

OBEDIENCE AND CHURCH AUTHORITY:
THE PROBLEM OF THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

by William D. Meyer*

The book of Hebrews - with its strong theme of a priesthood of all believers, where each Christian comes boldly through the curtain into the very presence of God in the heavenly Holy of Holies (Heb 10:19-22; 9: 1-3) with no other mediator than Jesus Christ himself (Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24) - is certainly antithetical to notions of hierarchy in the church. The lay recipients of the book of Hebrews are urged, at the conclusion of the book (Heb 13:14-15), to offer the sacrifices of the new Christian priesthood continually. These priestly sacrifices of the Christian laity, praise to God, confession of his name, doing good and sharing what we have, are pleasing to God. The Christian priesthood in Hebrews is in no sense limited to a special, separate class of church leaders. Hebrews also emphasizes the superiority of the new universal priesthood in the new covenant to the old hereditary, exclusive priesthood of the tabernacle in the old covenant, the central rituals of which, ordinary people who were not priests or prophets dared not take to themselves (Lev 22:10; 1 Sam 13:8-14). Heb 13:10 assures the church's new, better priesthood, "We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat."

However, within its first few centuries, especially after Constantine, the church began developing a clerical priesthood and a new sacrificial system that resembled that of the old covenant, Aaronic priesthood. A synagogue model of worship was replaced by a temple model. Communion evolved over the centuries into the sacrifice of the Mass, with the clerical priesthood alone qualified to administer it.¹ The gap between the clergy and laity widened.

Presbyterian pastor Greg Ogden, in his call for returning the ministry of the church to the laity, observes that even the Protestant Reformation failed to fully obliterate this gap.

We live in the generation when the unfinished business of the Reformation may at last be completed. Nearly five hundred years ago, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others unleashed a revolution that promised to liberate the church from a hierarchical priesthood by rediscovering "the priesthood of all believers." But the Reformation never fully delivered on its promise.

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The unfinished business and the unkept promise that has the power to unleash a grass-roots revolution is the logical corollary to the priesthood of all believers. For not only are all believers priests before God, we also are all priests to each other and in the world.²

Ogden, with my agreement, believes that one of the primary obstacles to church renewal and reform today is maintaining hierarchies that leave the people of God in a subservient position to other women and men: the official, ordained church leadership.

If in fact Robert Munger is correct that the clergy-laity bifurcation is the “greatest single bottleneck to the renewal and outreach of the church,” then we must begin to take drastic steps. John Stott is more direct: “I do not hesitate to say that to interpret the church in terms of a privileged caste or a hierarchical structure is to destroy the New Testament doctrine of the church.”³

But many Christian denominations of long and not-so-long standing obviously do interpret the church in terms of a hierarchical structure. Indeed, there is a worrisome trend among some conservative American churches to aggressively emphasize church authority with terms and concepts like shepherding, discipling and headship. And in these contexts, church authority generally means male authority, both in the church and the home.⁴

Before we can take such drastic steps in dismantling the sinful structures of church hierarchies, both Ogden and I face an exegetical problem. The problem is simply this: the book of Hebrews at first blush does not seem to be as clearly or completely anti-authoritarian as we might think or wish. Yes, we can certainly clearly follow the development of its author’s arguments against the old covenant priestly system, which held the people of God at a great distance from God himself (Heb 7:18-19; 10:1-11) in Hebrews chapters 1 through 12. But then we come to chapter 13. Here we find the only passage in the New Testament that explicitly calls for obedience of the people of God to church leaders.⁵ Heb 13:17-19 (NRSV) states:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing, for that would be harmful to you.

Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you soon.

So we have an exegetical and practical problem as we consider reforming the church. This passage, if taken in isolation, seems to contradict the anti-

hierarchical implications of the rest of the Book of Hebrews. It certainly would contradict Ogden's thesis and create real difficulties for church reform efforts that would close the clergy-laity gap.

Earlier in the same chapter, Heb 13:7-9 uses similar leadership language to urge:

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them.

The problem then is this: Does Heb 13:17 contradict the anti-hierarchical implications in the extensive discussions about the priesthood of all believers and about the high priesthood and superiority of Jesus elsewhere in Hebrews? What exactly did the author of Hebrews have in mind in Heb 13:17? How does it fit into the message of the book as a whole? How does it relate to other New Testament voices? And what are its implications for the church today, especially an American church of many denominations reluctantly coming to terms with the rough-and-tumble reality of a post-Constantinian existence where it can no longer count on even tacit support from the state or the majority of citizens? What are its implications at a time when the traditional structure of church government itself seems to be a major obstacle and bottleneck to preaching the good news to the entire world?

A Contextual Solution

It is my belief that the intended meaning of Heb 13:17 (and 13:7) can best be understood by placing it in the context of the larger pericope and the entire book of Hebrews. To approach either of these passages in isolation from these larger contexts is to duplicate the error of many Sabbatarians who consider Heb 4:9 ("So then, a Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God") in isolation, apart from the message of the entire book.⁶

By taking it out of context, Sabbatarians conclude, "Obviously there is still a purpose for the weekly Sabbath. As Hebrews 4:9 says, 'There remains a keeping of the Sabbath for the people of God.' Observance of the seventh-day Sabbath as a command of God is therefore a fundamental teaching of both the New and Old Testaments."⁷ But the Sabbatarian, proof-text treatment of this passage errs by either ignoring or glossing over the larger context of Hebrews, which asserts that the new covenant is superior to the old (Heb 7:22; 8:6-9), that the old is obsolete and will soon disappear (Heb 8:13), and that the law is merely a shadow

of better things to come and “not the true form of these realities” (Heb 10:1).

The Sabbatarian error in this example is fairly obvious. But in order for us not to commit a similar error with Hebrews 13:17, we must also avoid dealing with this one verse in isolation. Instead, we must view it within its immediate context, then within the framework of the entire document and then in the context of the entire New Testament. Only then can we expect to extract the meaning intended by the author for the original audience and the application intended by God for us today. Otherwise, we run the risk of imposing on it a meaning of our own, with equally dangerous consequences for our application today.

I will attempt to show that the context demands we view Hebrews 13:7 in terms of: (1) a Christian community under strong external pressure to compromise with the world and leave Christ, (2) where its old, established, graybeard leadership has been removed by death, (3) where a relatively junior, new leadership is (4) attempting to hold the community together against the pressure of loss of standing in the external, secular society and to combat the internal threat of Hebraic, old covenant-style doctrinal innovations, and where (5) obedience is correctly conditioned upon preaching the unchanging word of Christ, upon living the faith and upon accountability.

Therefore, if this picture is correct, the message of Hebrews 13:17 is essentially a call to Christian community solidarity, not the *Kadavergehorsamkeit*⁸ of authoritarian denominations, where the leadership’s word is law. (Our own 20th century has certainly suffered as have few others from the curse of leadership⁹ and ideologies of blind obedience, which insist that *Führerworte haben Gesetzkraft*.¹⁰) The author of Hebrews has in mind neither an ecclesiofascist approach, in which the individual’s personal prompting by the Holy Spirit is completely subordinated to the will and judgment of the leadership, nor a hierarchy.¹² This then contradicts the approach of Ignatius of Loyola, and his modern fellow travelers, whether Catholic or Protestant, in his spiritual exercises:

In order to have the proper attitude of mind in the Church Militant we should observe the following rules:

1. Putting aside all private judgment, we should keep our minds prepared and ready to obey promptly and in all things the true spouse of Christ our Lord, our Holy Mother, the hierarchial Church...

9. Finally, to praise all the precepts of the Church, holding ourselves ready at all times to find reasons for their defense, and never offending against them...¹³

As we shall see, Christ’s Word is law in Hebrews, not the human church leader’s and certainly not the hierarchical church’s. Nor is there any explicit mention in Hebrews of how the leadership is to be selected, maintained or removed nor whether its polity is episcopal, presbyterian or congregational. Nor

is the obedience called for in any sense unconditional.

Exegesis

Now we turn to establishing the context of our passage. "Of...importance for the overall presentation of the document are some clues concerning the social situation of the audience. The community has already experienced some suffering for their commitment to the Messiah (Heb 10:32-35; 12:3-13) and can look forward to more (Heb 13:13-14)."¹⁴ Because the Christian recipients of the book of Hebrews in becoming Christian had abandoned the patron-client relationships and ceased to embody the central values of piety toward the gods and the emperor that held together the Greco-Roman world socially, religiously and politically, they had lost both status and protection.¹⁵

In Hebrews 10, the picture is drawn of a church that has suffered "abuse and persecution" (v. 33) in "earlier days" (v. 32). Some members had been imprisoned, and some had their goods plundered (v. 34). But now the immediate threat was that some members, after apparently being worn down by years of external pressure, were shrinking back from Christianity (v. 38) by neglecting to meet together (v. 25) and ultimately exiting the community and going back into the world (v. 39). For Hebrews' author, this amounted to spurning the Son of God and outraging the Spirit of grace (v. 29). To cope with this pressure to give up their Christianity, which had cost them social place and grace and therefore protection in their society, the author of Hebrews praises the heroes and heroines of faith who also were rejected by their societies and suffered because of it. Hebrews 11:36-39 inverts society's values and makes what is despised by society honorable before God. deSilva comments:

This set of examples encourages the addressees once more to accept having no place in society (in effect, 'wandering about in deserts and hills and caves') and to accept the negative judgment of the public court of opinion (even its physical abuse) rather than shrink back from such disgraces and lose the greater reward.¹⁶

Standing Firm

In fact, this theme of standing firm with Jesus despite society's rejections is repeated in Hebrews 13, which modern scholars view, for reasons of both rhetorical structure and distinctive literary style of the writer, as an authentic part of the book of Hebrews,¹⁷ rather than as a later addition. At the center of the inclusio formed by the parallel leader-language of Hebrews 13:7 and Hebrews 13:17, "the frame for the explanatory parenthesis in 13:10-16",¹⁸ we are reminded

that just as Jesus suffered outside the city gates, we Christians must also go outside the camp with him and “bear the abuse he endured.” Harold W. Attridge informs us: “The boundaries of the section, which have been analyzed in a variety of ways, are indicated by an inclusion formed by the references to leaders past (v. 7) and present (v. 17).”¹⁹ At the very center of this larger unit is the author’s clear call for solidarity with the suffering and social rejection that Jesus Christ endured. Therefore it is also a call for solidarity within the Christian community and acceptance of the suffering and social rejection that is often a part of the Christian walk, especially in the first century patronal society.²⁰ This call for solidarity with the suffering of Christ and therefore the suffering of the church must then influence how we view the leadership references in Hebrews 13:7, 17.

A secondary concern of these leadership passages has to do with doctrinal novelties, an internal rather than an external threat. But following the theme of the entire book, the superiority of the new covenant to the old, and therefore the obsolescence and immanent disappearance (Heb 8:13; 9:9-10) of the jurisdiction of Torah, Hebrews 13:7 reads into a discussion of strange new teachings about food rules. These threaten the community’s understanding of grace. And the community is reminded of the unchangeableness of Christ in the face of these new teachings about food rules. Hebrews 13:8-10 reads:

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them. We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat.

Ideas about Hebraic food rules, probably similar to the circumcision party’s arguments that Paul contended with in Galatians, had probably begun to influence the Christian audience of the book of Hebrews. So the author is saying, in essence, remember your former leaders, their lives, their example and their theology. Christ doesn’t change, therefore you shouldn’t follow new teachings about old Hebraic food rules, which threaten your understanding of grace. What you now have, rather than being inferior to the Torah covenant, Torah priesthood and Torah food rules, is actually superior. The priests of the Torah are actually unqualified to eat from our altar.

(It must be acknowledged, however, that the logic of the author of Hebrews would break down if we extend it too far here. He²¹ is apparently using the unchangeableness of Christ to argue against the introduction into the Christian community of new teachings about Hebraic food rules. But the major thrust of the book has been that the new covenant has changed, indeed replaced, the old. So this point about the unchanging Christ would be very out of place earlier, if, for instance, it were to be connected to Hebrews 8:13. But in connection with

doctrinal innovations *within* the Christian tradition, especially if one holds that a gentile rather than Jewish audience is in mind, despite the title that was attached decades later, arguing about the unchangeableness of Christ does make sense.)

The clear indication in Hebrews 13:7-10 that the leadership the community is called to remember and imitate is dead should also influence our reading of the call to obedience in Hebrews 13:17. The call to “remember the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” would be both very peculiar and very risky if the author were speaking of present, living leaders, who, after all, could still go astray, especially in the unsettled atmosphere of the marginalized and persecuted first century church.

William L. Lane flatly states, “The former leaders are dead.”²² Paul Ellingworth comments: “All that the present verse tells us about these former leaders is (1) that they exercised a ministry of the word; (2) that they were personally known to at least some of the addressees; and (3) that they have died.”²³ We don’t know how they died. Martyrdom, though possible,²⁴ seems improbable, given the statement in Hebrews 12:4, “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” It is unlikely that the author is simply stating the obvious: that those alive to hear his message are not yet dead.

Conditional Authority

It is appropriate to note that the leadership of the now dead graybeards, and apparently also the present, more junior leadership in mind in verse 17, was connected to their speaking the word of God and their way of life. If we follow the logic of verse 7, leadership, for the author of Hebrews, was conditioned on both faithfully speaking God’s word and faithfully living the Christian life. There is no hint here of a hierarchy or of the investing of leadership and authority in either the person or the office of the leader. Leaders here are those who speak faithfully and who live faithfully. This seems to be a leadership of function, not the sort of leadership of form and office that evolved in the church in later centuries. And we need to connect these notions of obedience to leadership with the stress on the community from external societal pressure and the need for internal community solidarity in the face of that pressure.

The call in Hebrews to obedience to church leaders came at a time of crisis. It was aimed at dealing with a crisis, not at articulating a duty to obey authoritarian bishops. Attridge observes:

Little can be inferred from the term itself [used for “leader” in v. 7] about the precise status and function of the leaders in question. They are certainly unlikely to have been monarchical bishops, and some sort of presbyterial group is probably involved. Their most important characteristic was that they

“spoke to you the word of God.”²⁵

Interestingly, we see the same crisis pattern in the historical church’s first recorded calls for obedience to bishops. Ignatius of Antioch’s letters were the opening wedge of the evolution of the episcopal hierarchy within the church. After Ignatius had been arrested, he was sent to Rome, where he expected to be put to death. On the way, he wrote several letters to the churches in Asia and Rome. In them, he stressed obedience to bishops. But this again was Christianity under fire.²⁶ Ignatius, in his early calls for obedience, had in mind the survival and unity of the Christian community.²⁷ Though the obedience portions of his letters have been used since to support the hierarchy that fully developed much later, they seem to have been primarily intended as calls to solidarity within the community during a time of crisis when he and other leaders were likely to lose their lives.

So for Ignatius, there would be a need to encourage the Christians to follow the younger, less experienced leadership that would emerge after he and the other graybreads had been put to death or otherwise removed. This mirrors the biblical letter to the Hebrews, where the author seems to have had solidarity rather than hierarchy in mind in Hebrews 13:7-17. Lane, quoting Laub, insists, “there is no reference in verse 17 to a hierarchical structure of the community and of jurisdiction.”²⁸ A younger and relatively untried leadership, probably also including the author,²⁹ since he requests prayer in Hebrews 13:18 for himself,³⁰ seems to be in mind in Hebrews 13:17. In Ignatius’ letter to the Magnesians (chapter vi), he insisted:

I exhort you to study to do all things with a divine harmony, while your bishop presides in the place of God, and your presbyters in the place of the assembly of the apostles, along with your deacons. [emphasis mine]

Though hierarchy apparently was not so much Ignatius’ goal as harmony, the unfortunate trend toward obedience to hierarchy in the church was clearly underway in Ignatius’ letters. In chapter xiii, he wrote “Be ye subject to the bishop, and to one another, as Jesus Christ to the Father, that there may be a unity according to God among you.” In the same letter (chapter ii), Ignatius praises the deacon Sotio, “insomuch as he, by the grace of God, is subject to the bishop and presbytery, in the law of God.” To the Ephesians (chapter xx), he wrote:

Stand fast, brethren, in the faith of Jesus Christ...being under the guidance of the Comforter, in obedience to the bishop and the presbytery with an undivided mind...

However, Ignatius was not describing the contemporary existence of the kind of monarchical episcopate that emerged in later centuries.³¹ Assuming that the leaders in Hebrews 13:7, 17 held the office of bishop is unwise. Ellingworth and Eugene A. Nida, commenting about translation questions, caution, “We do not know the names or precise functions of the leaders, and therefore specific titles

such as 'bishop' should be avoided."³² George W. Buchanan in his comments on Hebrews 13:7-17 also states that exactly what office these former and present leaders held is uncertain. "There is no specification of a distinct office which these leaders filled, such as bishops or deacons. It evidently referred to all leaders who spoke...the word of God."³³

Obedience would seem to be conditional, limited to the extent to which the leaders were in fact themselves correctly teaching and obeying the word of God. Lane, again quoting Laub, says, "The authority of the leaders is not officially bestowed but derives directly from the authority inherent in the word of preaching."³⁴ Leadership of the house churches was a form of service worthy of honor. These Christians should be shown the deference that their leadership plainly deserved."³⁵

The authority belonged to God, not intrinsically to the human leader. Therefore, we should conclude that the duty of obedience attaches absolutely only to God and only conditionally to human church leaders. Peter makes a similar observation when confronted by the demand of the Sanhedrin to stop preaching Christ in Acts 4:19 and 5:29. So the textual references to the former leadership seem to indicate not an unconditional obedience to a non-accountable leadership, but just the opposite. In fact, Hebrews 13:17 uses explicit accountability language: "Obey your leaders...for they...will give an account." Though the author undoubtedly has in mind giving an account to God, there is no explicit or implicit limitation that I can see to prevent the leaders from also being accountable to the Christian community itself. All the text says is, "...they...will give an account." It doesn't say to whom.³⁶ Lane feels strongly that the grammar requires this clause to be translated, not so much that the leaders *must* give an account but that they *intend or want to* give an account.³⁷

If so, this only strengthens the case for accountability being an essential part of Christian leadership. And with priesthood of all believers being one of the strong themes of the entire book of Hebrews, it does not seem to be a stretch to conclude that this accountability to God would also include an accountability to his universal priesthood, who go boldly and confidently (Heb 10:19) with Jesus behind the curtain (Heb 9:3; 6:19,20) into the very presence of God (Heb 12:18-24; 10:21,22) in the heavenly Holy of Holies.

A picture emerges of a Christian leadership that is accountable and whose authority springs not from the leaders' persons or offices but from the conduct of their lives and their correct proclamation of the unchanging Christian message. John Calvin also understood Heb 13:7 as only requiring conditional obedience to "holy and faithful bishops," not "pretending bishops...murderers of souls and ravaging wolves."

He felt the passage requires individual believers to exercise discretion and judgment about church leaders:

I shall say no more to describe them, but for the present I make this one comment that while we are bidden to obey our pastors we must carefully and shrewdly distinguish those who are true and faithful rulers, because if we give this honour indiscriminately to anyone we like, wrong will be done to the good, and moreover the reason added here that they are worthy of honour because they watch for our souls will have no force. For the Pope and his like to draw support from this evidence it is necessary first of all for all of them to prove that they are among those who watch for our salvation.³⁸

The leadership pictured in Heb 13:7-17 is engaged in combating twin threats to the solidarity and integrity of the church. The primary threat is from the outside world, which has marginalized the Christian community and which tempts many individual Christians to give up on God's grace and return to the physically more rewarding life of conformity to the world and the political good grace of the patron-client social system of the ancient Mediterranean world.³⁹ The community has been warned in the climax of chapter 12 not to repeat the mistake of Esau, who gave up the birthright promise of God in exchange for a single physical meal (12:16, 17). The secondary threat appeared to be from a group that was introducing teachings that promoted Hebraic food taboos and therefore also threatened the community's understanding of God's grace.

The author of Hebrews is not calling for monarchical episcopate, absolute obedience or the ecclesiofascist approach of Ignatius of Loyola (with apologies to Ignatius of Antioch), or of denominations, old and new, that share such authoritarian views. Instead, a very reasonable picture is drawn of a universal priesthood, with a functional leadership that is accountable and whose authority is conditioned upon both its correct teaching of God's word and actually living an obedient life of faith personally. Additionally, as we see in Heb 13:15-16, the universal Christian priesthood, made up of the entire people of God, also correctly confesses God's name as an essential part of its sacrificial life. So the differentiation between the entire, universal Christian priesthood and its leadership is narrow and functional. Both confess and proclaim God's word. Both are accountable (Heb 4:12-13; 13:17). Both must live the life of faith. And both go directly to God in a priesthood with no mediator other than Jesus (Heb 10:19-22; 8:1-6).

Other New Testament Voices

As we saw earlier, Peter and John proclaimed a similar view of religious authority that subordinated obedience to religious leaders to their proclamation of God's message. Acts 4:19-20 shows these two apostles defying the constituted

religious leaders of the Jewish people, whom Jesus himself had told the people to obey because they sat in Moses seat (Matt 23:2), because the leaders demanded that Christ not be preached:

But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."

And as the confrontation between the gospel and religious leaders continued, the apostles' message about where the duty of religious obedience intrinsically attached became even more explicit in Acts 5:29-32:

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

This is an interesting passage because it contains an implicit Trinitarian formula that seditiously challenged conventional notions about religious leadership and obedience. Peter appeals to God as supreme authority. He appeals to Jesus as the ultimate religious leader. And he appeals to the witness of the Holy Spirit, combined with the actual religious experience of the apostles. This creates a very credible personal witness and *ad hoc* authority that supersedes that of the constituted, official religious hierarchy. It logically follows from this revolutionary statement that Christians no longer actually need to obey the constituted Jewish leaders, though Peter did not explicitly challenge the right of the Sanhedrin to exist. Nevertheless, in practice, a leadership that no longer need be obeyed ceases to have authority.

We should look carefully at all presentations in the New Testament that have to do with authority, especially confrontations between the emerging church and the established religious leaders, since this was one of the questions that would have been very important not only for the authors of the New Testament accounts, but also for the later church leaders who decided what would be included in the canon and what would not. Robert W. Funk, one of the guiding lights of the Jesus Seminar, certainly makes the point that institutional leadership groups rarely compile a literature that limits their power. But, in my opinion, he pushes the point a bit too far when he writes:

The canon of the New Testament was developed, along with the creeds, as a way of excluding political enemies, so regarded because they deviated from institutional opinion or practice: the primary interest was to build a fence around right doctrine and

hierarchical privilege. This also had the effect of consolidating ecclesiastical power.⁴⁰

So inclusion of this kind of anti-authoritarian material in the canon is certainly not accidental. If the function of the canon was actually to uphold hierarchical privilege, we would not expect to find these texts in the canon. And inclusion of texts that contradict what Funk sees as the self-interest of later church leaders does more than just command our attention. Such inclusion brings with it a powerful argument for self-authentication of such texts and canons. According to Luke T. Johnson, one of the themes of the book of Acts is the shift in religious authority away from the Sanhedrin, the constituted, official religious leadership that even Jesus acknowledged in certain matters, but which got in the way of the will of God and the proclamation of God's authentic message. Instead, authority moves toward the rag-tag band of apostles, the new, upstart band of Jesus' followers, who actually did the will of God and proclaimed God's authentic message.

Despite receiving a beating, therefore, the apostles continue to preach Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 5:42). Luke has made his essential point clear. Whatever political manipulations might still be available to the Sanhedrin, effective religious authority over Israel, considered as God's people, has passed to the apostles. They rule over the Twelve Tribes of the restored Israel in Jerusalem.⁴¹

So authentic religious authority passes from the person and office of the constituted leaders to the actual proclamation of God's word, the good news of Jesus Christ. And it descends onto a rag-tag functional leadership of Jesus' provincial followers, more or less making up the rules as they went along, guided by God's Spirit and validated by miracles and power from God. Luke, in Acts, informs us that the medium won't be allowed to overpower the message. But the message will overpower the medium, in this case the sitting religious establishment. It is as if today, as well, the New Testament's essential instruction to church leaders is proclaim the message to the world: point people to Jesus Christ and then get out of the way.

The key today, as well, is proclamation, not ordination.

Though Heb 13:17 is the only New Testament passage that explicitly calls for obedience to church leaders, there are a number of other New Testament passages that discuss obedience. Most significant obedience passages that would have a bearing on our understanding of church leadership, outside of Acts, are in 1 Peter or in the Pauline corpus. Most usages in both 1 Peter and Paul⁴² refer to being obedient to the faith (Rom 1:5; 16:26); obeying the truth, the gospel or the word (Rom 2:8; 2 Cor 9:13; 2 Thes 1:8; 1 Pet 4:17; 3:1); or obeying God or Christ (2 Cor 10:5, 1 Pet 3:20). There are also passages involving the obedience of

children, slaves and wives.

In a number of other passages, Paul calls on believers to imitate him (1 Cor 4:16; Phil 3:17; 1 Thes 1:6), but he generally does not mention obedience in them. An exception is 2 Thessalonians 3:7, 9, 14, 15, which we will discuss later. In the most important of these imitation passages, 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul calls for the imitation of his example *as* he models Christ in his life. He does not call for direct obedience to his personal authority. This is a conditional, dependent leadership that leans heavily for validation upon the personal example of an authentic, Christ-like life of faith.

However, we should also look at 1 Peter 5:5-6:

In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for

“God opposes the proud,
but give grace to the humble.”

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.

This passage is preceded in 1 Peter 5:1-4 by instructions to church elders, who are clearly church leaders and are warned by Peter not to lord it over their charges. However, there is clearly a shift in verse 5, and there is no reason to assume that the elders of verse 5 are the official church elders of verse 1. In fact, the contrast in verse 5 between the younger and the older makes the explanation of the HarperCollins Study Bible on this verse, that “the *younger* are an age group; the *elders* are officials who are also older”, seem very contrived, awkward and artificial. Unanswered by those who read verse 5 hierarchically is why Peter would limit this submission to church leaders only to young men. Why not other men? And women? The call to mutual humility in the same verse also strengthens the case for a plain-meaning interpretation. What is being called for in verse 5 seems to be nothing more than deference by the young to the natural authority of age, and mutual humility between both age groups.

In the Pauline corpus, two passages on obedience bear examination. The first is Titus 3:1-2:

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone.

This passage, which reads like a civic virtue list, contains no explicit or implicit references to obeying religious leaders. It merely says to obey the government and what are almost certainly governmental authorities. Beyond that, one should basically work hard and stay out of trouble, good advice all around, in any age.

The second Pauline passage to examine is 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15:
Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter;
have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed.
Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.

This passage is more explicit about obeying Paul's instructions, specifically the instructions in this letter. But here again, these verses are preceded by exhortations to civic virtues. And in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, Paul indicates his instructions came from Jesus Christ, in his name. The specific instructions have to do with loafers accepting the hospitality of other Christians without working for a living. So Paul lays it on heavy in verses 10 and 12: "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat," and, "Now such persons we exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and earn their own living."

So Paul is emphasizing, consistent with Acts, the authority of God. The teaching from Christ has authority, but there is no indication here, despite forceful obedience language, that Paul invests religious authority in the person of a church leader or in the office of the leader itself. Paul makes an accounting to his audience of the source of his message, to whom Paul presumably is also personally accountable.

Personal Conclusions

The consistent message of the New Testament is antagonistic to notions of absolute obedience to hierarchical church authority. Paul and Peter and the author of Hebrews invest authority in the proclamation of God's word. None of these New Testament voices, despite what we would expect following Funk's reasoning about institutional self-interest, invests religious authority in the person of the leader or in the office itself.

So we return, after examining both the Heb 13:17 obedience passage and other New Testament voices, to the understanding that authentic leadership in the modern, post-Constantinian Christian church is invested in faithful proclamation, not mere ordination. The author of Hebrews does indeed call us to obedience to legitimate church leadership, even if green and untested, in the call to solidarity inside the Christian community. But there is no hint I could detect in Hebrews that the leadership must be male or ordained. However, Heb 13:17 does indicate that the authentic leader must be faithfully proclaiming God's word, living the faith, and be accountable. In a nutshell, authentic leadership, deserving of obedience, must be a God-led leadership.

Even if it is female or unordained,⁴³ we Christians, who today are grappling with bottlenecks and obstacles to evangelism that emerge from the traditional structures of church government itself, must obey that God-led leadership, if this view of Heb 13:17 is correct. We must obey what is *of God*.

And if God is using rag-tag elements within the church today, then that is where our loyalty and attention should be. However, this does not mean disrespect to established graybeard leaders also being used by God to faithfully proclaim his message. It just means, in the context of our own lives, our own personal circles of influence and our own church congregations, that we must find and follow where God leads and whom God leads. We certainly should not be in opposition to God's lead in these matters. Otherwise we could find ourselves guilty of blaspheming the work of the Holy Spirit, not something we want to do.

It is also obvious that we must exercise our own minds in all this. We must be discerning and accept some risks. Guided by the Holy Spirit, we must take personal responsibility for our own decisions and judgments in determining where and whom God is leading. Essentially, this means being cautious about carelessly following persuasive people who boldly say, "God told me," or "God has revealed to me," or "God's Spirit is leading me to see" without testing what they say against the Scriptures, competent scholarship, reason and our own Christian experience. But then where we do determine that we see God's lead, here we need to follow.

In addition, the sinful structures of existing authoritarian hierarchies, contradicting or thwarting this accountable, proclamation-based, honest-living, God-led, functional leadership within the priesthood of all believers, deserve our attention and action. Such sinful structures must be resolutely but carefully dismantled, with brotherly concern and God's Holy Spirit guiding the demolition and reconstruction process. Demolition, after all, is a drastic step, even if it is a careful demolition.

Even though all this may seem radical, I believe these personal conclusions to be thoroughly and conservatively grounded in the message of Hebrews and the rest of the New Testament. So it is my wish for God to help us all seek and see and obey his will on these important Christian leadership questions. May God help us pursue his will and not our own.

ENDNOTES

Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 79-82, writes that one of the implications of the priesthood of all believers is that the laity should independently be able to celebrate Communion. He further notes that Paul's discussion of abuses at Communion in 1 Corinthians 11, does not involve an institutional or legislative remedy and that this is "immediately followed by a discussion of spiritual gifts": in 1 Cor 12. "Nowhere does Paul mention a charism given to persons having a special call to protect this meal."

²Ibid., 11-12.

³Ibid., 72.

⁴Ron Burks and Vicki Burks, Damaged Disciples: Casualties of Authoritarian Churches and the Shepherding Movement (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 76-131.

⁵There are, however, other New Testament passages that may implicitly support certain notions of church authority and that are often so cited by those who wish to bolster their own claims of authority. We will discuss some of these other voices at the end of this paper.

⁶Samuele Bacchiocchi, The Sabbath in the New Testament: Answers to Questions (Berrien Springs: Biblical Perspectives, 1990), 36-37, 72-78, 172-175. Bacchiocchi (professor of Church History and Theology at the Seventh-day Adventists' Andrews University) teaches that the book of Hebrews emphasizes both discontinuity and *continuity* with the past. He presents Heb 4:9 as a continuity passage (36-38) to overcome the larger discontinuity of the rest of Hebrews. Thus, he attempts to uphold a requirement for Christians to keep the Sabbath today. But in so doing, he ignores the fact that the immediate pericope is really discussing entry of Israel under Joshua into the *rest* of the promised land and not Israel's observance or non-observance of the literal, weekly Sabbath.

⁷Larry Walker, "The Rest of the Story: The Story of Rest," The Good News Expanded Edition 1. no. 4, (July/August 1996), E5. The Good News is published by the United Church of God, a large Worldwide Church of God breakaway group that separated in 1995 over its leaders' defense of Sabbatarianism.

⁸Blind, slavish, obedience, a now discredited Prussian military virtue, which sadly still manifests itself in many other cultures and in some parts of the Christian church. Literally, it is "cadaver-like obedience." The best visual example of this kind of "stiff" obedience and rigidity is to be found at Buckingham Palace, where the immobile, rigid guards, if they faint, are supposed to faint at attention.

⁹Robert Kelley, The Power of Followership: How to Create Leaders People Want to Follow and Followers Who Lead Themselves (New York: Doubleday, 1992), explores the 20th century American myth of leadership and the conformism it creates.

¹⁰"The leader's words have the force of law," Adolph Eichmann's principle. Tzvetan Todorov, Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps, trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollak (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 166.

Todorov comments further: "In the totalitarian ethic, loyalty to the leader is the fundamental obligation. The cults of both Stalin and Hitler are notorious in this respect. The motto [Heinrich] Himmler chose for the SS, for example, proclaimed, "*Meine Ehre heisst Treue*," "my honor is called loyalty," a phrase from one of Hitler's speeches indicative of the special place this quality occupies in Nazi thought. Loyalty toward others engaged in the same struggle and blind submission to the leader go hand in hand" (189).

¹¹This coined word clearly has some sting, and it is not accidental. I believe religious people need to acknowledge the similarities between authoritarian church polities that often seem to be accepted and even respected, and authoritarian political systems that are abhorrent to most moral human beings. In both, there is great emphasis on the role of the leader and on the need for the masses to submit.

Terminology is needed that will draw our attention to these similarities and prompt and provoke us to Christian action toward love and good works (Heb 10:24). My aim is deliberately provocative, with the cautious hope that love and good works will result when our thinking on these important questions is developed and clarified. If we sanitize authoritarian church polities with hoary terms like "episcopal," our thinking will be much more fuzzy. And we will be much less likely to confront our sins in these areas and take needed corrective action to alter the sinful structures of such polities.

However, to be fair to the current denominational leadership of the Worldwide Church of God, there is widespread, top-level embarrassment about its continuing with the authoritarian, pastor-general polity established by founder Herbert W. Armstrong. (This form of government is essentially papal, but now without a WCG theology to legitimate it.) Ogden's The New Reformation, with its radical recommendations for lay leadership and non-hierarchical polity, has been recommended to the WCG ministry and membership by the WCG's current pastor general, Joseph Tkach Jr. So something is clearly afoot.

Change of some sort is a foregone conclusion. But, despite these very hopeful and encouraging beginnings, the church membership has not been engaged in any meaningful way, so far, in discussions about what the inevitable changes in church polity should be. The assumption apparently continues to be that changes, even healthy democratic and congregational changes, will be imposed from above. This clearly reveals the durability of the problems and mindset perpetuated by authoritarian church polity.

¹²Franz Laub, “Verküendigung and Gemeindeamt: Die Autorität...Hebr 13, 7. 17.24,” Studien zum Neuen Testament und Seiner Umwelt, Series A 196. no. 90 (1981-1982), 189.

¹³Ignatius of Loyola, The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, trans. Anthony Mottola (Garden City: Image, 1964), 139-140.

¹⁴Luke T. Johnson, The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 414.

¹⁵David A. deSilva, “Despising Shame: A Cultural-Anthropological Investigation of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” Journal of Biblical Literature 113 (1994), 439-442. Though the evidence is not beyond dispute, I believe, with deSilva, that it points more toward a gentile than a Jewish audience. For instance, the basic doctrines of Heb 6:1-2 make little sense if a Jewish audience were in mind, since all of the listed doctrines are basic concepts of Pharisaic Judaism and lack specific Christological content as presented here. These doctrines do, however, make sense as “basics” if a gentile audience were in mind by the author of Hebrews.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 451.

¹⁷William L. Lane, Hebrews 9-13 (WBC 47B; Dallas: Word, 1991), 496-497.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 502.

¹⁹Harold W. Attridge, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Hermeneia, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 390-391.

²⁰David A. deSilva, “Exchanging Favor for Wrath: Apostasy in Hebrews and Patron-Client Relationships,” Journal of Biblical Literature 115 (1996), 92-95.

²¹The choice of personal pronoun is arbitrary. The use here of “he” should not be interpreted as a ruling out of the possibility of a female author.

²²Lane, 527.

²³Paul Ellingworth, The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text, (NIGTC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 702.

²⁴Otto Michel writes that martyrdom is at least possible for the former leaders. It is also quite possible to conjecture that the church leaders were martyrs, but then their deaths are classified as the faithful witness to their lives. Otto Michel, Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament Begründet von Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, 12th ed., vol. 13, Der Brief an die Hebräer (Göttingen: Vandenhöck & Ruprecht, 1996), 490.

²⁵Attridge, *ibid.*

²⁶Caution is to be exercised today in extrapolating these emergency remedies for emergency conditions into general principles for all times and all situations. One need only reflect on the tactics of authoritarian political leaders in our century who seized upon real or imagined emergencies to suspend constitutional liberties permanently to see the danger of applying Ignatius' calls to solidarity and obedience as he was marching to martyrdom too literally and universally to our situation today.

²⁷Cyril Charles Richardson, The Christianity of Ignatius of Antioch (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 33. "What the saint is always at pains to stress is the harmony and unity of the Church, that is founded upon obedience to the ecclesiastical authorities..."

²⁸Lane, 555.

²⁹Attridge, 402.

³⁰F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, revised ed. (NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 386.

³¹Christine Trevett, A Study of Ignatius of Antioch in Syria and Asia, *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity* 29 (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1992), 83. She comments, "Full-blown monarchical episcopacy, I think, was not what was at stake in these Asian churches, though the far-sighted and forward-looking Ignatius may well have envisioned such an animal."

³²Paul Ellingworth and Eugene A. Nida, A Translator's Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews (London: United Bible Societies, 1983), 325.

³³George Wesley Buchanan, To the Hebrews: Translation, Comment and Conclusions (Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), 233.

³⁴Franz Laub, “Verküendigung und Gemeindeamt: Die Autorität...Hebr 13, 7.17.24,” Studien zum Neuen Testament und Seiner Umwelt, Series A 196. no. 90 (1981-1982), 190.

³⁵Lane, *ibid.*

³⁶In Hebrews 4:12-13, account is to be given to God.

³⁷Lane, *ibid.*

³⁸John Calvin, The Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Hebrews and The First and Second Epistles of St. Peter, trans. William B. Johnston (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1963), 213.

³⁹David A. deSilva, “Exchanging Favor for Wrath: Apostasy in Hebrews and Patron-Client Relationships,” Journal of Biblical Literature 115 (1996), 92-95.

⁴⁰Robert W. Funk, Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millenium (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 117.

⁴¹Johnson, 227.

⁴²Because I don’t think it is truly relevant to the topic at hand, I’ve avoided tackling the question of authorship. When I refer to Paul as an author, I should be understood as loosely referring to the Pauline corpus, regardless of authorship.

⁴³Earl Kent Brown, Women of Mr. Wesley’s Methodism (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1983), 7-12. John Wesley taught that God authenticated the leadership he backed by its fruits. And Wesley concluded that God had “taken ownership: of the preaching of a number of unordained lay men and women and that he could do no less.