated in the United States and around the world unfortunately. And consequently, this has created more confusion than clarity among God's people.

So today is going to be a brief introduction to this subject. And if you want more information on biblical church eldership, I'm going to suggest two resources for you. First, something that's more homegrown. Several years ago, one of our elders, Dave Rich, taught a series of adult Sunday school lessons on the subject of biblical eldership. Those are on our website. And at one time, they were the second most downloaded resource that we had on our website. And it's not like we just have three or four downloads a year or anything like that. Not just by people inside of our congregation, but I know people around the country, people who have come up to me at Shepherd's Conference and said, "I listened to that series of lessons on biblical eldership that you have on your website by that Dave guy. Is he still with you?" And yeah, he is. And they say that that just changed their life, changed their church. It is a fantastic series. I highly commend that to you. And if you want to go into even more and better detail than that, I would commend the book *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch. Anything that Alexander Strauch writes is worth its weight in gold. He has books on elders, books on

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deacons, a book on hospitality, church leadership, etc. Anything by Alexander Strauch is worth picking up and reading.

Now let's jump to our text because we are running out of time and I haven't said anything important yet. Jump to our text. Who are these leaders? We're just going to answer—again, I'm laying some foundation here for you today. We're going to talk about biblical church structure, what that looks like, why we are structured the way that we are, and what you should look for if you're looking for a biblical church structure. So we're going to begin by looking at what the New Testament says about church leadership because you'll notice in verse 17 that the term *leaders* is used there, but I'm going to spoil a little bit of the ending here for you at the front end. The word for “elder” or “deacon” is not used in chapter 13. I'm assuming, or I'm going to make the case for you, that what is understood here is elders in verse 17.

Now the New Testament is far from silent about the subject of church leadership and church leadership structure. Most churches in America have a very laissez-faire attitude toward church leadership. Just sort of structure it however you want to structure it. You can do this, you can have a church committee, pick a few elders, pick a few deacons, kind of give them assignments, and maybe when you do a really good job as a deacon, you become an elder-in-training and then an elder, and then we've got to throw in a pastor of course. We have a music pastor in there, and we should have a pastor of the sound booth, and we have a pastor for youth, and we have a pastor of music ministry and a pastor for old people and a pastor for young people and a pastor for crippled people and a pastor for one-legged people and a pastor for blond-haired people, and we just give everybody the title of pastor, giving no thought at all to what they should be doing or who they should be. That is the approach of most churches. In fact, if you're a faithful giver, we're just going to call you a pastor, make you the pastor of technology. Your job is just to—yeah, there's one person in the back raising their hands. You get to stream the service, you're the pastor of technology.

God has been very clear, crystal clear, about the subject of church leadership. And there is—though there may be room for varieties of ways that men within this structure can relate to one another and use their giftedness, I do not believe that there is any wiggle room at all concerning the nature of the structure itself and the roles that people within that structure fulfill. From Strauch's book—I only have one quote from him even though the whole book would be worth reading to you here. One quote from him. Strauch says this: “Not only does the New Testament record the existence of elders in numerous

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churches, it also gives instruction about elders and to elders. In fact, [listen to this] the New Testament offers more instruction regarding elders than on other important church subjects, such as the Lord's Supper, the Lord's day, baptism, or spiritual gifts." Stop for just a second. The New Testament offers more information about elders and eldership than it offers about the Lord's Supper, the Lord's day, baptism, or spiritual gifts. Does that tell you what the emphasis in the New Testament is? And yet churches will go to war over those other issues, all the while neglecting what Scripture says about biblical audition. Back to Strauch's quote: "When you consider the New Testament's characteristic avoidance of detailed regulation and church procedures when compared to the Old Testament, the attention given to elders is amazing." God has been very clear.

Now what are elders? Who are these leaders? They're not named in verse 17 you'll notice. He just uses the word that could be translated "guides," and it is translated here in the NASB as "leaders." It's not any of the three words that are used to describe an elder or a pastor, and it is not the word for deacon. It's more of a general term that is not specific, but I would make the case to you that what is being assumed here is that he is talking about elders, and I would suggest that to you because he describes their office or their work as being those who watch over your souls. That describes a shepherding work, a shepherding in soul care. So, while the word *elder* or *shepherd*, *pastor*, is not used, the work that an elder or shepherd does do is described in the passage. He describes their function and accountability.

Now it may be—because here's one of the interpretive questions. Why does the author use the term *leaders* and not *elders and deacons*, or *elders or deacons*? And it may be for this very reason, that in this church that Hebrews was originally written to, that there may have been both elders and still apostles who might have lived in that church, especially if you're dealing with a gathering of Jewish believers sometime prior to AD 63, 64, when Hebrews would have been written. It's likely that—well, there were still apostles on the scene at that time, and it's likely that there would have been an apostle inside of that church. So rather than saying obey and submit to your apostles, your elders, and your deacons, he just sort of uses the term *leaders* to describe people in the church who had a God-given spiritual authority in the congregation. This could be apostles and elders, or elders and deacons, because the truth is that deacons do have a delegated authority within the church. It is a delegated authority by the elders to do certain things, to engage in certain ministries, and they exercise their certain spiritual gifts in capacities that involve, oftentimes, degrees of authority. So I think the author is

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just simply including elders and deacons in this. I think primarily he is describing elders, and we'll return to that here in a moment to show you more why.

He gives us a description of their work. They keep watch over your souls. He commands them to submit to them and obey them. And notice that it is not singular—obey your leader—but obey your leaders, plural. There was a plurality in this location. And this fits everything else that the New Testament says regarding eldership and church leadership.

Now, what is the second question? What is biblical eldership? I think—and I don't think that this is true in this congregation so much because in our membership class, which we do twice a year, sometimes once a year, we go over this in quite some detail so that everybody would understand this. But I think if you were to simply take a poll of your garden-variety Christian from across the evangelical landscape in America and ask them to find an elder, to find a deacon, and give me the difference between the two of them, that probably nine out of ten would not be able to do that. Not because they are stupid but just because most have not given any thought to this subject at all.

So what is eldership, or what are elders? There are three words used in the New Testament that describe this office, three words. The first, the word translated “elder” is *presbyteros*, from which we get the word *presbyterian*. It's translated as “elder” in Titus 1:5. “For this reason I left you in Crete,” Paul tells Titus, “that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders [there's the word] in every city as I directed you.” It's also the same word used in 1 Peter 5:1–5 that gives instruction to elders, where Peter calls himself a fellow elder and then gives instruction to the elders to shepherd the church there well, looking to the Chief Shepherd who will appear and bring with Him the unfading crown of glory. Paul gives the qualifications for the office of elder in Titus 1. OK, so that's the first word. *Elder* or *presbyteros* is kind of a Jewish-flavored term. It was a Greek word, but it was a Jewish-flavored term that described the dignity, maturity, honor, and wisdom of that office. The idea of an elder to a Jew would have made a lot of sense because they had elders of the nation of Israel, which were the men of maturity and honor and wisdom and intellect who led the people, and the people looked up to them and respected them and submitted to them.

The second word that is used of an elder is the word *overseer* or *episkopos*, and that is translated as “overseer.” In the King James in 1 Timothy 3:1, it's translated as “bishop.” You can hear the word *bishop* in *episkopos*, right? The *episkopos*, a bishop, is kind of how it's transliterated. 1 Timothy 3:1: “It is a trustworthy statement; if any man aspires to the office of overseer [that's the word], it is a fine work he desires to do.” And then

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interestingly, he gives the qualifications for an overseer in 1 Timothy 3, and the qualifications for an overseer and the qualifications for an elder, there's a lot of overlap there because they are the same office, spoiling the ending for you, they are the same office. And so the qualifications are similar in each list. They're almost identical, actually. *Episkopos* is the Greek term that stresses the work of oversight and administration. You might even say the watching over your souls. That's kind of the idea. So I think he's talking about elders. He talks about their task, their job to watch over your souls as those who will give an account. *Episkopos* is translated as "overseers" in Philippians 1:1, where it's also grouped with deacons. So there's two different groups—elders or overseers and deacons—in Philippians 1:1.

The third word that is used for elders is the word *shepherd* or *poimen*. It's used in only one place as a noun, and that's Ephesians 4:11, where Paul says that Christ "gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers," and I would suggest to you that *poimen* there would be better translated as "shepherds" rather than "pastors." For some reason it got translated as "pastor" there, and it would be better translated as "shepherd" because that's what the verb form of that noun means. It refers to shepherds. It refers to the one who does the function of pastoring or shepherding people. It's used that way in Acts 20, which we read earlier: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (v. 28). You can hear the verb form of that in there: "shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

Now, these three words—*elder*, *overseer*, and *shepherd/pastor*—they all refer in the New Testament to the same office, the same people, the same role, and the same authority. They can be used and are used interchangeably. In fact, in two different locations in the New Testament, these words are used interchangeably. In Acts 20, which we read earlier, and you may not have even noticed this when we read it, but in Acts 20, verses 17 and 28—here these verses are together: "From Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church . . . [saying to them] 'Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.'" You hear it? Elders, overseers, and shepherd. An elder is an overseer who shepherds. They're used synonymously. Also used synonymously in 1 Peter 5, where Peter for five verses gives instructions to his fellow elders, and he says there,

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1 I exhort the elders among you [listen for all three of these words], as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,

2 shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight [that's the word for overseer; it's a verb form] not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness. (1 Pet. 5:1–2 NASB)

Now, a pastor is an overseer is an elder is a shepherd is an overseer is an elder. These are synonymous terms all the way through the New Testament. They are the same person, the same ministry, the same leadership function. And this means that there is no basis in the New Testament at all for some hyper-realized structure of church leadership where you have popes and archbishops and fathers and padres and—that's just I guess Spanish for father, isn't it?—father and archbishops and sub-bishops and mini-bishops and bishops-in-training and all of the other nonsense that clutters church ecclesiastical structure. There's no biblical basis for any of that at all, none whatsoever. There are elders who could be called overseers if you're talking about the work of exercising oversight. If you're talking about their shepherding work, you might call them pastors. If you're talking about their wisdom and maturity, then you might call them elders. Three synonymous terms that are used that way in Scripture.

There are two different offices of leadership in the New Testament, elders who are overseers who are pastors—I made that case—and then deacons. Whereas elders serve the spiritual, teaching, feeding, protecting needs of the flock, the deacons serve more of the physical aspects of that and alleviate some of the strains and concerns of eldership ministry in being helpers to the elders and taking care of some of the physical needs of the flock. So God in His infinite providential wisdom has appointed for His church, for His people, for all of church history until the Lord returns and takes us home—the Lord has appointed two offices within the church. One to be concerned with the spiritual needs of the congregation and the other to be concerned with the physical needs of the congregation. That is the wisdom of God.

Now, another item about biblical eldership is that it is a plurality. It is a plurality, which means it is not one man in a church who holds this office. It's not one man. It is a plurality of men. It is not God's design to have one person who dictates from on high what the policy of a church is going to be, making every decision in the church and handing down his Moses-model approach to ministry to everybody underneath of him. That is not God's design. That is unhealthy, spiritually unhealthy for everybody involved.

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Instead, the New Testament models a plurality of elders in a single church. And you've already heard this in some of the passages that I read, but listen here as I read a few verses to you. Listen for this, the fact that elders or overseers is mentioned in the plural and city or church is mentioned in the singular so that the model of the New Testament is multiple men in a single church who function as a team of men jointly shepherding the local church.

Acts 20:17: "From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders [plural] of the church [singular]." Multiple elders, one church.

Titus 1:5: "I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city." Elders plural, city singular.

Philippians 1:1—writing to one church, Paul says, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers [plural] and deacons [plural]."

Acts 14:23: "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed."

And then Hebrews, and I could go on more—we have Hebrews, our Hebrews text here, chapter 13, verse 17, where you'll notice that leaders is plural. "Submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy." It is plural. So this is God's design—joint, shared pastoral leadership, a group of biblically qualified men who together shepherd the local church, a group of pastors/overseers/shepherds who lead the church, where no man in that group is outside of the authority of that group or outside of the authority of the word of God. Because you may ask, "Jim, if there's no archbishop over you and Dave and Cornel and Jess and soon to be Jeff, if there's no archbishop to whom you can appeal, then what is the authority under which you operate if there's no pope above you and another pope above him?" And the answer to that is that every man who serves as an elder serves as an undershepherd of the Lord Jesus Christ and a servant of the Word of God under the authority of the Word of God in mutual submission to one another where they subject themselves to each other, receiving counsel, holding each other accountable, and being under the authority of the entire group. That's how it works.

You say, well, what if you have a collection of men who don't submit to the lordship of Christ? Then you do not have a biblically qualified eldership, and you should leave. That's it. That's your check and balance on that system. If you have men who do not

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meet those qualifications and do not function in that way, you do not have a biblical church leadership.

This church has four elders, soon to be five. Next week, we're going to recognize Jeff. So you have four elders. So if you come to this church and somebody introduces me to you as Pastor Jim, you will notice very quickly two things. I'm not keen on honorifics. So if you call me Pastor Jim, I will correct you and say it's just Jim. I'm Jim. Is that because I don't view myself as a pastor? No, it's that I hate honorifics. I hate the titles. I hate the structure of all of that. Now, I understand there are children here who refer to me as Pastor Jim. They come up, say, "Hi, Pastor Jim," shake my hand. That's fine. When that kid turns eighteen though, I'm going to say, "It's just Jim. From now on, it's just Jim. You call me Jim. That's what I am." It's Dave, it's Jim. I hate the honorifics. So that's one.

Second, if I introduce myself to you, I will introduce myself always as one of the pastors of Kootenai Community Church because I'm not *the* pastor. I'm *a* pastor here. You have four. You have a council of men who together shepherd this local church, who hold one another accountable, are transparent with one another, and who jointly together operate under the lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of His Word. That is how we are structured. There's no premier authority even on our eldership where one man has the say over another man. There have been times in our discussions about something where I will defer to one of the other men. I'll say, "If this is the role that you think we should take or the path that you think, you know better on this, let's go with that. I will defer to you." And then there are other times when they will defer to me and say, "I think that's a good idea. If that's what you think we should do, we should do it." That doesn't work in corporate America. That doesn't work at your workplace. It doesn't work in the military. It doesn't work in the government. It doesn't work anywhere except one place: in the church which Christ has purchased with His own blood. There, it works magnificently so long as the men there understand what their role is and function biblically in it. It works perfectly well.

Now, it is also a qualified eldership. Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3—I'll just refer those to you. I don't need to read them, but you can read those on your own. We're running out of time. Let me edit some stuff here. All right, I think from that description that I just gave you, I think you can see that what is being described here in Hebrews 13:17 is eldership. It's in the plural. It's describing those who lead, have some sort of God-ordained, Christ-given spiritual authority in the church environment, and that's why people are commanded to obey them and to submit to them. They're described in terms of

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shepherding, that they keep watch over your souls. And you'll notice in verse 20 where the author in the benediction says, “Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord,” there he's describing the Shepherd under which every undershepherd functions and works to shepherd the flock in the local congregation.

Now, what authority do elders have? It is, and I'm going to give you a few descriptions here—it is a delegated authority. It comes from the Chief Shepherd. That is why he says they will give an account. Elders do not rule on their own authority. Elders do not have that privilege. They do not get to bark out commands in every area of life. It is a delegated authority. And by the way, the idea of delegated authority is true in every realm of authority—in the home, in the church, and in civil government. Those are the three God-ordained realms of authority, and God has appointed different people and structures for each of those realms of authority.

In the home, the father is the head of the home. It is his job to lead the family and to lead in the discipline and the nurture and the caring of his wife and of his children. He has a delegated authority. And in the home, as within every sphere of God-given, God-ordained authority, there is accountability that comes with that headship. There's accountability that comes with authority. This is true in the church, obviously from the passage, where he says that they will give an account to this Chief Shepherd who has been raised from the dead. That's whom elders are going to give an account to. But in the home, that delegated authority that a man has is the same kind of authority in the sense that it comes with accountability as well. So the question then for fathers, for men in their home, given that you will give an account to God, ask yourself how do you use the position that God gave you? For the good of others or for your own sake? When you drop the trump card that I'm the head of the home and God has put me in a position of authority and you must submit to me, when you drop that trump card before your wife and before your children, does your headship always end up serving your interests, your priorities, your preferences, your way? Or does it ever fall the other way? The purpose of biblical leadership and God-ordained authority—listen carefully, this is true in every realm—is authority that is to be used for the good of others, never for the advancement of yourself. Always for the good of others. So men, do you use your authority for the good of your wife and your children, or do you use your authority to neglect your family, to get away with your sin, and to make excuses? God will hold you accountable for how you use the headship that He has given to you in your home. Let that sober you as it should.

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You say, well, what about government? Oh, don't worry. They're going to get theirs. You think that the abuse of the authority by those in civil leadership is going to go unaccounted? No, no. Psalm 2: the nations rage and the kings of the earth plot their revenge against the Lord and against His Anointed. And Psalm 2 ends with saying, "You do homage to the Son, lest He be angry with you and you perish in the way." There's going to be an accountability. Nobody in Washington is going to get away with anything. Nobody is. Every decision, every abuse of authority, every corrupt prosecutor, every corrupt district attorney, every corrupt trial, every corrupt politician, they're all going to be held to an account. God's not going to let any of them get away with anything.

And the same is true in the church. Yes, there are abuses of authority in the church—not this one, but in the church at large. And we've seen in the last couple of weeks examples of that in people in very high-profile positions come out and have it all exposed, right? And you've seen the corruption that exists as everybody covers themselves and tries to make excuses and justify, and "I didn't know, we didn't know, they didn't know." Yeah, there are people who abuse spiritual authority in the church. They will get theirs and they will be held accountable for that as well.

Elders have not just a delegated authority but also a limited authority. As an elder, I have nothing at all to say about what time your kids go to bed; how many kids you have; how much time you spend with your leisure activities; how much you go on vacation; how much money you spend on your groceries; where you eat; where you live; how you spend your meals out; what brand of clothing you wear; issues of conscience like public school, private school, homeschool; what you plant in your garden; whether you like your steak medium rare or ruined. I have nothing to say about any of those subjects. Now, I may feel very passionately about a whole host of those issues. Those are not under my authority. Those issues of conscience are not for me to rule in your life. You have to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. You have to live in accordance with your conscience, informed by the Word of God.

But there are areas in which elders do have authority in the church: to determine what is taught and who teaches and what ministries are supported and how money is spent and who is hired at the church and who spends that money, what ministries get platformed, what ministries get supported, the doctrinal position of the church, discipline for the church. That is all accomplished, that administration or rule is accomplished by the Word of God as the church is fed the Word of God through the preaching and teaching of His Word corporately, individually, in homes, in discipleship,

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in counseling, in conferences, in meetings. That is the way in which biblical shepherds shepherd. Our job is to protect the church from false teachers and false teaching, to serve in the Word of God, to disciple and to discipline believers, to confront sin and to deal with impenitent sin inside of the congregation by people who will not leave that sin and embrace righteousness, to oversee the worship and the ministry of the fellowship, and to lead in that worship.

And lastly, eldership authority is a servant authority. All authority is given by God, and all authority is to be used for the good of the others. Jesus said that

26 it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant.

27 For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves. (Luke 22:26–27 NASB)

That was His model.

The apostle Paul modeled the same type of servant leadership. Jesus said in Mark 10:45 that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” And following that example, the apostle Paul referred to himself as a drink offering being poured out on the sacrifice and service of your faith (Phil. 2:17). Paul described himself as a servant to all the churches, working with his own hands to provide for his needs and the needs of those who traveled with him, laboring—he says day and night we did this so as not to be a burden to any of you (1 Thess. 2:9). He counted himself as the least of all the saints, and he says in 1 Corinthians 10:33 that he did this, “not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.” That is the biblical model.

So how does a pastor or elder serve his flock? By being aware of all of the spiritual threats to your soul that are on the horizon and in the church and knocking at the door, and warning you of them. A pastor serves the flock by keeping alert and keeping watch and taking care of the flock and watching over their souls. That's what the word *keep watch* or *watching over their souls* means. Your soul is your most valuable possession. You lose that and you lose everything. Lose everything in this world and you've lost really nothing if you keep your soul. But if you lose your soul, and you're drug away into soul-damning and soul-destroying error that will ruin you spiritually, then you have lost the most precious thing. So a shepherd is charged with helping you guard, watching out

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over, and instructing you in the things that concern the well-being and the eternal glory of the most precious possession that you have.

And so now the question is why wouldn't we submit to that? Why wouldn't we obey that? Do you understand that that is the motive that the author is giving us for submitting to church leadership? Because God, by His common grace, His good grace to His church, has given to the people whom He loved and He purchased with His own blood—He has given to them leaders who will watch over and care for their souls. And so the author says obey them and submit to them, for they keep watch over your soul. They're aware of the sin and the evil and the sloth and the backsliding, the false doctrine, the false teachers, and the errors, the big ones and the small ones, that are on the horizon. And a good shepherd knows of those things and warns his people regularly of them.

This is a heavy responsibility and one that, I will confess to you, has almost a palpable weight to it at times. There are times when we've sat around in elders' meetings and felt almost a weight that is indescribable. Not a physical weight but one that is palpable as we understand what this means and the significance of it, and that we have to give an account for what we do and how we do it.

And so we are called to submit and obey, and our time is up, and we have no time to go into this today, but I didn't plan to. I'm ending right on time according to what I have here. We're going to talk about this next week. I want you to notice that the command to obey, the motive for it is given with that phrase, that *they keep watch over your souls*. To disobey the leaders is a cause of grief, the author says, and this would be unprofitable to you. To disobey them is a cause of grief to them, and this, he says, would be unprofitable to you. So wouldn't you want to be profited? Why would you not want to be profited? So it boils down to this, and I will just end with this application. If you are in a church with a biblical structure of church leadership where qualified men in that position are exercising diligence to keep watch over your soul, why would anyone not submit to that leadership and obey it? Why would you not be thankful for it and cherish it? If they do what they do for your eternal good and your spiritual good and reward, then it would be an act of folly to disobey it. It would be unprofitable for you.

Now, I don't think we have that issue here. I told you at the beginning of this, I didn't get up here because I thought—I have any of you in mind, I'm needing to address this as a church, we need to correct course on this. That's not it at all. But if you're in a church where that is the structure of leadership, and here it is, why would you not obey that

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and submit to it? But if you're in a church where men in leadership are not watching out for your soul and they are not interested in your eternal good and they do not care about your eternal reward, then why are you there? Get out. If you think those men are negligent and they don't care for you, go somewhere where you can be under spiritual authority, where men are shepherding your souls and care about you in that way. Both the leader and those who are called to submit will give an account to the Lord with what we do with this command. So let us be sobered by it, and we'll look more at it next week.

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