

15. We believe in church government, loyalty and obedience to those in authority over us in the Lord.

(Transcript of message preached by Pastor Rick Minett on June 26, 2005 at Grace Community Church)

“Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. . . Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:7-17).

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 says, *“And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake...”* The question of ministerial authority is a legitimate one; one that is clearly addressed in scripture. Sadly, we’ve seen this truth abused on both sides of the spectrum—from leaders who abuse their authority to church members that demonstrate no respect whatsoever for Biblical authority. And the end result in both cases can be devastating.

When anyone responds to the call of God, especially as a pastor, that person is being held to the highest standard known to man. For you see, I must not only give an account for my life, but I must give an account for the way I equip and edify the body of believers that God allows me to serve. Ephesians 4:11-12 says, *“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”* As a shepherd, and that is what pastors and church leaders are called to be, the responsibility is far greater than most people really consider. Peter exhorts church pastors this way in 1 Peter 5:2-4, *“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.”* So what Simon Peter does here is look at the nature of the sheep, the responsibility of the shepherd, and then compares that to the pastor’s role in the church. Essentially, this passage along with others, tell us these three things about those who have been called to shepherd the flock of God.

Shepherds Are Feeders

Sheep spend most of their lives eating and drinking, but they are not careful about their diet. Sheep don’t know the difference between poisonous and non-poisonous plants, so one of the responsibilities of the shepherd to carefully guard their diets and lead bring them to pastures rich with healthy food. This very point was driven home to Simon Peter not once, but twice, by the Lord Himself in John 21. In verse 15, Jesus said, *“‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord: You know I love You.’ He said to Him, ‘Feed My lambs.’”* And in verse 17 we read, *“He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?’ Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed My sheep.’”* Nowhere in scripture are pastors told to “please” the sheep; instead, we are told to “feed” the sheep. My goal isn’t to tickle your ears, your fancy, or just make you feel good; my goal is to nourish your souls. And I can’t nourish your souls if I only feed you light snacks of spiritual milk. In order for you to grow strong and for me to fulfill my God-ordained responsibility, I must take you from “spiritual milk” to “spiritual meat.” Shepherds feed.

Shepherds Are Leaders

When Simon Peter says, *“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you...”* he goes on to say how a shepherd is to do that, by then saying, *“serving as overseers...”* But a shepherd doesn’t lead or exercise oversight from above, but from within. Being a shepherd requires one to get among the sheep—not to distance himself from them. Furthermore, a shepherd doesn’t herd his sheep from the rear, but instead, he leads them from the front. A shepherd leads; only a butcher drives!

Shepherds Are Protectors

I have spent very little time on farms so I do not know a whole lot about sheep, but from what I have read, they cannot defend themselves very well. Sheep don’t kick, scratch, bite, jump and seldom run. And when a predator attacks, they huddle together instead of running away which only makes them easier prey; so without a doubt, they need someone to protect them.

One of the ways that the adversary seeks to destroy sheep, members of the church, is through doctrinal error and spiritual untruths. So pastors are urged in scripture to be on guard and to watch for predators that would spread such error and to protect the sheep from it. For instance, in Acts 20:28-30, Paul says, *“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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. For I know this, that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock... Therefore watch...”* Shepherds are called to stay alert and guard against error, as well as stay alert and watch for sheep that have gone astray.

Sheep, I’m told, have no sense of direction and get confused very easily. Isaiah says people are like that, as well. In Isaiah 53:6, we read, *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way...”* Like lost sheep, lost people need someone who will protect them by leading them back to the safety of the fold. The role of the pastor is to do exactly that—to lead people back to the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep. Now of course, Jesus is the perfect example of a loving

shepherd. He epitomizes everything a spiritual leader is called to be. He is the “Chief Shepherd” and He calls church leaders to serve as “under-shepherds” who take seriously the responsibilities of feeding, leading, and protecting. And when leaders faithfully carry out those duties, Hebrews 13:17 makes complete sense. Again it says, *“Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”*

Is spiritual authority ever abused? Of course; we all know that from history—the Jim Jones stories have been repeated many times. And some of you know it’s true from your personal history. For example, what became known as the “shepherding movement” in the 70s and 80s probably started out with good intentions by ministers who wanted to help people, but it turned into a ministerial dictatorship in many cases. There are members of this church that used to attend “shepherding churches” and they’ve told me of their experiences. They were forbidden to marry without the pastor’s consent. Their occupations were essentially determined by those in church leadership. Even the most elementary decisions that most of us make in life had to be submitted and approved by the pastor and elders of the church.

My responsibility is to equip and edify, but it is not to run your life. If that were the case, I’d rather drive a truck! I think some people seek positions of spiritual leadership primarily for the sake of power. And I’m not speaking merely about pastors, but also about any position of leadership in the church. You’ve met people like that—they desire certain positions of leadership because of the “power” it gives them. But if that’s the case, they’ve failed before they’ve begun. Church leadership isn’t about power; it’s about service. There’s a wonderful story in Matthew 20 that speaks to this very thing. As Jesus was nearing the cross, Salome, the mother of James and John comes to Jesus, kneels down before Him, and whispers in His ear, *“Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.”* She’s just a good Jewish mother wanting the best for her boys. What can be wrong with that? But Jesus saw through her “false sincerity” and realized that she was coming to Him not in worship and humility, but she was coming to Him to get what she could get from Him. She wanted her boys to be “great”—and in her mind the “measure of greatness” was determined by having others under them. What she failed to realize was that God’s view of greatness and man’s view of greatness is about as opposite as opposite can be.

For example, years ago at Harvard University a new building was being constructed for the Philosophy Department. The University president asked one of the professors what he thought should be inscribed on the building cornerstone. The professor thought about it for a long time and then borrowed a phrase from an ancient Greek philosopher: “Man is the measure of all things.” Greatness, to this professor, happens when we place ourselves at the very center of life. The University president listened and thanked the professor for his suggestion. When the building was completed a few months later the professor rushed over to look at the cornerstone to see the words inscribed thereon, anxious to see his suggestion, but was shocked to see that the University president failed to take his advice. Instead the inscription read: *“What is man that Thou art mindful of him?”* The president understood something about greatness that the philosophy professor apparently couldn’t grasp. Jesus was trying to get Salome to understand the same thing. He told her that she didn’t understand that there is a price to pay for greatness. She didn’t understand that the way up—is down! In the Kingdom, you don’t ascend to greatness—you descend to greatness!

When the other disciples heard about the request of Salome they were livid. But Jesus called them all together and told them that there was something that they all needed to understand. In Matthew 20:25-27, He said, *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”*

The problem that so many people have is that they are constantly trying to force the “structure of the church” into the “system of the world.” We are constantly trying to pattern the church after the pattern of the world. But that is like trying to force a square peg into a round hole—it will never work. We must understand that the church operates entirely different than the system of the world. Leaders in the church are to have the heart of a servant, not the heart of a dictator. Leaders of the church are to pattern themselves and their ministries after Jesus and His ministry—not Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, or General Patton.

Frankly, this whole issue is very similar to Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 5, where he talks about a woman’s submissive role to her husband. In verses 22-24, Paul says, *“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let wives be to their own husbands in everything.”* Now most men feel that Paul would have done just fine to end right there, but he didn’t. He continues in verse 25 by saying, *“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her...”* And in verse 33, he concludes, *“Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.”* What is Paul talking about? He’s talking about the balance that comes when on one side there is “genuine love” and on the other “gracious submission.”

In the spring of 1984, I received a phone call from Eliot Murff, a former member of this church who is now in heaven. He asked me if I would meet with him because the church was looking for a new pastor. We met, a few weeks later I preached on a Sunday morning, and the next week I was extended an invitation to become pastor of this church, which I accepted. What a lot of people don’t know however is that six months later a friend of mine came to visit me. He was in pastoral ministry in California, working for his father’s church, which at that time was one of the largest churches in America with thousands of members. His father was looking for an associate pastor and my friend thought I’d be perfect for the job.

I’ll never forget as my friend and I walked around the old church down on Indiana Street. He essentially said, “What are you doing here? Read the church growth books, these kinds of churches never grow. They just die a painful death. And if they ever do grow, it means someone has to spend a lifetime there—because it takes ten, fifteen, twenty years for them to even begin to head in the right direction. Are you sure you want to do that?” He meant well and everything he said was true!

Well, I must admit, he had me thinking. This great church in California flew Deanna and I out to California; they wined and dined us (with grape juice, don't worry) and an offer to join their staff was extended more than once. They really wanted us to join them. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't seriously interested. Deanna didn't want to leave Texas, but the thought of near perfect weather and a church of thousands made me think seriously about packing our bags. And as I wrestled with all this, I'll never forget a phone conversation I had with my mother. I told her about the opportunity in California and the struggle I was having over the decision whether to stay at Grace Community or leave. She thought I should stay. I said, "But we only have 20 people!" And she said, "That may be true, but Rick, those 20 people need someone to love them." And that single statement made everything come into proper perspective. It reminded me of the fact that when I stand before the Lord and give an account for my life and my ministry, He's not going to ask me the size of church, He is going to ask me the same thing He did Simon Peter: "Did you love my sheep? Did you feed them, lead them, and protect them?"

I lived in Pennsylvania until I was six years old, but there are still a few things that I remember vividly even though I was so young. One is a bridge that spanned a little river as you entered the little town I lived in. It took you from Coppel to Ellwood City. And the reason that bridge stands out in my memory is because it was different from most bridges—it only had one lane. As you entered the bridge from the east there was a sign that said, "Yield..." and as you entered it from the west there was a sign that said, "Yield..." And I still remember sitting there at times, for what seemed like hours, waiting for our time to cross. I didn't like that "yield" sign as a kid. I just wanted my dad to drive straight ahead without stopping. But as I grew older I understood that "yielding" was to my benefit. As I grew older, I discovered that learning to yield kept me safe and probably prevented some head-on collisions.

When Ephesians 5:21 tells us to "*submit to one another in the fear of God*"—it is to our benefit as well. More often than we probably realize, it keeps us from some head-on collisions. The issue of church government and one's submission to it really comes down to words like "yield" and "surrender." Am I willing to yield my rights for the sake of others? Am I willing to surrender my will and wants for the sake of the Kingdom?