

Follow the Leaders – Hebrews 13:17

Introduction

The need for leaders:

Industry and commerce – throw incredible amounts of money into identifying, training and maturing leaders

Professional sports teams – paying coaches astronomical salaries

But there is probably no area where leadership is so critical as in the church. The reason is simple: Nowhere else are the stakes so high: the glory of God and the eternal destiny of men and women.

Why Do We Need Leaders?

3 foundational and critical reasons:

1. Practical

Proverbs 29:18 *Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained.*

Sheep needing direction, purpose and vision. That's the role of a leader.

But what is it that a leader must give? KJV: "vision" (Heb. hazon) does not refer to some dream of success a person may have but to a prophetic vision that was a revelation from God (cf. 1 Sam. 3:1).

The Hebrew verb often translated "perish" means "unrestrained." Without divine revelation people abandon themselves to their own sinful ways. God's Word restrains human wickedness, and those who keep it are happy.

Thus an individual's well-being – and the well-being of the church – depends on obedience to divine revelation. There must be knowledge of divine revelation through Biblical preaching for there to be obedience to it. Leaders clearly chart the course for the future based on the teaching of the Word of God.

2. Biblical

Jesus Himself modeled this when he chose twelve, that "they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach" (Mark 3:14). Jesus came preeminently to die on the cross as payment for our sin. But He also invested the three years of His earthly ministry building into the lives of twelve men who would launch and lead His Church.

3. It is necessary for us to be effective

In Acts 6:2-4, the leaders of the church were faced with pressure that might take them off course. They responded, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Because they knew what God had called them to, they remained focused and the result was they turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6).

What Do Leaders Do?

Hebrews 13:17 *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.*

This passage gives us two insights into the activities of ministry leaders:

- (1) they keep watch over the souls of those to whom they are ministering; and
- (2) they minister for the profitability of others.

These two phrases are really saying the same thing: the aim of leadership is the profit or the good of the people, especially the good of their souls. What profit does the writer to the Hebrews have in mind? Consider Hebrews 10:39. "We are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul." The aim of this book is to help people not shrink back from faith and have their soul destroyed, but rather to persevere in faith to the end and preserve their soul. The book of Hebrews is all about perseverance.

So the aim of spiritual leadership in the church is mainly the salvation of the soul. And that salvation is not seen in the book of Hebrews as a one-time event of decision, but a life-long battle against temptation and unbelief. In other words, since perseverance is at stake day after day, the aim of leadership is not simply to get decisions for Jesus at the front end of the Christian life, but to so teach and so live and so admonish that professing Christians in the church "do not shrink back to destruction, but . . . have faith to the preserving of the soul" (10:39).

How Do Leaders Lead?

Hebrews 13:17 gives us three qualifiers that describe leadership.

(1) The first is watchfulness. Leaders are to "watch over your souls." What do leaders watch so that people are preserved and not destroyed? I would suggest four things from the book of Hebrews.

1. Spiritual leaders watch the word of God. They must be alert to the accurate meaning, preciseness, truthfulness and power of God's word.

Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you." Leaders lead by teaching the word of God. Hebrews 2:1 says, "We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard (the word of God), so that we do not drift away from it." The job of leaders is to live out the word of God authentically and to teach it practically to those in their care.

Hebrews 4:12 instructs us that "the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Spiritual leaders today must continually sharpen their skill in wielding the sword of the Spirit. Whether preaching and teaching large audiences, leading small groups in understanding God's word, or discipling one-on-one, the leader must understand the Bible deeply and present it accurately for life change to occur.

2. Spiritual leaders watch Christ. The Son is the word we must hear most clearly. Hebrews 1:2 says, "In these last days God has spoken to us in His Son." Hebrews 12:2 tells us to "Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith." If it is the aim of leaders to preserve faith, and if Jesus is the author and perfecter of faith, then leaders must continually point people to Jesus.
3. Spiritual leaders watch their own conduct. Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember those who led you . . . considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." If God encourages those in the church to imitate the faith and lifestyle of their leaders, we must be on our toes to insure that they have godly models to follow. That is also why there should be higher standards for leadership in the church than for membership in the church. That is also why failures in leaders are worse than failures in members, and why restoration to leadership should be much more difficult than restoration to membership.
4. Spiritual leaders watch the people. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds." I believe this speaks volumes to the importance of small group ministry in the church. Leaders in the church cannot possibly know the needs of all the people. But a small group leader can get up close and discern what those in the group need, and to "stir up one another to love and good deeds."

(2) Another qualifier of leadership is joyfulness. You simply cannot fake joy. It comes as the overflow of our walk with Jesus Christ. And the primary task of a leader is to walk closely with Jesus Christ, to sit at His feet to learn, worship and commune with Him. When we walk with Him, joy is the overflowing quality that others see. And leaders are to lead "with joy and not with grief," according to Hebrews 13:17.

(3) Finally, there is the qualifier of accountability. Leaders are to lead “as those who will give an account.” We will. This is serious business. We will be asked, What did you teach? How did you live? What steps did you take in the case of the disobedient, the rebellious, the suffering, the grieving, the perplexed, the lonely, the aged, the children? And we will have to give an account.

How Do We Respond?

Three Cultural Challenges and Two Biblical Commands

Before we take a look at the response that God prescribes, let’s discuss for a moment the context in which we live. The defining spirit in America today is self-determination, not submission to the will of another. The ultimate value in America is personal liberty and freedom of choice to do as one pleases. Self is king. And autonomy is the highest law.

Additionally, there has been abuse of authority and power, even in churches. Books have been written about “spiritual abuse” and “churches that abuse.” And what they have in mind is the abuse of power to manipulate and coerce and use people to enhance the leader’s status and stroke the leader’s ego and sometimes line the leader’s pocket.

Finally, in America today there is a genuine distrust of spiritual leaders. It’s true that spiritual leaders can “go bad” and teach bad things. In Acts 20:30, Paul is speaking to the elders of Ephesus and warns them, “From among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.” The clear implication is that elders can go bad. Tragically Paul warns that it will happen. This is confirmed in Galatians 1:8, where Paul says that the gospel is so sacred that you should not obey anyone who comes with another message: “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is accursed!” The truth of God is the litmus paper of all true leadership: if a leader doesn’t preach God’s truth, don’t believe him!

In 1 Peter 5:2-3, Peter tells us that elders should be good examples to the flock and not use their office for sordid gain or for the pleasures of power. “Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God, and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness, nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.”

No elder is perfect. No leader is without sin. But we are called on to have exemplary character and leadership integrity.

And it is in that context that the response God prescribes is given in the beginning of Hebrews 13:17. “Obey your leaders and submit to them.”

Obedience and submission. Not exactly the words our culture longs to hear. But God’s truth is always counter-cultural. Christ-followers are called to march to a different drumbeat. This is the underlying assumption to the Beatitudes – you are blessed when you don’t settle for the world’s values and responses, but you allow God to cultivate godly character and proper lifestyle choices in you.

Obey (peith) is a very broad word that means to be persuaded by, to trust, to rely on, and comes to mean “obey” because that is what you do when you trust somebody. Submit (hupeik) occurs only this one time in the New Testament and means to “make room for by retiring from a seat, to yield to, or to place yourself under one’s direction.”

God’s people deserve good leadership – and they should respond to good leadership with obedience and submission.

What does this look like in the life of the church? First, I would suggest that there be a plurality of godly leaders in every church. The third word in verse 17 is leaders (plural). God doesn’t say obey your leader, but obey your leaders. The context of the New Testament church was a plurality of leadership. One individual was never meant to be “the leader.” No one has all the gifts. We need many “pastors and teachers and evangelists” (Ephesians 4:11) functioning in our churches today.

Second, there must be mutual submission within the body of Christ. Remember all the “one anothers” in Paul’s letters? He tells us to love one another, encourage one another, support one another, build up one another. He also tells us to submit to one another. Mutual submission is the mark of a follower of Jesus. Leadership is never a power-play. It’s never an authoritarian “my way or the highway.” Jesus put it this way when the disciples started to respond in a worldly way about leadership:

⁴² Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45).

May we be leaders who truly follow our leader – and may others follow us as we follow Christ, to the glory of God the Father.

Father, in the name of Jesus, I ask that you would raise up leaders for Your church in this generation . . . qualified leaders who model the life of Christ and teach the word of God clearly, accurately and relevantly. And I pray for those in Your church, that they would respond in obedience and submission, gladly following the visionary leadership that You have placed over them. May all this result in glory and honor to You, the only One who is worthy. Amen.