

Title: “Authority and Accountability in the Christian Church”

Key verse: Hebrews 13:17 (ESV) – “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.”

Good morning, everyone. The title of today’s message might remind you that about five months ago, I did a sermon on the topic of accountability. That sermon was born in my mind in springtime this year, when I listened to a wonderful interview with a respected Christian leader on the crucial need to keep our ministers accountable to other Christian brethren. However, the focus of today’s message is very different. Today’s message was born in my mind last year as I was pondering church life and church leaders and church government – church life, church leaders, and church government. I have divided my sermon today into three parts:

- Part 1 – A look at our church leaders
- Part 2 – A look at church government
- Part 3 – A look at congregational life

So, let’s begin. Part 1. The first verse I would like to read is Hebrews 13:17 (ESV). Here, we read about ourselves, our church leaders, and our relationship to them. Verse 17 says – “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.”

The first thing that I would like to highlight in this verse is the basic job description of the pastor or elder: he is watching over our souls. He has been called by God to the task of pastoring a local flock of Christians, and each of us needs instruction in the Word of God and exhortation on putting it into practice in our lives. Each of might – and sometimes do – stray from living according to godly standards. Our leaders watch over our souls: if you continue to stray, you damage your standing with God, your relationship with God, as well as your relationship with your fellow Christians. So, listen to what your leaders teach you and exhort you to do. I know they aren’t perfect – and sometimes you might find them narrow-minded or old-fashioned – but, generally speaking, they know what’s right according to God’s Word and we should submit to their leadership. When I say these words, I’m thinking mostly in terms of behavior – how we live our Christian life in both personal and corporate terms. But, our pastors also need to make sure that sound doctrine prevails in the church. Wrong views of God and the way of salvation are likewise damaging to our souls.

I like how the New International Version (NIV) translates the first phrase in this verse: “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority ...” Have confidence in them. They have trained hard and they have been placed in their position of watching over God’s flock and they have gained experience in shepherding. Trust them ... have confidence in them.

Please notice something: this verse says that your leaders “will have to give an account.” That means they will be held accountable for the way in which they have shepherded their flock. I think primarily this means they will be held accountable by God when we all meet Jesus and are judged in the end. 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:10 (NIV) – “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

But when Hebrews 13:17 says our leaders “will have to give an account,” that might also mean that they ought to be held accountable by their peers (fellow pastors) and by their denominational leadership. Without such oversight, they could go off track or become lazy or ineffective. I think of

the Apostle Paul's words in Galatians 2:1-2 (NASB) – “Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. <sup>2</sup> It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that somehow I might be running, or had run, in vain.” Paul presented to James, Peter, and John the gospel message which he preaches to the Gentiles, and he did so privately in case he might be told he was wrong, but actually in verses 6 to 9 it says he had gained their approval for the content of the gospel message he preaches. This is an illustration of Paul's accountability to the leadership of the Christian community. He had the rank of apostle, but he also needed to confirm with the leaders of the Jerusalem church that he was on the right track. You can see a similar episode in Acts chapter 15 when the Jerusalem church had to discuss and find a solution for some controversial issues.

Let's look at the second half of my verse in Hebrews. When you and I obey our church leaders, we should, quote: “... do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” We should follow our leaders in a way that gives them joy, not a headache. Let me tell you a story that may reveal to you a little bit of friction I had with a pastor nearly twenty years ago. He wanted to introduce an innovation to our church and I had some reservations about that. I don't want to spend time explaining what that innovation was, but let me say that different denominations have differing opinions about that topic. I had some discussions with him about this and maybe I gave him a headache. But I realized that he has been placed in his current position and that he is charged by God to watch over our souls. I said what I needed to say, and then let him do what he believed best for the congregation. I was pleased with the outcome, as he took my concerns into consideration when proceeding with that innovation.

Over the years, I watched as a few people went to him with their own thoughts and concerns, sometimes giving him a headache. Gee, at our church here we have people from many different denominations and cultures, sometimes with differing ideas of what church life should be like. I watched our pastor have to juggle the various thoughts and concerns brought to him. He can't please everybody, so of course he disappointed some. But while watching this, I determined not to give my pastor a headache – or at least, not a big one. Two years later, I wanted to bring up another issue with him, but did so softly and we had a very comfortable meeting. I left him with my perspective, and let him act on my idea if he thought it appropriate. It's his prerogative ... it's his calling ... it is he who has a responsibility to watch over our souls, and the health of the whole congregation. The lessons I learned while dealing with that pastor I have brought forward in my dealings with the pastors who have followed him in the pastoral position here.

And the final phrase of verse 17: “... do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” It is no advantage to you or to him or to the congregation if you cause him a great amount of groaning as he tries to shepherd the flock.

In the last few minutes, I have said a lot of idealistic things about how we should follow our pastor because God has called him to be the watchman for our souls. However, it is also true that every man is a fallible human being who may fail us sometimes due to his lack of experience, lack of sensitivity, or while exercising the duties of his office he starts abusing the power he has. I am not advocating a slavish obedience when I say we should follow our leader as best we can. Sometimes, it is he who is off-track, and he needs to be confronted with the problem so that it can be rectified. With the leading of the Holy Spirit and with repentance and forgiveness, the problem can be solved. But, unfortunately, sometimes human pride and sinfulness get in the way. And not only that – remember that pastors and missionaries and evangelists are in the front line of the battle against spiritual forces, and they are targets of the enemy, of Satan and his demons. Please, pray for your pastor and other ministers and church council members and Sunday school teachers and anyone doing the work of the ministry. They are targets of the enemy and we need your fervent prayers.

Let us move on to the next Scripture passage. Here, we will read a series of exhortations to pastors, some positive and some negative. 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 5:1-4 (ESV) – “So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; <sup>3</sup> not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup> And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

The first exhortation to elders is that they “shepherd the flock of God . . . exercising oversight.” Here are two verbs. The first is “to shepherd.” The Latin term for this is “pastor” and that’s how we got the English word “pastor” which we use for the man who leads and guides the church. The second verb here is “exercising oversight.” The pastor is watching over the people, keeping his eye on them so that they do not stray out of bounds. The term “elder” is the name for this office. The verbs “to shepherd” and “exercising oversight” are the things he does. Actually, “elder” and “pastor” are the same office.

When you think of an actual shepherd out in the fields watching over his sheep, what are the things that he is doing? Firstly, he guides them to the pasture where they can get food. The pastor of a church feeds the congregation with teaching from the Scriptures. And, he encourages you to read the Bible yourself, feed from the Bible yourself and put into practice what you read.

Another thing the shepherd does is protect his sheep. In our world, there are many temptations that can cause us to go astray. Our pastor warns us to flee from these temptations, and if we fall into sin, to call us back to repentance. He protects us in other ways too, such as warning us of false teaching.

The shepherd cares for those individual sheep who need special attention if they are injured or sick. Our pastor provides counseling when we are struggling with an emotional or spiritual problem. And he visits us in the hospital or brings comfort when a loved one has died.

Let’s look again at verse 2. The pastor should not feel compelled. He should do his task willingly, choosing to do God’s will. And be eager to fulfill his role, and do so without greed for financial gain.

Verse 3 returns to an issue I mentioned a few minutes ago. I noted that the pastor is someone who is a fallible human being and that he may, while exercising the duties of his office, start abusing the power he has. In this verse, Peter takes aim at this temptation and warns elders/pastors to not be domineering over their people. Verse 3 reads (NASB) – “nor yet as domineering over those assigned to your care, but by proving to be examples to the flock.” The people in the congregation have been “assigned to the care” of this pastor, “entrusted” (NIV) to the care of this pastor. This is a sacred duty from God. The pastor must remain mindful of that and not be a domineering presence or a dictator. Titus 1:7 (NIV) – “Since an overseer is entrusted with God’s work [*entrusted with God’s work*], he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.”

On the contrary, he is to be “an example to the flock.” Our pastor is to be an example of a model Christian, an example to you and me. I am reminded of what the Apostle Paul wrote in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:1 (NASB) – “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.” The New International Version (NIV) says, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”

Let us move on to Part 2 of today’s message: A look at church government.

There are basically three main models of church government, though there are several variations within each. Some denominations have certain forms of government unique to themselves, but the three I'll describe today are the main types. These three models are ...

1. The Episcopal model
2. The Presbyterian model
3. The Congregational model

The name for the Episcopal model of church government comes from the Greek word used for "bishop" or "overseer" in verses such as 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 3:1 and Titus 1:7. This Greek word is *episkopos*. This word passed into Latin as *episcopus* and then into Old English as *bisceop*, and then we have our modern English word *bishop*.

The name for the Presbyterian model comes from the Greek word *presbyteros*, meaning "old man" or "elder." You can find this word used for church leaders in Titus 1:5, 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 5:1, and at various places in the book of Acts.

If you recall, a few minutes ago I told you that the terms elder, overseer, and shepherd or pastor are basically all describing the same office. But in church history, the term overseer/bishop began to be used for ecclesiastical leaders who have an oversight responsibility over many churches in a large geographical area. Churches with ancient roots such as the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox churches follow what we call the Episcopal model of church government, with a system of bishops and archbishops ruling in a strong hierarchical manner, and having priests and deacons serving at the local church level. In this model, the bishops and archbishops are seen as successors to the apostles and they have a great deal of power. The lines of authority and accountability are clearly marked.

As with any structure, there are pros and cons to this model. On the one hand, it gives much stability, both in church life and in guarding orthodox theology. On the other hand, it can feel oppressive, and with fallible human beings filling the ranks of the leadership, corruption and incompetence were common during the Middle Ages.

As the Middle Ages progressed, dissatisfaction with this situation grew, until the Protestant Reformation erupted and changed the ecclesiastical landscape of Europe. While we remember the Reformation as a rediscovery of the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone, another important impulse was the desire for freedom from the corrupt church structure centered in Rome. Some churches from the Reformation era such as the Church of England and some Lutheran churches follow the Episcopal model of government, but most churches sought a different way to govern themselves.

Churches from a Calvinist orientation often follow the Presbyterian model of church government. The name of this model comes directly from the New Testament word for elders, *presbyteros*. With this model, leadership of the local church is generally shared among a group of elders. Thus, the responsibilities are shared and accountability is exercised, mindful that they are ultimately under the authority of Christ and His Word. Accountability is also exercised in this system because the local church belongs to a larger grouping of churches, and each of these churches sends representatives to a body called a "presbytery" which oversees all of the churches in the group. In this model, the local church is not independent, and sometimes decisions made at the local church level are overturned by the presbytery. This is a system of accountability that insures that the local church does not stray from what the larger body considers proper doctrine and practice.

From the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, there were many Christians who were not satisfied with the state churches formed in the Protestant countries. They desired to live their

Christian lives in accordance with what they read in their Bibles. In England, many Christians did not like the form of worship required by the state church and did not want to follow it. They broke away to form their own churches, and were severely persecuted for their actions. Many had to take refuge abroad, and many went to the American colonies. They were seeking religious freedom. I'm an American, so this story is an important part of my cultural heritage.

This drive for religious freedom led to the formation of many local churches which formed a Congregational style of church government. Rather than being governed by an outside authority, the local church takes responsibility for its own governance, under the authority of Christ and His Word. The congregation as a whole is involved in decision-making. This reflects the Protestant principle of the "priesthood of all believers," the belief that every Christian has direct access to God and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

If this be true, then all of us can and should participate fully in church life. In the congregational system, the membership together makes major decisions. We are also responsible to hold each other accountable. And in the congregational system, the membership also chooses its leadership: the pastor(s), as well as lay leaders such as lay elders, deacons, or a church council.

This is the system we have here at OIC. This is a democratic system, and so when we have meetings, many voices participate in the discussions. Sometimes, it may seem like too many voices. But actually, I think it is necessary to hear a variety of perspectives during the decision-making process. One verse that often comes to my mind is Proverbs 24:6 – "And in an abundance of counselors there is victory." It is by this process that each of us can share our concerns and perspectives. None of us knows everything, and oftentimes there is a certain angle on a particular issue that we didn't realize until somebody pointed it out. All things should be considered. And then we take a vote. Sometimes I've been on the losing side of a vote, but the way the system works is that after the process is completed, we all embrace the outcome. That's the ideal I operate by in this process.

Well, that is enough about church government. It is time to move on to the next section.

Part 3: A look at congregational life.

In this part, I want to concentrate on relationships between fellow Christians, inside and outside the church. Sometimes, I ponder certain Scripture verses that give exhortations on how we ought to relate to one another as Christians. It is these verses which I would like to share with my church family, not because I see any particular problems with this family here, but I am thinking in general terms about what basic Christian behavior toward one another is supposed to look like, and I am mindful that we are sinners saved by grace and we still have old patterns of behavior that need to be discarded.

In my younger days, my Christian mentor gave me a little lesson I have never forgotten. He pointed to Genesis 4:9, to the rhetorical question that Cain asked when the Lord asked him where his brother was. Cain said, "I do not know, am I my brother's keeper?" While it is true that Cain was trying to avoid telling God where Abel was, my mentor told me that the answer to the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" is "Yes." We have a responsibility to care for our family members, and that includes in the family of God, the church. A responsibility to care for them and to be in right relationships with them. It is this thought which inspires this part of my message today.

I will only be able to share a few of the many thoughts and Scripture verses I have collected on this theme. Maybe I will share more with you some time in a future message. Today, I'd like to touch on the basic themes of forgiveness, love, and encouragement.

## **Forgiveness**

What could be more basic to the Christian life than forgiveness? Christ came to earth to forgive us our sins.

Luke 24:46-47 - “And [Jesus] said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,<sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

Just as God through Christ has forgiven us of our sins, so we should forgive those who have sinned against us. In Ephesians 4:32, Paul gives these words to the church - “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Jesus said in Mark 11:25 - “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

As I read through my Bible, this verse sometimes grabs my attention. We cannot stand before God in prayer and worship if we have anything against anyone. You need to forgive the person.

In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus says this - “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Ouch. My heavenly Father won't forgive me? Well, I would like to tell you a little story ... reveal an embarrassing chapter in my life, back in the 1990's, when I could not forgive a certain Christian brother. I wish that he had not arrived on the scene, because he took away a girl I really liked, and actually she was crazy about me. Maybe she was too crazy for me, because I felt quite pressured. I liked her, but I wanted to choose her of my own free will and not under pressure. I pushed her away and just at that moment a new guy at church expressed his interest in her. I let him take her away. He was a completely honest guy, but I wished he had not arrived on the scene. For years I harbored a great deal of resentment toward him. Even though I thought I had forgiven him, and I stayed within the Christian community, memories of that guy would come back to me and I would have these surges of anger toward him.

Hebrews 12:15 - “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.”

I had a “root of bitterness” that I was indulging. After a few years of this, I realized that I cannot call myself a Christian if I cannot forgive this guy. Eventually, I made my choice. I chose Christ over Self. I humbled myself, confessed that sin thoroughly, and put it all behind me. By the way, during the 1990's, I was attending OIC and was active here, but it wasn't until I resolved that issue in 1999 that I became a formal member of this church.

Do you have a “root of bitterness” against somebody? Against a Christian brother or sister? It is not healthy for you, nor for them, nor for Christ and His church. You need to get rid of it and forgive the person. Your Heavenly Father won't forgive you until you do. (I'm not talking about losing your salvation, but you are certainly losing the blessings He might have given you). I feel like the latter half of the 1990's was a lost period for me. I was somewhat active at church, but mostly ineffective. After I repented of that unforgiving attitude, the Lord has used me more for His Kingdom.

## Love

In Matthew 22:35-40, we read this — And one of them, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question, testing Him: <sup>36</sup>“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” <sup>37</sup>And He said to him, ““You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” <sup>38</sup>This is the great and foremost commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

The greatest commandment, and a second like it, which is to love your neighbor as you do yourself.

John 13:34-35 - Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this all people will know that you are My disciples: if you have love for one another.”

When we as the family of God love one another, the world knows that we truly are followers of Jesus Christ.

1<sup>st</sup> John 3:17-18 - “But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? <sup>18</sup>Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”

Our love for our brethren ought to be tangibly seen by our deeds and by an honest life.

## Encouragement

One of my favorite verses is Hebrews 10:24 - “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup>not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

We should be encouraging one another. Verse 25 tells us not to neglect coming to church – you can't encourage or brother or sister (or be encouraged by them) unless you show up to church. We should encourage each other: to keep faithful in our walk with the Lord, to “stir one another up” and inspire them to practical acts of love and good deeds, to lift them up when they are feeling down.

1 Thessalonians 5:11 - “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”

We should build up one another, not tear down. In a variety of ways, we could tear someone down, and we should avoid that.

Ephesians 4:29 - “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

Romans 14:19 - “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”

Be careful with your words. Don't tear down. Use fitting words, seek for peace ... and build one another up.

I have been noticing that I will soon enter my senior years, and then the end of my life will come. During the past few years, I have felt that at a minimum, I hope that I have been a positive influence on this earth and in Christ's church, rather than a negative influence. Positive words of encouragement rather than bitter words of disappointment. I have seen some Christians using some bitter words and I already went through a period like that and I don't want to have that characterize

my life. Let us seek to be more a positive influence than a negative one. With reliance on the Holy Spirit who helps us.

Colossians 3:8-9 - “But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices.”

## Conclusion

Early in this message, I quoted 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 5:1-4, where Peter exhorts elders to shepherd and the flock of God willingly and eagerly.

I am going to close today’s message with 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 5:5 (ESV) – “Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’.”

All of us are exhorted to clothe ourselves with humility toward one another. Humility. Let us love, forgive, and encourage each other with a humble manner.