

# *Obey Them That Have the Rule over You*

## **Part 1 of 3**

The role of leadership within the Christian community is frequently misunderstood by church leaders within the various denominational backgrounds. This in-depth study of Hebrews 13:17 seeks to explore the role of leaders within the Christian community as presented in Holy Scripture. Many Christian leaders labor under the impression that God has ordained certain men and women with the power to control Christians within their particular fellowship. This kind of mindset developed from citing certain Scriptures without consulting the context to determine if what is referred to is found within the intent of the author. In this investigation of Scripture, the objective is to analyze the present day function of power seized by many leaders within the various Christian communities. Unfortunately, the mindset of many concerning the role that leaders are to exercise within God's family is based upon isolated passages taken out of context to justify their dictatorial powers.

There is a positive side of leadership as well as a negative side. This in-depth study seeks to look at both sides from a biblical perspective. On the downbeat trait, we often discover that the person appointed as leader is dictatorial, overbearing, arrogant, dogmatic, authoritarian, and so on. On the other hand, there are leaders who are on the upbeat quality, that is to say, they exercise the role of guides. These individuals exhibit behavior that the fellowship of God's people should model. A true biblical leader is one we should imitate in our daily walk with God. On the negative side, leaders are often viewed as rulers, bosses, directors, executives, managers, chiefs, and masters. However, on the positive side, leaders are often viewed as guides, advisors, beacons, counselors, teachers, lighthouses, and guideposts.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>In Part 1 of 3, I call attention to events that have been confrontational in my ministry from leaders within the Christian community. I have purposefully withheld their names. I call awareness to certain actions taken against me in order to drive home the abuse of power by many sincere and godly people. Some of the individuals have gone home to be with the Lord.

# LEADERSHIP IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

## Dictatorial Leadership

The question that confronts many sincere Christians is: Is biblical submission just blind obedience to whatever the leaders believe the Bible teaches? Or does unfettered or unregulated surrender to the leaders negate allegiance to Christ in every facet of our lives? Can the leaders stand in judgment for our actions, or do we give an account to God for our own dealings? Are there any infallible interpreters in the fellowship of God's people? These are questions that we must confront within the family of God's children. Have we placed unconditional faith in our leaders? Or have we put our faith in God and His written Revelation? Which? Are the leaders known as elders, bishops, clergymen, priest infallible interpreters of God's Word? Are we, as Christians, responsible to God for our dealings and our interpretations placed upon God's written Revelation? Are we to blindly follow whatever the leaders instruct us to do or believe?

Has God authorized high-ranking individuals to occupy a tyrannical position within the company of God's redeemed people? It is not uncommon for elders or deacons, within some fellowships, to hire or dismiss preachers without the consent of the congregation. Once they make a decision, then that judgment is final—no recourse, case closed. I have witnessed in my sixty-seven years of ministry the practice of elders appointing other elders to rule without the consent of the congregation? This scenario happened several years ago in a local congregation in Birmingham, Alabama. As a result of the high-handedness of the leadership, the local body of Christ split. The leadership sought to exercise absolute dominion over the flock of God. This decision was based upon a misapplication of Hebrews 13:17, which they themselves had been taught, in all probability, from preachers in the pulpit.<sup>2</sup>

Has God endorsed a select few to exercise lordship over the consciences of other believers? Are believers to unscrew their heads and let a certain group of men behave as a board of directors? When the board of administrators interprets Scripture, should we accept their views as *ex cathedra* (,eks-kə-'thē-drə, from the chair, with the authority derived from one's office or position)? Is it sinful for us to disagree with the chosen shepherds and still remain within the fellowship of God's people, that is to say, the local congregation? Does God require blind conformity? Are we to be fully persuaded according to the thinking of the elders/preachers/evangelist? Are we to follow the dictates of these individuals regardless as to what they teach, or should we exercise some judgment in keeping with our own minds? Do the Scriptures teach a sort of sightless submission?<sup>3</sup>

The positive aspects of leadership promote responsible direction in order to encourage us to put forward a life dedicated to holy living. There is a need for older men to give guidance in

---

<sup>2</sup>See Dallas Burdette, "How to Read the Word of God," in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 160-170, for the principles to apply to correct interpretation.

<sup>3</sup>See Mary Alice Chrnalogar, *Twisted Scriptures: Breaking Free from Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, revised edition 2000), 189-200, for an excellent analysis of mind control practiced by many leaders within the Christian church. See also Ronald M. Enroth, *Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) and *Recovering from Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

the way of devoutness (see Hebrews 13:1-17). Leaders need to encourage Christians through their trials and tribulations. The church needs godly men and women to train other Christians to become soldiers for Jesus Christ in the conversion of the world.

## Congregational Leadership

This study is not written to castigate holy men and women in their roles as servants of Christ nor is this study written to deny that congregations need leadership. Rather this evaluation of the current philosophy of leadership is concerned with “power religion.” Power religion is the same thing as exercising lordship over God’s children. When leaders exercise dictatorial rule over people, it is spiritual abuse and a violation of the principles set forth by Jesus as well as His Apostles. Peter warns leaders not to engage in such high-handed tactics:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; <sup>3</sup> not lording (κατακυριεύοντες, *katakuriouontes*<sup>4</sup>) it over those entrusted to you, but being examples (τύποι, *typoi*) to the flock. (1 Pet 5:1-3)

Peter wants the elders to be models or patterns to the flock, not individuals who lord it over the ones entrusted to them. Since there is a trend among some leaders that Christians are to give blind obedience to whatever they teach, then this issue of the proper role of leadership is one with which we must deal. Some leaders assume the role of Pope in their relationship to the people. It is wrong for leaders to bind their interpretations upon other Christians.<sup>5</sup> The philosophy of “individual non-responsibility” advanced by many leaders is unbiblical. Leaders are not infallible interpreters. We should search the Scriptures for ourselves and draw our own conclusions based upon the context (See Romans 14:1-15:7).<sup>6</sup>

Paul sets an example of this kind of reasoning in his Epistles to the Christians at Rome and Corinth. There were many differences over doctrinal matters within the congregation at Rome. Some of the believers were correct in their interpretation of the issues discussed in Romans 14 and some were wrong, but both were wrong when they tried to impose their views upon other believers. Thus, Paul dealt with diversity of opinions this way:

---

<sup>4</sup> **κατακυριεύοντες**, *katakuriouontes*: verb, present, active, participle, plural, nominative, masculine—from **κατακυριεύω** (*katakuriouō*, “I exercise lordship over; I overpower”): “to exercise control over someone as his master, to dominate completely.”

<sup>5</sup>We do not deny that leaders can take action against other individuals if they live a profligate life or deny the deity of Jesus. All Christians must take a stand upon these issues. The problem comes when selected leaders decide a particular interpretation of a Scripture that does not deal with one of the above issues—immorality and denial that Jesus has come in the flesh.

<sup>6</sup>See Dallas Burdette, “Unity in Jesus,” in *Old Texts through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 452-463, for an examination of diversity within the Christian community.

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. <sup>2</sup> One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Romans 14:1-4)

Paul did not say that the shepherds were to enforce the correct interpretation dealing with "disputable matters." The person with deficiency in understanding is still acceptable to God. Paul says "no" to passing judgment upon other believers: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant?" (14:4). But is that all Paul says about this issue of unity in diversity? Again, the answer is "no." Listen once more to him as he speaks of the true standing of individuals before God with imperfection in their knowledge: "To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (14:4). Some of the Christian leaders wanted to force their own views in these matters of differences, but again Paul says, "No": "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). He concludes his discussion about diversity this way: "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (15:7). Has God accepted us with imperfection in our lives? Has God accepted us with imperfection in our understanding? If so, then Paul says that we should "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

Not only did Paul deal with unity in diversity with the church at Rome, but he also had to address this issue of how Christians should react when some defect in knowledge is quite apparent to the so-called know-it-alls. He begins his treatise on the sacrificing of foods to idols: "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge" (1 Corinthians 8:1). In other words, it is true that some understood the issues very clearly while others did not comprehend. Paul admits this up front. But he does not drop the ball with that statement. He goes on to say: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (8:1). It is not uncommon for Christians who think they know everything to manifest an attitude of aloofness toward those whose knowledge does not measure up to theirs. Paul goes right to the heart of this problem: "Knowledge puffs up." For Paul, if we love others in spite of differences, then, this condescension is the outcome of love—"love builds up."

Paul nips this know-it-all-attitude in the bud. He writes: "The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know" (8:2). Christians are in a state of growth. But Paul does not want the Corinthians to make a test of fellowship out of spiritual digestion. What does matter is the state of the heart. Again, Paul points out that that which is acceptable to God is love for God: "But the man who loves God is known by God" (8:2). One may be deficient in knowledge but, at the same time, if one loves God, then, this individual is the one to whom God extends His love.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>For a detailed analysis of Romans 14:1-15:7 and 1 Corinthians 8, see Dallas Burdette, "Watch Out for Those Who Cause Division," in Dallas Burdette, *Old Texts Through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 274-316.

If there were elders in the congregation at Corinth, they were not advised to take a negative action against the “weak” but rather to love them. Paul later wrote to Titus on the procedures to follow if a person became divisive:

Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned. (Titus 3:10-11)<sup>8</sup>

This warning would apply to any of God’s children—leaders or lay people. If we are not willing to follow the counsel of Paul to the Romans and the Corinthians about the spirit of toleration, then Paul says that we should have nothing to do with the disruptive person—none are excluded, which includes elders, preachers, and editors of Christian journals. The so-called ruling class does not frequently heed this warning. They themselves become very troublesome and dogmatic when they do not get their way. They themselves are frequently divisive and disruptive of the unity created by the Holy Spirit. Unseeing submission on the part of the congregation discourages personal accountability to God. This sightless resignation, as enforced by many church leaders, is not a mark of true Christian maturity. Raymond Brown (1928-1998), American Roman Catholic priest and biblical scholar, is perfectly right when he insists, “The Christian is answerable to Christ alone.”<sup>9</sup>

## **CONTROVERSY AND MISUNDERSTANDING OF BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP**

Much of the controversy and misunderstanding concerning the proper role leaders play within the local body of believers revolves around an interpretation of Hebrews 13:17: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.” Many well-meaning leaders cite this passage in order to substantiate their dictatorial leadership within many Christian fellowships. Many godly men allude to this Scripture with almost literal crudeness. Certain Scriptures, on first reading, appear to uphold the position that many leaders advance within the local congregation, but before we offer an interpretation, we should consult the context. One goal of any interpreter should be to ascertain what the original writer sought to communicate through his use of words.<sup>10</sup>

The arguments that are usually advanced to maintain lordship over the congregation are so fragile that we are reluctant to let too much credence rest upon them. Nevertheless, because of current arguments advanced by a few, this subject of authority exercised by a small number of leaders is one with which we must deal. Part of the problem today is that the traditions of the church sometimes make it difficult, if not impossible, to read the Bible without “glasses.” Truth is too often the projection of the particular views and interests of the powerful. The powerful,

---

<sup>8</sup>For a detailed study of Titus 3:10-11, see Dallas Burdette, “Who Are the Heretics,” in Dallas Burdette, *Old Tests through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 432-451.

<sup>9</sup>Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1982), 265.

<sup>10</sup>See Dallas Burdette, “How to Read the Word of God,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 160-170.

often times, have difficulty in hearing God accurately. The “faith of the fathers” becomes the watchword of orthodoxy. Without intending to, “we bring our theological heritage, our ecclesiastical traditions, our cultural norms, or our existential concerns to the Epistles as we read them.”<sup>11</sup> The words of Jesus should ring loud and clear: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 3:6).<sup>12</sup>

In seeking an answer to the phrase, “Obey them that have the rule over you” (Hebrews 13:17, KJV),<sup>13</sup> every interpreter must initially pursue the meaning intended for the original audience. Too often Christians find things in biblical narratives that are not really there. They read *into* (*eisegesis*) the Bible their own notions rather than read *out of* (*exegesis*) the Bible what God wants them to know. God’s people should not be “monkey-see-monkey-do” readers of Holy Scripture. God’s words are to be found in the intent of His written Revelation, not our interpretation of His Word.

Since words operate within a context and receive meaning from that context, then an exegete (interpreter) must recognize that words can change from situation to situation. Words do not automatically have meaning; they receive meaning from their author. To make the text say something that the person behind the text did not propose is to abuse the text. The message of the passage cannot be properly interpreted in isolation from its historical context. As a result of misreading the wording, it is not uncommon for leaders to labor under the impression that God has given them authority over other Christians. Their voices are equated with the Word of God. Their interpretations are identified with Scripture. No one is allowed to be “fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5). The evidence from Scripture does not support the traditional attitude and position maintained by many elders and leaders. It is imperative that disciples of Jesus learn to reevaluate and reinterpret what has been handed down to them through the years.

### **Ultimatums of Conformity Issued By Many Religious Leaders**

It is not exceptional for leaders (elders and preachers) to issue an ultimatum to other believers who do not concur with their particular brand of orthodoxy to either shape up or ship out. The rule of thumb is: one must submit, never question. One is not allowed to disagree with the so-called leadership and still remain within the fellowship of the local community. In order to justify such ungodly behavior by the leaders, the nonconformist (one that thinks for himself or herself) is often referred to as “not sound in the faith.” This mindset is prevalent among many

---

<sup>11</sup>Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 58.

<sup>12</sup>See Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 29-68, in which they discuss the “difficulties in hearing the text” and “the forgotten interpreters.” I am indebted to these two individuals for their insightful analysis on the problems that hinder correct interpretation.

<sup>13</sup>*The King James Version*, (Cambridge: Cambridge) 1769.

Christians in the various denominations.<sup>14</sup> Our acceptability with some congregations depend on the position that we maintain concerning the following issues: one's understandings about divorce and remarriage, instrumental music in the so-called worship service, the use of the Sunday school versus the non-Sunday school position, individual communion cups versus the one-cup practice, the Scripturalness of Bible colleges, the support of orphan homes, views on the return of Christ (premillennial, postmillennial), handclapping in the assembly, solo singing in the assembly, and so on. Christians are not allowed freedom to decide for themselves; the beliefs espoused by certain individuals must coincide with partisan leadership.<sup>15</sup>

The subject of divorce and remarriage has wrought havoc within the body of Christ. If one divorces without the approval of leadership, then warnings are issued concerning their marital status. In other words, the eldership can issue an ultimatum—divorce and remain celibate or face dire consequences—ostracism. The leadership determines whether one should remain single, or if remarried, whether one can remain married. Whatever leadership decides, the people must obey without question. For one not to obey the elders is tantamount to not obeying God. No one is allowed to disagree with the “chosen few” without incurring the wrath of God, at least according to some leaders. The dictatorial powers are not limited just to this one issue—divorce and remarriage—but it can be applied to any position that the leadership decides upon.<sup>16</sup>

### **Sightless Conformity Demanded By Some Leaders**

A host of Christian leaders today teach sightless conformity to their biblical interpretations. The kind of concord demanded by many church leaders—elders, preachers, and editors of religious journals—is not the same intent of the author of the Book of Hebrews. Many church leaders today—not all—have the concept of compliance that demands conformity and resignation to party orthodoxy. The battle cry is: submit or be kicked out of the synagogue. This attitude is the same mindset of the religious leaders in Jesus' day.<sup>17</sup> As a result of the misuse of the Greek text, recent scholarship has focused on this issue of “obey” and its semantic<sup>18</sup> meaning.

---

<sup>14</sup>For examples of divisions among God's people, see Dallas Burdette, “False Teachers,” in Dallas Burdette, *Old Texts through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 63-77. Many denominations will not recognize other believers, especially if they do not subscribe to the beliefs of the particular denomination with which they wish to identify themselves.

<sup>15</sup>Unfortunately, many Christians still divide over many issues that are not relevant within the scheme of God's community. See Dallas Burdette, “Oddities in Pattern Theology,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 55-86, for examples of how many godly men and women have separated themselves from others who also equally belong to Christ.

<sup>16</sup>For an analysis of the divorce controversy, see Dallas Burdette, “The Divorce Sayings in the Synoptics and Pauline Accounts,” in Dallas Burdette, *Old Texts Through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 150-188.

<sup>17</sup>See Dallas Burdette, “A Literary Analysis of the Gospel of Matthew,” *Ibid.*, 26-62.

<sup>18</sup>Semantical studies pertain to words and their contextual meanings or dimensions within the biblical text.

The word *obey* stands out like neon lights on a bill-board. What is the meaning of the Greek word that is translated by translators as “obey?” Does the English word *obey* capture the intent of the author of the Book of Hebrews? To help us solve the dilemma, we turn to Greek scholars in order to try to understand more clearly the original intent of this controversial word. Owen L. Crouch (d. 2000), who earned a Masters of Theology degree followed by a Doctorate with a major in Greek and minors in archaeology and missions, writes that the “verb means ‘persuade.’ When you persuade yourself you obey.... They are not dictators over your spirits but are ‘leaders’ for your lives.”<sup>19</sup> Another scholar, Philip Hughes<sup>20</sup> is perfectly right when he insists: “The authority our author is commending must not be confused with authoritarianism.”<sup>21</sup> It is in this same vein that Leon Morris<sup>22</sup> draws attention to the fact that “authority” is not a part of the Greek text. For instance, he writes:

The readers are to be obedient to their leaders. In v. 7 the leaders were men who had died. Here, however, those alive and currently in places of authority are meant (At the same time we should perhaps notice that there is nothing in the Gr. to correspond to NIV’s ‘their authority’).<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Schuyler English, biblical scholar and author, too, explains: “It is self-evident, or should be, that such obedience will not be in the form of blind and unqualified compliance with the whims of self-appointed authority.”<sup>24</sup> Why did the author of Hebrews write verses 7 and 17 in Chapter 13? Just a casual glance of the Book as a whole seems to convey the author’s appeal to the believers who had previously responded to the Good News of God not to return to legalism, that is, Judaism (the old heaven and earth—8:13; 12:22-29). The New Covenant demands, even as the Old Covenant, high moral standards, but at the same time, the New Covenant does not involve Mosaic rituals, holy days, and formalities. In other words, the New Covenant with God through Jesus Christ is internal, not external ritualism of animal sacrifices. He draws attention to the crucifixion of Jesus, but, in doing this, he cautions them about the possibility of crucifying the Son of God afresh by returning to Judaism.

He wants Christians to continue to trust in Jesus as God’s Atonement for the sins of humanity. Not only does he want these believers to turn to Him for salvation, but he also wants them to lay aside every sin that causes one to stumble so easily. This faithfulness to Jesus is

---

<sup>19</sup>Owen L. Crouch, *God Has Spoken: Expository Preaching and Teaching, Hebrews* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1990), 446.

<sup>20</sup>**Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (1915-1990):** An Anglican clergyman, Calvinist, and biblical scholar, he moved to the USA and became a professor, teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary among other seminaries. He was also a prolific writer and editor of the *Churchman*.

<sup>21</sup>Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 586.

<sup>22</sup>**Leon Morris (1914–2006)** was a leading evangelical New Testament scholar. He received his PhD from the University of Cambridge in England. He was principal of Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia, retiring in 1979. He then served as visiting professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

<sup>23</sup>Leon Morris, *Hebrews*, in Frank Gaebelein, Gen. Ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol., 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 152.

<sup>24</sup>E. Schuyler English, *Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (South Carolina: Southern Bible House, 1955), 501.

what verses 7 and 17 are all about in Chapter 13 of Hebrews. Listen once more to the author of the Book of Hebrews:

Keep on loving each other as brothers. <sup>2</sup> Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. <sup>3</sup> Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. <sup>4</sup> Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. <sup>5</sup> Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” <sup>6</sup> So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” <sup>7</sup> **Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.** <sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. <sup>9</sup> Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. <sup>10</sup> We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. <sup>11</sup> The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. <sup>12</sup> And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. <sup>13</sup> Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. <sup>14</sup> For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. <sup>15</sup> Through Jesus, therefore, let us **continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise**—the fruit of lips that confess his name. <sup>16</sup> And do not forget to **do good** and to **share with others**, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. <sup>17</sup> **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.** (Hebrews 13:1-17)

Christians were to be persuaded to “continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise,” to “do good,” and to “share with others.” The context indicates that the obedience involved Christian ethics. Unfortunately, this Scripture has been wrenched from its context in order to enforce conformity to the dictates of a select few who assume the role of infallible interpreters. In the early 70s, I, too, was ostracized by godly men when I refused to abide by the ruling that I could not have fellowship with anyone outside our particular fellowship associated with God’s company of redeemed ones.<sup>25</sup> This same mindset is still prevalent among many of God’s children to this day within the various denominations. If one fails to agree with the status quo, this individual will find himself or herself on the outside of this fellowship. Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), in 1835, sought to curb the current trend in his day of disassociating from one whose knowledge did not measure up to the status quo (the existing state of affairs) of a particular fellowship of God’s people. The following comments by Campbell is on target as he seeks to capture the unsound position of throwing one out of the church for differences over interpretation:

Amongst Christians there is now, as there was at the beginning a very great diversity in the knowledge of the Christian institution. There are babes, children, young men, and fathers in Christ now, as well as in the days of the Apostle John. This, from the natural gifts of God, from the diversities of age, education, and circumstances, is unavoidable. And would it not be just as rational

---

<sup>25</sup>For a detailed analysis of my dismissal, see Dallas Burdette, “Dallas Burdette’s Pilgrimage of Faith,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 1-26.

and as scriptural to excommunicate one another, because our knowledge is less or greater than any fixed measure, as for differences of opinion or matters of speculation?

Indeed, in most cases where proscription and exclusions now occur in this country, the excluded are the most intelligent members of the society; and although no community will accuse a man because he knows more of his Bible than his brethren, and on this account exclude him from their communion; yet this, it is manifest, rather than heresy, (of which, however, for consistency's sake, he must be accused,) is, in truth, the real cause of separation.

If God has bestowed better gifts or better opportunities on one man than another, by which he has attained more knowledge, instead of thanking God for his kindness to the community, they beg God to take him away; and if he will not be so unkind, they will at length put him from among them under the charge of heresy. In most instances the greatest error of which a brother can be guilty, is to study his Bible more than his companions—or, at least, to surpass them in his knowledge of the mystery of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

### **Letter to Dallas Burdette from Abused Preacher**

Just a few years ago, I received (December 23, 2001) a letter from a brother who had suffered tremendously from abusive power exerted by the powerful. I am withholding this brother's name in order to protect him from the powers that be. As we read his letter, we can sympathize with the abuse he received from individuals who have mistreated him—all in the name of faithfulness to the Word of God. Listen to this brother as he describes his encounter within a certain fellowship of God's people. He writes about his pilgrimage of faith as he left the Baptist movement to work among the Churches of Christ:

Dear Brother Dallas:

First, I want to sincerely apologize for my apparent poor demeanor in my E-Mails to you. I ask that you forgive me of this wrong! Permit me to briefly explain that I came amongst the churches of Christ meek, humble, rejoicing & happy. In a matter of a few short months I had been torn to shreds, me & my wife & family. The radical "anti's" looked at every corner for anything of disagreement they could find to beat me with. I endured it for a time, confusedly. Yet, after a while I figured I had to take up for myself & defend myself.

This has been a constant fight for me now for over 3 years. As you know, & as you stated in one of your E-Mails, if one does not line up & agree with them on EVERY single point then one is a false teacher & open game. They totally refuse a personal thinker & do everything in their power to gang up & kill him! I'm sure you know exactly what I am talking about. My growing up in a religion that held the Ministry in high esteem & reverence into the Church of Christ who are the total opposite was a tremendous shock, to say the least! This is what led to the writing of my book.

I am a child of God that has been beat up on so much that I have so much anger & hostility in my heart for church of Christ people. I am a Preacher walking around with a chip on his shoulder ready at any time to fight, as I have been made to react. I am sorry that I have become this way. It's like if a father or mother literally beats their child it will turn out to beat others as well because that's how they have had to learn to react. I am not the man I use to be prior to entering the Church of Christ

---

<sup>26</sup>Alexander Campbell, "To Mr. William Jones, of London, Letter IV," *Millennial Harbinger* 6, no. 3 (March 1835): 112.

denomination. I don't know if I'll rebound back from it! It appears that the "knee-jerk reaction" I spoke to you about just happens to be me! I ask for your forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

I totally enjoy your writings. You work very hard & I am proud to have them in my library. Thank you so much. Brother Dallas, I want to go to heaven, I want to love the Lord & His people. I want to serve Him & them all the days of my life. Yet, I must somehow work through this bitterness. I ask for your humble prayers on this behalf. Dallas, behind all this bitterness, hatred, evil, & paranoia is a kind-hearted child of Christ who loves Him with all his heart.

My God truly & richly bless you & yours with happiness & long life in His service.

## **DALLAS BURDETTE VERSUS ELDERSHIP**

### **Membership in Local Congregation**

As we reflect back on the KJV rendering of Hebrews 13:17, we are confronted with the words: "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account." Many Christian leaders read this verse with wooden literalness. Several years ago, I sought to place membership with one of the local congregations in Montgomery, Alabama. This particular fellowship of believers was associated with the Stone/Campbell Movement of the nineteenth-century. This group identified itself as a Church of Christ.<sup>27</sup> Once I had made known my desire to place membership and work within this congregation of God's people, the elders informed me that they would need to meet with me before they could give their consent. I agreed to this meeting, but they informed me that this would have to be done on a Wednesday evening during the congregation's regular Bible study groups. They refused to come to my home or to allow me to meet with them in their homes. This meeting, since it occurred on Wednesday evening, only lasted about thirty minutes.

I finally agreed to the hastily-made arrangements that evening to meet with this board of directors—commonly called eldership—to discuss my becoming a member of this local congregation. After going to the office of the pulpit minister, we all sat around a conference table. Then, the meeting began like this: "We understand that you have a problem with obeying them that have the rule over you." Ultimately, they wanted to exercise mind control over me. I was informed that they would accept me on certain conditions. The conditions were: (1) You cannot invite members of this congregation into your home if you have certain individuals visiting you, namely, Carl Ketcherside (1908-1989) and Leroy Garrett (1918-2015); and (2) You can never give any religious journal or books to any member of this congregation without our approval.

I found this extremely interesting, especially the rule about not giving books to anyone without the permission of the "ruling elders." One of the "ruling elders" owned one of the largest Christian bookstores in the South. He could sell the books, but I could not give them away without his permission. This group wanted to place a "gag order" on my writings or the writings of other men. This group of elders practiced mind-control, which is totally unbiblical. These leaders, in spite of their sincerity, sought to coerce me into accepting their views as

---

<sup>27</sup>There are many congregations associated with the Churches of Christ that do not adopt this mindset. Many elders within this movement recognize that they are guides, not rulers.

infallible, even though some later changed their views on the divorce and remarriage issues that they adamantly argued against me at the time. My views on divorce and remarriage, at the time, were also a bone of contention with these godly men. Later (several years later), one of these elders who fought my membership in the congregation changed his views concerning the divorce and remarriage controversy. He requested that I write a paper on this subject, which I did.<sup>28</sup>

### **Mind Control Sought By Elders**

Another encounter occurred several years earlier than the aforementioned confrontation with a group of godly men who rejected me in order to preserve, so they thought, biblical integrity. In another congregation, I expressed some views, while teaching a Bible class, on the marriage and divorce debate that did not coincide with the “ruling class.” One of the elders came to me and informed me: **“You are never to tell anyone anything in this congregation that disagrees with what the elders have said.”** Once more, I was confronted with the “obey them that have the rule over you.” This is the same congregation that called in a preacher from Atlanta, Georgia to get the congregation back on track—in spite of the fact that many members objected to this kind of clandestine operation to get members back in line with traditions.

After his arrival, he and the elders, one evening, raided the church library and confiscated all of the books that I had donated to the Church, which had been previously approved by the same elders. These books were then placed under lock-and-key. The members were not allowed to read them. Later, one of the deacons found out that I picked up my books, but he was never told that, prior to my asking for my books back, the leadership impounded the books to protect its members. Again, we witness the cult mentality of mind control on the part of leadership.

### **Letter from an Elder**

In spite of the Matthean account of Jesus’ rebuke of superiority among the disciples, nevertheless, Christians still cite Hebrews 13:7, 17, and 24 to substantiate dictatorial, magisterial, authoritarian, totalitarian, and domineering obedience in the absolute. We are still confronted by the demand of some leaders (elders, preachers, and editors of religious journals) who insist upon blind obedience. Having said this, this statement is not a blanket castigation of all religious leaders. I received an email (December 25, 2001) from an elder (Bill Smith, Jr.), who is one of the leaders in a congregation in Louisiana. He writes:

Dallas, as you do your paper on “authority” and Hebrews 13:17, you can quote this elder as saying no mere human has authority over another Christian. As an elder, I have inordinate influence, but I have no raw authority to command anyone! Most men who want to argue authority do so because they have little or no influence among God’s people that allows them to lead. Therefore, they want to command. Of course, they do consider themselves to be benefactors for the peoples good,

---

<sup>28</sup>This essay became a chapter in my second volume (*Old Texts through New Eyes*). See Dallas Burdette, “The Divorce Sayings in the Synoptics and Pauline Accounts,” in Dallas Burdette, *Old Texts Through New Eyes*, 150-188.

don't they? This authority thing in my opinion is another of those hangovers from Catholicism. It grieves me that men want to rule rather than serve. This after Jesus made it so clear that his disciple were not to function as the world's rulers. Do a good job on your paper. Our fellowship really needs to reinvestigate Christian leadership.<sup>29</sup>

## **HEBREWS 13:17 EMPLOYED BY MANY LEADERS TO ENFORCE CONFORMITY TO ORTHODOXY OF ITS PARTICULAR FACTION**

As stated above, the Scripture that is cited to uphold the traditional position of the authority of elders (leadership) within the Churches of Christ is Hebrews 13:17. Many Christians read this Scripture and automatically identify this passage as authority for insisting that the elders are to be obeyed *in toto* (in-'tō-(,)tō, completely, fully, entirely, and utterly). When we read this verse without spectacles, we are immediately confronted with the awareness that this Scripture does not mention the word *elders*. In fact, the word that the Hebrews author employs is the word for *leaders* (ἡγουμένους, *hēgoumenois*, “leading ones”). Even though leaders may include elders, nevertheless, this text does not indicate who the leaders were.

When we interpret Hebrews 13:17 to teach that Christians must blindly “obey the elders,” then this kind of reading reads too much into the words of this text. Within many segments of the Restoration Movement (Churches of Christ), this Scripture has led to the crystallization of error concerning the role of leaders within the body of Christ. Raymond Brown<sup>30</sup> draws attention to the negative interpretation foisted upon this passage:

The writer is not inculcating blind, unthinking obedience to everything a Christian teacher says, otherwise there would be little point in issuing the warning he has just given about ‘diverse and strange’ doctrines. In the New Testament there is clear recognition that discernment is obviously necessary and also that obedience to the revealed word of God is essential.<sup>31</sup>

### **King James Version: Creation of Much Confusion**

Some of the confusion exists as a result of the King James Version. The word and phrase that contribute to the confusion are: “obey,” and “rule over you.” The English word *obey* is the translation of **πειθῶ** (*peithō*), and the words “rule over you” originate from the Greek word ἡγούμενος (*hēgoumenos*, “leader”). This in-depth study will explore the use of these two Greek words in order to ascertain the true intent of the author. It appears, so it seems to me, that the words *obey* and *rule over you* are too strong and, thus, do not convey accurately the nuance (a subtle distinction, or variation) intended by the author. The traditional emphasis upon the word

---

<sup>29</sup>Private email to Dallas Burdette from William H. (Bill) Smith Jr., dated Tuesday, December 25, 2001, 9:42am. This citation is quoted with the permission of Bill Smith.

<sup>30</sup>**Raymond Brown** (1928-1998) was formerly principal of Spurgeon's College in London, England, and he has also served in several pastorates. He is the author of several books, including *The Message of Hebrews* and *Spirituality in Adversity: English Nonconformity in a Period of Repression, 1660–1690*.

<sup>31</sup>Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 264.

*obey* contradicts other plain teachings as expounded by Jesus to His disciples. Also, the English phrase “rule over you” does not carry the sense contemplated by the originator of this Epistle.

The English translation seems to infer a hierarchy<sup>32</sup> within the church, that is to say, a pyramid structure with laity at the bottom and various levels of leadership going to the top of the pyramid. Does the Greek text substantiate this kind of interpretation upon **πείθω** (*peithō*, “I urge, I apply persuasion, I seek to persuade”) and **ἡγέομαι** (*hēgeomai*, “to lead”)? As stated above, Matthew records a conversation between Jesus and His disciples about leadership. The disciples were arguing about positions of power. To this Jesus responds by saying:

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers (**ἄρχοντες**, *archontes*) of the Gentiles lord it over (**κατακυριεύουσιν**, *katakuriēousin*) them, and their high officials exercise authority over (**κατεξουσιάζουσιν**, *katexousiazousin*)<sup>26</sup> Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,<sup>27</sup> and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—<sup>28</sup> just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28)

The word *rulers* is from the Greek word **ἄρχοντες** (*archontes*), which is from **ἄρχων** (*archon*, “ruler or chief”). Then the words “lord it over” are from the Greek word **κατακυριεύουσιν** (*katakuriēousin*), which is from **κατακυριεύω** (*katakuriēō*), “to exercise dominion over”). And finally, the words “exercise authority over” are from the Greek word **κατεξουσιάζουσιν** (*katexousiazousin*), which is from **κατεξουσιάζω**, (*katexousiazō*, “to exercise power or authority over”). These words employed by Jesus in His conversation stands in stark contrast to what the author of the Book of Hebrews is reputed to have written. The person behind the Book of Hebrews did not use **ἄρχων** (*archon*, “ruler or chief”), or **κατακυριεύω** (*katakuriēō*, “to exercise dominion over”), but rather he uses the word **ἡγέομαι** (*hēgeomai*, “to lead”). The Greek text in Hebrews 13:17 does not substantiate the prevailing error (“rule over you”) advanced by many elders and preachers within the Churches of Christ as well as other denominations. In fact, the generally accepted interpretation of Hebrews 13:17 contradicts what Jesus discussed with His disciples as reported by Matthew in his Gospel (Matthew 20:25-28).

Before advancing into an analysis of Hebrews 13:17, we call attention to another Scripture that is often relied upon to uphold the so-called “authority” of the elders. Paul’s statement in 1 Timothy 5:17 is also utilized by many sincere Christians to maintain the status quo maintained by many within the Churches of Christ. Paul writes: “Let the elders that rule (**προεστῶτες**, *proestōtes*) well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine” (KJV). The NIV translates: “The elders who **direct** the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.” The Greek word **προεστῶτες** (*proestōtes*, which is from **προίστημι** (*proistēmi*, “to manage, to direct, to supervise, to exercise a calling”). *The Message* translation translates this

---

<sup>32</sup>A hierarchy is a ruling body of clergy who are designated into orders or ranks, each subordinate to the one above it. This is especially truth in a church government by a hierarchy. In other words, a hierarchy may be defined as a body of persons in charge.

way: “Give a bonus to leaders who do a good job, especially the ones who work hard at preaching and teaching.”<sup>33</sup>

### **King James and the Divine Right of Kings**

The divine right of Kings, as maintained by King James I (1566-1625), rings loud and clear in the translation of Holy Scripture.<sup>34</sup> He reigned from 1603 to 1625, and he wanted and demanded his subjects to “obey” him and his appointed bishops. It appears that the KJV translators did not seized upon the shade of meaning intended by Paul. The Greek word **προΐστημι** (*proistēmi*) may be translated as “direct” or “manage,” which communicates the idea of “to lead” or “to care for,” not “to rule.” **The context of First Timothy does not exhibit, or show signs of, the concept of the ruler and the ruled.** This word will be dealt with more fully in Chapter 2. It is also worthy of note that Paul in his Second Epistle to Corinth addresses this very issue of “lording it over” God’s children: “Not that we lord it over (κυριεύομεν (*kyrieuomen*) your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm” (2 Corinthians 1:24). In order for us to adequately understand the role of leaders within God’s family, it is necessary to draw attention to a more exhaustive study of the English words *obey*, and *rule over you*. The next few paragraphs sets the stage for Chapters 2 and 3.

### **King James and the Cult of the Bishops**

As we peruse, or read thoroughly, the King James’ rendering of these Scriptures in the Book of Hebrews, it appears, at least it seems this way to me, to be a deliberate attempt by those who were in power (King James [1603-1625] and his bishops) to strengthen their hold on “usurped authority,” an authority traced all the way back to Henry the Eighth (1509-1547)—the divine right of Kings. According to the author of Hebrews, the “ones leading you” were not to be tyrannical in their leadership, but they were to assume the role of servants. In other words, it is not “sightless” allegiance that is spoken of in Hebrews 13:7, 17, and 24, but rather submission to the principles of holiness as exemplified in the lives of the leaders.

---

<sup>33</sup>Peterson, Eugene H., *The Message*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 1997). **Eugene Peterson**, born in East Stanwood, Washington in 1932, is an author and former college professor and pastor. He is a graduate of the Biblical Theological Seminary in New York (now New York Theological Seminary) and holds a Master’s degree in Semitic Languages from Johns Hopkins University. In 1962 he became the organizing pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) in Bel Air, Maryland where he pastored for several decades. After retiring from Christ Our King, Peterson taught for five years at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. He then retired to the state of Montana where he had grown up and where he continues to write. He is especially well-known for his paraphrase of the Bible from the original languages: *The Message*.

<sup>34</sup>This mindset resulted in the countless loss of life. Hundreds were tortured and put to death because they thought for themselves. For an overview of the consequences of this type philosophy, see Dallas Burdette, “Where the Scriptures Speak,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 87-152.

Regrettably, the translators of the King James Version<sup>35</sup> did not capture the mood of the Greek text precisely. If the author of Hebrews wished to communicate the proposal of “rulership,” he could have employed other Greek words to transmit this impression. As stated earlier, the Greek word for “lord it over” is noticeably not present. The current translation of the KJV translation of Hebrews 13:7, 17, and 24 appears to be the attitude of the translators. It is in this vein that Gustavus Paine cogently captures the essence of the “cult of the bishops” mentality, when he writes: “Given the times and the number of bishops among the learned men, the new Bible was certain to sustain the cult of bishops wherever the chance arose.”<sup>36</sup>

Our next chapter (Chapter 2) examines in detail the use of the word **πειθῶ** (*peithō*, “persuade”) and **ἡγέομαι** (*hēgeomai*, “guide”) in Hebrews 13:17, which words carries the connotation of “persuasion” and “leading.” Since this in-depth study of Hebrews 13:17 deals with the definitions of words, it is necessary to study morphology (*mōr-’fā-lə-jē*. the study of word formation) and phonemes (*’fō-, nēm*, minimal unit of speech sounds in a language that distinguishes one utterance from another). This chapter (Chapter 2) examines the grammatical elements in various Greek verbs in order to understand how to correctly translate a particular Greek verb in its intended meaning. I have given the Greek transliterated characters as well as the English translations. The purpose of this in-depth study of Hebrews 13:17 is to help Christians understand the correct definitions that we should attach to the words *obey* and *rule over you* in the KJV’s translation of this much abused text.

---

<sup>35</sup>The KJV was conceived in 1604 and brought to fruition in 1611 by the Church of England.

<sup>36</sup>Gustavus S. Paine, *The Men behind the King James Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 95-96.