

“Obey Your Leaders”

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Recently, I watched a movie called *Darkest Hour*, which is about Winston Churchill, England, and the events of 1940. Churchill has just become prime minister of England at a time when Germany has already invaded Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark, and Norway; they would soon invade Belgium and France. A number of people around him were urging Churchill to negotiate peace with Germany. Of course, from our perspective, that would be suicide, because we know that Hitler would not allow Europe to rest in any kind of undisturbed peace. But at that time, it seemed like there was no way England could win. America wouldn't enter into the war until about a year-and-a-half later. There were 300,000 soldiers trapped in Dunkirk, France, between the German forces and the sea. Not surrendering—or, as it was put, “negotiating terms”—seemed foolish. But Churchill held his ground and he inspired the United Kingdom to fight. History has, of course, proved him right.

I'm sure history is full of similar stories of leaders who have chosen to do what is right instead of what is easy, who have chosen to do what is needed as opposed to what those around them want. While many choose the easiest path, the path of least resistance, leaders know that they must choose the right path. That's what makes them leaders. And it is in the best interest of those who are under their leadership to support them, trust them, and follow them.

Today, we're going to continue to think about leadership within the church. Next week, I'll go back to 1 Timothy to consider the role of deacons in the church. But today I want to focus on the responsibility that a church has in following its leader. The flock must follow its shepherd.

The theme of leadership—and rejected leaders—runs throughout the Bible. As long as more than one person exists, there will be leaders and followers.

In the beginning, God created human beings. He gave them a great role—to rule over his creation while reflecting his glory. But he also made them to come under his leadership. And the first human beings rejected his leadership. Instead of following God, they wanted to be like him, and they believed the lie that they could be like him by disobeying him.

In the book of Genesis, God starts to work with one man, Abraham, and his family becomes Israel. In time, Israel grows into a nation, a nation enslaved to the world's superpower, Egypt. God heard the cries of his people and he sent them a leader, Moses, who brought them out

of Egypt. He brought them out, of course through God’s power and through mighty acts—signs and wonders—that God performed. Even before that happened, there was a question of whether the Israelites would follow Moses. That’s because when Moses first told Pharaoh to let God’s people go, Pharaoh made life harder for the Israelite slaves. Some of the leaders of the Israelites told Moses, “The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us” (Exod. 5:21).¹ Soon after, the whole people of Israel “did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery” (Exod. 6:9).

Yet God continued to use Moses, and he delivered the Israelites out of slavery and out of Egypt through a series of ten plagues. Yet even after that great deliverance, the people still complained. When they were trapped between the Red Sea on one side and the Egyptian army on the other, the people said to Moses, “Is it because there are not graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?” (Exod. 14:11–12). But the people did not die. Instead, God rescued them once again by a miracle, parting the Red Sea so the Israelites could pass on dry ground, and then closing the Red Sea on their Egyptian oppressors.

Yet even after that, the people complained! They “grumbled” about a lack of water and food. They complained against Moses’ leadership and said they would have been better off dying in Egypt (Exod. 16:3). Moses understood that their complaints ultimately weren’t against him; they were against God: “Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD” (Exod. 16:8). Yet God graciously met their needs. But because of the people’s disobedience and grumbling, God let a whole generation die in the wilderness instead of entering immediately into the Promised Land of Canaan (Num. 14:26–33).

The people wanted good things that a leader could provide—freedom, food, a new place where they could inherit land and live. But when a leader made decisions that they didn’t understand, they grumbled. Yet Moses had been commissioned by God to lead the people. Moses followed God, not the whims of the people.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

One of our presidents, Harry Truman, once said, “I wonder how far Moses would have gone if he had taken a poll in Egypt.”² If Moses catered to the people and their desires, perhaps they never would have left Egypt. They surely never would have arrived in the Promised Land, because their rebellion against God would have gone unchecked. Leaders need to make necessary decisions, not according to what the people want, but according to what they need.

Winston Churchill, once said, “I hear it said that leaders should keep their ears to the ground. All I can say is that the British nation will find it very hard to look up to the leaders who are detected in that somewhat ungainly posture.”³ His humorous point is that a leader who is afraid to make decisions that need to be made, but who instead worries about what the people are saying, is unworthy of respect. Great leaders must make the right decisions, not the popular ones.

I read both of those quotes, by Truman and Churchill, in a great book by a Christian man named Os Guinness. That book is called *A Free People’s Suicide*, which is about how American, the Free People of the title, are committing suicide by misusing their freedom. Guinness says that “America . . . is suffering from an overdose of . . . too much peer influence, too many polls and too much pandering.”⁴

We need to be led, and there are times when we even want a leader, but we don’t want a leader who will challenge us or do things we don’t like or understand. The book of Judges is a great example of this. The judges are not people who hear court trials. No, they are leaders, basically military saviors. There’s a pattern in the book of Judges: The people disobey God and start worshiping idols. God gives the people over to their enemies. The people cry out to God for help and he gives them a judge. The judge defeats the enemies. But in time, the people forget, they disobey God, and start worshiping idols again. The people wanted safety, but they didn’t want God.

One of the judges was Gideon. After God used Gideon to save the Israelites, some of the men of Israel say to Gideon, “Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.” Again, the people wanted a leader who could protect them from their enemies. Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule

² Robert Ferrell, ed. *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 310, quoted in Os Guinness, *A Free People’s Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 183.

³ Churchill made this statement in a speech in the House of Commons on September 30, 1941, quoted in Guinness, *A Free People’s Suicide*, 183.

⁴ Guinness, *A Free People’s Suicide*, 183.

over you; the LORD will rule over you” (Judg. 8:22–23). That was a wise thing to say. God is supposed to be the true King. However, God leads his people through human leaders. Yet it was good that Gideon didn’t become king, because he soon asked the people for gold and then he made for himself an ephod, which was a garment that only the high priest was supposed to wear. This is what the Bible says: “And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family” (Judg. 8:27). What that means is that Gideon led the people to worship idols. Idolatry is likened to being unfaithful, to “whoring.” The leader that the people wanted was a bad one. They didn’t want God or a godly man to be king.

Toward the end of the book of Judges, things go from bad to worse. And there’s a line that is repeated, like a refrain of a tragic song: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

After the time of the judges, Israel had kings. That’s a long story that we don’t have time for. Suffice it to say, many of them were bad. They often followed their own sinful desires instead of obeying God. Even the best king, David, had some significant sins in his life. So, God promised to send a better king, a perfect king who would rule with justice and righteousness. That king, of course, is Jesus.

Jesus is the perfect leader. Of course, he’s the God-man, truly God and truly man, so he can be both a divine leader and a human leader through whom God leads. While on the earth, Jesus was strong and courageous, but also compassionate. According to Matthew’s Gospel, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). Jesus healed the sick, he welcomed outsiders, people who were considered egregious sinners, and he taught about forgiveness, grace, and love. Jesus not only came to save us by dying for our sins on the cross, but he also came to correct and lead us. Jesus always said and did what was right and what was needed, not what people wanted and certainly not what was popular. He is the King we need.

As a leader, Jesus also demanded that people follow and obey him. One of the things he says often in the Gospels is “follow me” (Matt. 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 19:21). Jesus demands allegiance. At one point, in Matthew 10, he taught this:

³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his

life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matt. 10:37–39).

And Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15; cf. verses 21, 23).

Many people like some of what Jesus says, or they even like the idea of a savior who will get them out of hell and into heaven. But many people don’t like the idea of obedience. For some people, “obey” is a four-letter word. And those who don’t think “obey” is a four-letter word are bad at spelling, which means they didn’t obey their teachers. The point is that we don’t like the idea of obedience, particularly in our day and age.

A couple of months ago, I mentioned that an atheistic philosopher named Thomas Nagel admitted that much. He said, “I want atheism to be true and am uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.”⁵ He then says, “My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition.”⁶ He admits that the reason he didn’t want there to be a God is because he doesn’t want a “cosmic authority” over him, telling him how to live.

Another author, a Christian named Timothy Witmer, says, “The deterioration of respect for authority in culture has its root in a failure to respect the sovereign lordship of the ultimate authority, the living God who is the Shepherd and authority of all of life.”⁷ In other words, the reason we don’t like human authority is because we first don’t like God’s authority.

We find the same thing in the church, unfortunately. We want to have a relationship with Jesus, but we want it on our terms. We want to have all the blessings that Jesus offers, particularly forgiveness of sins and eternal life, without committing to Jesus and his church. Or, we want to commit to Jesus without committing to a local church and submitting to the leaders of a local church.

The problem is that such attitudes aren’t biblical. If we love Jesus, we’ll love his church. If we love Jesus and his church, we’ll obey his commands and we’ll obey the leaders of his

⁵ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (1997), 130.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁷ Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 77.

church. We see this in at least two passages in the New Testament. One is 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13:

¹² We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

That passage is quite easy to understand. The ones whom Paul is referring to are the leaders of the church. They are the pastors/elders/overseers. They labor among the people, doing the work that God has called them to. Paul tells the Thessalonians to respect them and to esteem in love, because of their work. And I think the idea is that if they do that, there will be “peace among yourselves.”

The other passage that talks about following church leaders goes beyond the words “respect” and “esteem” and uses that ugly four-letter word, “obey.” In Hebrews 13, the author first says, in verse 7, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” The leaders here are people who “spoke . . . the word of God” to them. He tells his readers to imitate these leaders. Then, in verse 17, we read this:

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.

Not only do we get that four-letter word, “obey,” but we get a dreaded six-letter word, “submit.” In other words, “come under their leadership.” Why? Because “they are keeping watch over your souls.” These are pastors, who are caring for the souls of their people. It’s in the best interest of a Christian to obey and submit to a pastor, because that person is looking out for that person’s soul. Not only that, but this pastor “will have to give an account” to God. A good pastor faithfully follows God’s word. And he will have to give an account to God for what he has done (cf. James 3:1). Another reason why people should obey church leaders is that this makes their work “joy” instead of “groaning.” And having a pastor whose job has become “groaning” would be of no advantage to anyone.

It’s hard to overstress the importance of this. The church shouldn’t be like Israel in the book of Judges, where everyone does what is right in their own eyes. God created the church,

and he gave the church leaders. Not just preachers or chaplains, but leaders. Yet people often don't treat pastors as real authorities.

I think we in America at this time are rather allergic to authorities. But pastors have long complained about people not listening to them. This is what Origen (185–253), a third-century pastor and theologian, said to his congregation almost 1,800 years ago:

The Lord has entrusted me with the task of giving his household their allowance of food [Bible teaching] at the appointed time [Lk 12:42]. . . . But how can I? Where and when can I find a time when you will listen to me? The greater part of your time, nearly all of it in fact, you spend on mundane things, in the marketplace or the shops; some of you are busy in the country, others wrapped up in litigation. Nobody, or hardly anybody, bothers about God's Word. . . . But why complain about those who are not here? Even those who are, those of you who have come to church, are paying no attention. You can take an interest in tales that have become worn out through repetition, but you turn your backs on God's Word and the reading of Holy Scripture."⁸

I find that quote surprisingly relevant. At first, Origen is preaching to those who aren't even there, who would rather do anything than come to church. But then he starts preaching to the choir, as it were. And the choir is bored with the things of God, though they take great interest in tales. You can hear Origen's frustration, his "groaning."

I suppose some people will come up with excuses for not following their church leaders. They may say things that suggest they should only follow Jesus, as if following Jesus and following their pastor are mutually exclusive things. They'll talk about how much they love Jesus and have precious quiet times with him, while they don't listen to their pastors. If you love Jesus, you will obey him. And Jesus has told us, through apostles and prophets, to obey the pastors of the church. How you treat Jesus' church is a reflection of how you treat Jesus. When Jesus confronted Saul on the road to Damascus, said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). Saul, better known as Paul, was arresting Christians, who would probably then die for their faith. Jesus told him that to persecute the church is to persecute him. Similarly, not following pastors means not following Jesus.

There are times when a pastor is younger than many of the people in his congregation. Older people might take a verse out of context to suggest that the younger pastor must actually

⁸ Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 10.1, quoted in Gerald R. McDermott, *The Great Theologians: A Brief Guide* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 20.

follow the older congregation. First Peter 5:5 says, “Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders.” And, after all, they’re paying his salary.

But that passage, 1 Peter 5, is talking about pastors. Pastors are called elders because “elder” was a term used in Judaism to describe a leader of a family or a synagogue. Quite naturally, this person was usually an older man. But in the church, an elder is not always older. In her commentary on 1 Peter, Karen Jobes writes, “The contrast is not between the older men and the younger men of the church.” If that were so, a different Greek word for “younger” would be used. “Rather it is between those who have the seniority and the commensurate standing that qualifies them to be [elders] in contrast to those who, for whatever reason, do not. Official elders of the church were naturally chosen from those who held seniority in the faith, which most often also corresponded to physical age. Those not (yet) qualified to be elders were ‘younger’ in standing in the church.”⁹ And as we’ll see later in 1 Timothy, Paul tells his younger associate, “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12).

Another excuse not to follow a pastor might be, “I’m not officially a member of this church.” Many people no longer commit to a local church. According to Timothy Witmer, “People are showing increasing reluctance to identify themselves with a particular flock, to make the commitment of church membership vows, and to submit to the authority of shepherd-elders inherent in those commitments.”¹⁰ I think officially being part of a local church and submitting to the leadership of that church is presupposed in many passages in the New Testament, including the passages that we’ve read. And I think you can make a great argument for saying that a failure to commit to a local church is a failure to commit truly to Jesus.

Though we don’t like words such as “obey” and “submit,” there are many good reasons for obeying pastors.

The first main reason is that it is for your good. Pastors have been spiritually gifted to teach God’s word. Last week we saw that Jesus gave the church pastor-teachers in order to shepherd the flock and to equip the saints for ministry. A faithful pastor feeds his flock the word

⁹ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 307.

¹⁰ Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 87.

of God, protects them from false doctrine and sinful behaviors, and helps them serve God. This benefits those who follow their shepherds.

Pastors also have spiritual discernment. When it comes to making decisions, or seeing where the church should go, pastors have special insight. Pastors think often about ministry and the direction of the church. They consult other pastors. They study. Often, non-pastors just react from their gut. They say, "I like this," or, "I don't like that," without really thinking about what the church should do.

Put another way, sheep don't know where they're supposed to go. That's why they need a shepherd. The shepherd doesn't survey the sheep and ask them all where they would like to go. No, the shepherd knows what is best for the sheep and he leads them to green pastures.

Another reason to follow pastors is that it's not good to discourage pastors. There's probably nothing more discouraging than having a congregation that doesn't listen, that doesn't follow. And this isn't good for a congregation. I can tell you that most pastors are discouraged. Over time, a number of pastors leave ministry because of that discouragement. Many feel lonely and isolated.

When you follow pastors, you make their job a joy. When you don't, you make their job a groaning. And it's not beneficial to anyone if a pastor's job has become groaning.

Now, does that mean you must always follow a pastor? No. You are free not to follow a pastor when he does something contrary to God's word. If he teaches false doctrine, don't follow. I don't mean if he interprets a passage in a slightly different way. In fact, I think it's often going to be the case that good pastors will correct a congregation's understanding of the Bible. But if a pastor starts saying that you don't need to believe in Jesus to be reconciled to God, or that there isn't such a thing as hell, or that Jesus isn't God, well, it's time to get a new pastor or a new church.

If a pastor isn't acting in accordance with the Bible, in his personal life or in the way he leads the church, then there are ways to address this. We'll see this several weeks from now when we get to 1 Timothy 5. There is a time and place for criticizing a pastor, but this shouldn't be done quickly or lightly. We all should be slow to speak and quick to listen. And I think we should approach pastors with that same attitude: quick to listen, quick to obey, quick to submit, quick to respect, slow to criticize and slow to accuse. And if any kind of accusation must be

made, it has to be done on real, specific evidence that has been witnessed by at least two people (1 Tim. 5:19).

Unfortunately, there have been pastors who have misused their authority, and I suspect that's why some people are very reluctant to obey pastors and submit to them. In a fallen world, such things will happen. Just because a shepherd has failed does not mean that the Good Shepherd, Jesus, has failed. When a pastor fails, he can be corrected and restored, if he repents. If he refuses to repent, he can be removed, or people in a church may choose to leave the church and join another one. But Jesus is the perfect leader who never fails. He knows what he needs. That's why he came to earth. He came to live the perfect life that we don't live. He fulfilled God's purposes for humanity. He never failed to love, worship, and obey his Father in heaven. And yet he died on the cross, suffering the wrath of God against sin, because that was the only way for God to be a righteous judge and a merciful Father. Jesus wasn't afraid to teach hard truths or make hard decisions, even the decision to let himself be killed, to lay down his life so his people could go free. He is the leader of us all, and we must submit to him.

Let us follow Jesus by obeying the word of God, the Bible. That means following leaders of a church. And I ask you to follow me as I follow Jesus.