

Submitting to church leaders isn't as biblical as you think

"Be persuaded by those who go before you, and yield, for they watch over your souls, as ones about to give an account; that they may do it with joy, and not groaning, for this is not beneficial for you" (Hebrews 13:17, my translation).

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I remember sitting in disbelief as the elders stood up front to address the church I was attending with a "serious matter." I was in seminary and had been at this rural Arkansas church for at least a year. They were my family. As the elders stood up, they were stoic and firm. "A few days ago, brother Mark (not his real name), as he was leading worship, decided to change the words to Jesus Loves 'Us' instead of Jesus Loves 'Me.' He did so without permission from us elders and a sister in Christ was offended. We've asked Mark to repent and he is going to share his public confession now."

I watched in horror as one of the kindest people I'd ever met stood humiliated and weeping before 200 some people and a group of arrogant elders asking for forgiveness for not submitting to the eldership. In my mind I wanted to stand up and shout out, "Who do you fake elders think you are?" Someone needed permission by the elders to change one word in a song? Is this really the kind of shepherd Jesus said he was in John 10 when he said, "the Good Shepherd lays his life down for his sheep"? Were these fools standing before us the kind of shepherds Jesus called to keep watch over his flock? Something didn't sit right with me and a few months later, when these same elders rejected my request to teach a class there as a required practicum to complete my Master's degree, I parted ways forever. They told me that they didn't have time to proof read and approve all of my lessons. This congregation had all the indicators of a cult, not a church. So I left. More power to them (pun intended).

I grieve for the countless survivors I've spoken with who attempted to talk to church leaders about abuse and were told to remain silent or else. If they continued to cry out in pain, they were disciplined for "not submitting to the leadership." If these survivors or concerned members left the church, they were forever shunned for "forsaking the assembly." The two passages above, Hebrews 13:17 and Hebrews 10:25 have been misinterpreted and weaponized to put power exactly where it doesn't belong—with the leadership.

We have an epidemic of abusive leaders. There is no question about that. Everyone in advocacy knows this well. We feel it. We hear it. We see it. And survivors tell us that the way the leadership responds is far worse than any sexual or physical abuse they've endured. It's not just survivors of abuse. So many of my friends in ministry are fired by elders for "not submitting" and are forced to tell the church that they "resigned." Preachers are often coerced and blackmailed into signing nondisclosure agreements. These "resignations" make it appear as if it was the

preacher's decision to leave and not that the elders actually fired them. This always leaves the church confused, the minister's family wounded, and increases the elders' sense of power and control. If anyone has been following the Harvest Bible Chapel disaster, you'll know that pastor [John Secrest was just fired](#) for voicing concerns about the way the leadership shut him out of making decisions. Immediately after John sent his letter to the congregation, he was fired and the elders released this statement:

Because of his continued unwillingness to yield to the direction of the elders and the insubordinate email he recently sent counter to the elder direction, it became clear that he should not continue in his role.

Our hearts are grieved as John's contributions to the Naples Campus cannot be understated. We wish him, Jessica, and his family well.

Harvest Naples will continue as a campus of Harvest Bible Chapel in Chicago with [Pastor Rick Donald](#) serving as interim Campus Pastor and Associate Travis Doucette as Pastor of Worship and Leadership Development. Pastor James MacDonald will not be preaching this weekend. Services will continue this Sunday at 9:00 and 11:00 am.

We recognize that situations like these often yield more questions than can be answered in one email. The local elders of Harvest Naples, Scott Stonebreaker and [Fred Ananias](#), are available to field any additional questions.

We ask for your prayers as our church grieves this loss.

We are believing for good things as we lean into God and His Word.

Standing together,

The Harvest Naples Leadership Team and Elders

This is what I witness all the time. Be subordinate to us or else. Church members, pastors and their families, and abuse survivors are dispensable. If they question the leadership, ask to meet with leaders, or express concern about how decisions are made, they are thrown out like dirty water.

So my question is, "What does the Bible really teach about authority and how do we respond?" Jesus, after overhearing the 12 apostles arguing about which of them was the greatest, said, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35 ESV). This wasn't hyperbole for Jesus. He lived it and he meant it. In the context of abuse, we often talk about the "power differential" between pastors (or other leaders) and lay members. To be honest, this bothers me a little bit (OK, a lot!). Have we given power to us church leaders that was never meant to be? I don't want my church members to feel subordinate or inferior because of my position. Why should they? There shouldn't be a power differential. People will find me in my office the same way they'll find me in my home—wearing sandals, a T-shirt, and shorts or jeans. Besides the fact that I hate dressing up, I don't want the feeling that my position means that I'm better than or superior to anyone else. I'm not. And nobody should ever feel like they can't freely talk to me or about me, whether in Wal-Mart or in my office. I don't have authority as a preacher. The authority isn't mine. I'm a servant who preaches. Period.

With that said, of course people need leadership but leadership comes from stepping out in front of the people you serve. Leadership is about providing servant-direction for the people whose souls you care about. My elders, deacons, and congregation are my peers. We are not bosses of each other. We all simply have different roles, but we are equals. All of us. I can be removed

from preaching if I have committed a serious sin or crime, but my elders do not hold sole authority to fire me on a whim. They simply do not have that authority or power. Neither do I. Nor should we.

Power. Leaders aren't meant to have power or authority over people. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). Peter agrees: "To him be the power forever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 5:11 NIV). Power. Authority. What does the Bible consistently say? This is important! Jesus said, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:42-44 ESV).

Our model of church leadership is poisoned. When people feel intimidated by leaders, when they are told to submit, when leaders hold all the decision making power, and when people feel that a golden scepter must be extended by a leader before they can speak freely—we no longer have a biblical model of leadership. Instead, we have an abusive model.

What about elders? Peter appeals to elders as a fellow elder. Peter said, "Shepherd the flock that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. . . Likewise, you who are younger, be subjected to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Peter 5:2-3, 5 ESV). As sure as I'm typing this, many leaders will ignore the context of this passage and focus on younger people being "subjected" to the elders. The word used here is *hupotasso*, which means to place yourself under. This verse is meant for younger people, not the elders. It's akin to saying, "Young people, be respectful to the older people who watch over you." This is not about subjection to people in authority. Quite the contrary, for the next sentence says, "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another."

So what about the infamous passage to submit to your leaders (Hebrews 13:17)? I am not a Greek scholar, but after taking it for a couple years I learned that much gets lost in translation. The word "submit" is an unfortunate translation. My literal translation of this passage is this: "Be persuaded by those who go before you, and yield, for they watch over your souls, as ones about to give an account; that they may do it with joy, and not groaning, for this is not beneficial for you." This has an entirely different meaning than how you've likely heard it used. The ESV translates it this way: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls." The word for "obey" literally means to be persuaded by. It is the same exact word King Agrippa used in Acts 26:28 when he said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" Certainly the King didn't mean, "In a short time would you ask me to obey you and become a Christian?" The word *peitho* means to be persuaded by or to follow. The word "leaders" has often been (mis)used to mean the elders, higher-ups, or those "in charge." Again, that is not what this word means. It simply means those who go before you. And the word "submit" is probably the worst translation of all. It literally means "to yield to." I used to drive truck. Semi-trucks are dubbed "king of the highway" for good reason. At 80,000 lbs, a car that weighs 3,000 lbs is no match for semis. When I yielded onto the interstate, I did not use my weight, power, or position as truck driver to force my way onto the highway. Nor did cars bully

their way onto highways. Everyone, big and small, is expected to yield to oncoming traffic. I did not bully my way onto freeways because I was bigger than everyone else. I did not tell cars to “submit to my authority” or else. Rather, I yielded (watched out for) to traffic then drove along with them! It was for others’ safety that I yielded to them. This is the sense of the word. It is a willful, careful, caring merging of lives for the sake of souls. Listen to the rest of the verse again: “for they watch over your souls, as ones about to give an account; that they may do it with joy, and not groaning, for this is not beneficial for you.”

Finally, people who leave the church because they’ve been wounded are not the ones forsaking the assembly. And forsaking the assembly does NOT mean not showing up to church. The “forsaking” is an abandonment of people in need. When Jesus was on the cross, he used this same word. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken (abandoned) me?” Jesus was in need. In distress. Another sense of the word means to leave people in their distress. Forsaking the assembly is not about not going to church on Sunday mornings. It’s about abandoning, deserting, or leaving behind those in need. My opinion is that, ironically, Hebrews 10:25 is addressing leaders who were abandoning those of the assembly who were living in desperation. Again, here is my translation: “. . . not leaving helpless those of us assembling together, as is the custom with some, but consoling one another, and so much more as you see the day drawing near”

This is a call to not abandon those in need who assemble together. It is a clarion call to console one another. To provide care and comfort to those who are oppressed, poor, and in need.

Context is important, and the consistent message throughout the Bible is that God’s foundation is righteousness and justice (Psalm 89:14), that Jesus came to preach good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to the captives, recovering sight to the blind, and set at liberty those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18-19), and that leaders (those who go before) are the ones to especially serve and keep watch over the souls of those aforementioned.

So the next time a leader tells you to submit to their authority, or shames you for “forsaking the assembly,” just remind them that all the authority has been given to Jesus and that they are indeed the ones deserting the assembly by not caring for the wounded.