

Hebrews 13:17a “Obey your leaders ...”

This is not intended to be a treatise on “The Eldership.” It is not intended to give any information about the qualifications of Elders or their work, except as may be inferred by the following discussion. There are many passages dealing with the many and varied facets of “The Eldership.” This will ONLY deal with the exegesis of part of verse 17 of Hebrews 13.

Heb. 13:17 “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”
- NIV

To really submit to God’s word we must understand it. To understand it we must study it. To study it takes time and effort. Can we, now, together begin that effort on this passage.

Heb. 13:17 is a one verse paragraph as attested to by the NIV, NASB, ESV, Moffatt, McCord, Weymouth and the RSV as well as the United Bible Societies Greek Text, third edition. There seems to be no other immediate context. This verse stands alone, in so far as its content is concerned. But it stands amid several other admonitions on various other subjects. Compare verses 1,4,7,9,15,18, 20 and 22. Because of these facts this verse should be understood as a general exhortation to be followed as much as the others mentioned in this chapter.

Looking at the first sentence we have: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.”

The leaders spoken of here are, generally agreed by all, to be the Shepherds, Bishops or Elders of the church. The phrase “to their authority” is not in the Greek text nor in any of the translations mentioned above, therefore it should read “Obey your leaders and submit to them.”

The two key words are “Obey” and “submit.” These two words have been misunderstood, ignored, and generally abused by people to serve their own purposes. It is my prayer and hope that we will have only a desire to know, understand and submit to God’s word as the only correct and complete source for serving and pleasing Him.

Sometimes it is beneficial to understand what a passage is NOT saying so that the true meaning may be seen more clearly. I think this would be very helpful in this case. Some ideas that this passage **DOES NOT** teach are:

- 1) That members cannot disagree with the Elders.
- 2) That any disagreement of the members with the Elders must be a violation of this passage.
- 3) That the Elders are always correct.
- 4) That Elders must be obeyed in **everything**.
- 5) That the Elders cannot be critiqued,

It goes without saying that all or any criticism or disagreement must **first be expressed to the elders**. The attitude with which it is done is of the utmost importance, any criticism must be done in the spirit of humility and Christian love. **Humility and Christian love** must always be manifested on both sides **in any such discussion**.

The truth of the five ideas listed above, are so obvious they are almost axiomatic. If that is true then what **does** Hebrews 13:17 mean? In what things must we obey the Elders?

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It follows from the above axioms that any member can disagree with the Elders on any topic at any time. This is true because Elders are not infallible. They err. They make mistakes in judgment and in interpreting scriptures. A few scriptures might be considered on this point: Matt. 18:15-17, Acts 20:17, 30-31, Gal. 2:11-14, Rom. 3:23, I Pet. 5:1-4, I John 1:8-10. Please take the time to review these passages, they are very pertinent to our study.

But when member(s) do differ with the elders, how this difference is handled is very important. If this difference is handled quickly, in the spirit of love, humility and a sincere search for the truth, and before it has time to “fester,” then this difference can be a source of spiritual growth for all concerned.

Paul says in I Cor. 11:19 “No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.” This scripture shows the value of differences if they are used as an opportunity for growth and not an opportunity to do “battle” (where there is always a “winner” and a “loser.”)

How then can we “Obey your leaders and submit to them?” We must look at the words “obey” and “submit” in detail.

1) Obey -- Πειθεσθε. This is second person plural, imperative mood, middle voice of the root verb πειθω. This verb is translated by several English words in the NIV. Of the 52 times this verb appears in the NT, only three times is the English word “obey” used to translate it.

We can see from a Greek concordance that the English words most frequently used to translate our Greek verb is “convinced” (11 times,) and “confident” (11 times) then “persuaded” (10 times). Therefore when the word “obey” is used it cannot lose entirely the meaning that includes a reasoning process. This idea of a reasoning process is incorporated in the other English words used to translate πειθω, such as “persuade, trust, confidence, and convince.” The idea that the Greek word includes a reasoning process is greatly strengthened in our usage (Heb. 13:17) by the fact that this verb is in the middle voice. English verbs do not have a middle voice, only the active (when the subject is doing the action) and the passive (when the subject is receiving the action). English represents the idea of a middle voice by the addition of the reflexive pronouns (himself, herself, etc.) The middle voice simply means that the subject is doing the action to himself. The verb in Heb. 13:17 is in the middle voice, giving the idea: “let yourself be persuaded” or “make sure that you are convinced.” This is something that we do to ourselves and therefore includes a period of time for thinking or “a reasoning process.” It is not something the Elders do to us or for us. The question is whether we should be persuaded by, agree with, trust in or have confidence in the Elders based on an edict or should this persuasion be based on evidence? Maybe we can answer more affirmatively after we look at the other two passages that use “obey” as a translation of πειθω: they are Gal 5:7; and Jas. 3:3.

Gal. 5:7-8 “You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying (πειθεσθαι, from the root πειθω. See appendix) the truth? That kind of **persuasion** does not come from the one who calls you.” Paul here is discussing circumcision which the Jews wanted these new Christians to practice. He said they were doing well (“running a good race”) but someone is hindering their ability to run (by cutting in on them), that is, causing them to “not be persuaded by the truth” (this is the literal translation given by Marshall's English-Greek interlinear translation). Verse 8 clearly says that the “obeying,” or not obeying, done in verse 7 is a reasoning process, namely, persuasion based on evidence.

James 3:3 “When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.” This verse gives us no help at all in understanding Heb. 13:17, unless, of course, someone thinks that all members

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of the church must obey the Elders like unreasoning animals who must be forced to go the “right way” as horses are by the bit. But if this is true then we have an unreasoning animal one day and a qualified spiritual leader the next when that member is selected to an Elder.

We can therefore conclude that when Heb. 13:17 uses the word “obey” the writer means to obey as a result of a reasoning process, i.e. a convincing and/or persuading based on evidence. Obviously we can only “obey” the elders if they tell us something to do, or not to do. If they don’t clearly give instructions then it is impossible to “obey” or “not obey” them.

2) submit -- υπεικετε. To help us understand this word we should look at a few other places where it is used.
Rom. 13:1 ¶ Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

1Cor. 16:15-16 You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. I urge you, brothers, (16) to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work, and labors at it.

Eph 5:21 ¶ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Eph 5:22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord... 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

In each of these cases the “submission” is conditional, that is, no one would say that we should submit to governing authorities in an absolute way, in everything they say, i.e. if they tell us not to meet for worship, etc.

In the Corinthian passage: no one would say that we should all submit to those who have “devoted themselves to the service of the saints” in an absolute way, else the elders must also submit to those who have “devoted themselves to the service of the saints” in this absolute way. I think the same thing is true when wives are told to “submit to their husbands in everything.” Even with the addition of the phrase “in everything” we all understand that this “everything” does not include sin or leaving Christ, even if the husband tells his wife to do so. Husbands who make decisions without discussion with, and input from, their wives through a timely process of reasoning based on the evidence are abusing this passage and are ignoring the “oneness” of the relationship which God defined. Elderships who make momentous decisions without offering the members an opportunity to express differing opinions are also abusing their authority and showing a disregard for the real meaning of the Heb. 13:17 passage.

When Paul tells us all in Eph. 5:21 to submit to each other, that includes Elders. Elders are also told to submit to each member of the congregation in this passage.

The Greek word for “submit” in Heb. 13:17 is υπεικετε, which is second person plural, present tense, imperative mood of the root verb υπεικω. Knowing the meaning of the Greek verb here might help. Since this is the only place in the NT that this Greek verb is used we cannot compare its use in other scriptures to help our understanding. We must use the dictionaries and commentaries:

Dictionaries:

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Thayers Greek lexicon says: “to resist no longer, but to give way, yield, metaphorically: to yield to authority and admonition, to submit.

Bauer, Arngt & Gingrich lexicon: “yield, figurative: give way, submit to someone’s authority.”

With all this information and all these scriptures how are we to understand the word submit? Since Elders are just men, subject to all the frailties of other men we know that we should not “submit” to the Elders in everything (i.e. sinning or false teaching). If it does not mean “absolutely,” then what? Its meaning must include having an attitude of humility, a willingness to be flexible and to listen to those who differ with you and to evaluate the evidence and come to an agreement which is not self-serving but is in harmony with the scriptures and in the best interest of all concerned, based on evidence and reasoning. We can **ONLY** make this decision with serious Bible study, reasoning, discussion and much prayer and humility. -- “Come let us reason together, says the Lord.”

After such a process, if the differences cannot be resolved, then the objector must submit to the decisions of the elders. Although the objector may still disagree, he must remain silent (unless asked his opinion) on all matters of Judgment. If it is a matter of scriptural teaching he must, of course, follow God’s word and not the opinions on men.

The danger with any truth is the possibility of its abuse. This truth is no exception. I know it is possible for someone to take this truth and abuse it and use it in an attempt to disagree and discredit the Eldership on any and every point. Any such abuse is sin and will be punished by God on that great day. But we cannot let the possible abuse of this truth keep us from teaching it. Because, after all, it is a Bible truth.

Appendix

The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament

πειθω (obey, Hebrews 13:17)

to persuade. seek to persuade. endeavor to convince. Acts 18:4; 19:8. 26: 28:23:
to persuade. influence by persuasion. Matt 27:20; Acts 13:43; 26:28:
to incite. instigate. Acts 14:19:
to appease. render tranquil. to quiet. 1 John 3:19:
to strive to conciliate. aspire to the favor of. Gal 1:10:
to pacify. conciliate. win over. Matt 28:14; Acts 12:20:
pass. and mid. to be persuaded of. be confident of. Luke 20:6; Rom 8:38; Heb 6:9:
to suffer one's self to be persuaded. yield to persuasion. to be induced. Acts 21:14:
to be convinced. to believe. yield belief. Luke 16:31; Acts 17:4:
to assent. listen to. obey. follow. Acts 5:36. 37. 40: 2
perf. πεποιθα. to be assured. be confident. 2 Cor 2:3; Phil 1:6; Heb 13:18:
to confide in, trust, rely on, place hope and confidence in. Matt 27:43; Mark 10:24; Rom 2:19