

Our responsibility to our elders

We spent several weeks on the topic of elders, the role of elders, the qualities of elders. So far, we have talked about the elders, their roles, their responsibilities, their character. But this preaching series doesn't just seek to help us choose elders well-qualified for the role. The goal is not simply to help those who are elected to better understand what their new role will be. If we want this series to prepare us for church life with elders, we also need to consider what our responsibility to elders will be. Yes, the Bible describes the elder's relationship with church members, his attitude towards them, his responsibility towards them. But what does it say about the attitude of church members toward elders, the responsibility of members toward elders? We spent two weeks studying what the Bible asks of elders. But what does the Bible ask of the Christians in the church in their relationship with the elders? Church members also have responsibilities. Verse 17 tells us what God asks of us and also gives us reasons why we should obey.

Obey in submission

Since the Fall, humans have found it difficult to submit to the authority established by God. The world we live in is a world where individualism dominates. "I'll do it my way" sang Frank Sinatra. Authority in society, at school, in the family, in the church, we find it difficult to submit to it.

And in the context of such individualism, the church is called to be radically different. The church is called to submit to God, to his will, to his law. We pray that God's will be done on earth. It means we pray for it to be done in the church and in the life of every member of the church.

And in his Word God describes his will for the church: "Obey your leaders and be submissive to them." The church is called to obey and submit to the elders appointed by God. This is what God asks of us in the church. These words are easy to understand but difficult to do: "Obey", "submit". It makes us bristle to think about it. Hearing these words makes us uncomfortable. "What are they going to ask of me? Will I not lose control of my life if I obey, if I submit to someone?" Obedience and submission to others is not natural for us. And this is especially the case because we see the weaknesses and faults in the lives of those to whom we are called to submit. They are not perfect people. Their decisions are not always the right ones. They can get things wrong. Yet God gives this command to his church: "Obey your leaders, the leaders I have given you."

The word "obey" here means, receive the teaching given by the rulers in order to obey it. Convinced of the truth they present to you, obey it. It is the role of the elder to explain the word of God, to clearly show the will of God from the scriptures. So we obey, not because it is his opinion or because an elder has a charismatic personality, but because he demonstrates the clear teaching of the Word. He exhorts according to sound doctrine.

And the word "to be submissive" has a slightly different meaning. In the original, it is a word which describes the attitude of a soldier towards his commander. He does whatever his commander asks him to do because of the authority that comes from being a commander. And the authority of the elder does not come from itself. It comes from the position he occupies, delegated by God. His authority comes from the office that God has given him. It is God who invests the elder with the authority of God to lead the people of God. So our submission to the elders in the church is submission to God. It is a submission to the authority of God, delegated to the elders. We see this idea in Ephesians 6. Paul writes: "Women, submit to your own husband, as to the Lord." Chapter 6: "Children, obey your parents according to the Lord." "Servants, obey your masters as to Christ." The obedience and submission to which we are called is obedience and submission to the authority entrusted by Christ to the elders appointed by Him in His church.

And when we talk about submission, what is implied is submission to something that you don't agree with. Imagine that with some friends you want to spend a day together. Some, including you, want to go to the beach. Others want to visit a castle. The decision is made to go to the beach. This is what you want to do. Can we say that you are having to submit to this decision? No, because that's what you want to do. You agree with the decision. But if it had been decided to visit the castle, you would have had to submit to the decision.

So when a decision made by the elders is not a decision that you would have made, when you would rather do something else, that is submission. Decisions will be made by the elders. You won't always agree with all of their decisions. You are free to come and express your views to the elders, to explain why you disagree, but if you are a member of the church, it is your responsibility to submit to the elders' decision. When we submit to a decision with which we do not agree, we agree not to sow disagreement in the assembly. We agree to be silent on the subject and not to arouse opposition. We saw this a few weeks ago with the complaints against the apostles in Acts 6. If you have something to complain about, if you don't agree, go talk to the elders. Maybe they will change their mind. But in going to present your case to the elders, you must be prepared to submit to the decision they make.

Of course, if the elders ever ask you to do something that is against the Word of God, then you should not submit to what they say. We must obey God rather than men. But in a church led by elders, placed in a position of authority by God, the members of the church agree to submit to the authority of the elders.

What is true for church members is also true for elders. There will be times in the council of elders when there is not necessarily agreement on some subject. But the elders, too, must agree to submit to the decision of the majority of the elders. They have to support the decision. The elder must not whisper behind the back of the council of elders.

In our church regulations, in the section on the terms of church membership we read: "Each member gladly and joyfully accepts the responsibility and privilege of submitting in the Lord to teaching and church government." Imagine a church where members refuse to submit to the authority of the elders, where they refuse to submit to decisions made by the council of elders, where they are constantly publicly undermining the authority of the elders, where they only do things with which they agree. It would be a real circus! Worse, it would be the war between the members and the elders.

I have been part of associations in the past where some members were constantly undermining the authority of the leaders. I worked in a school where among the teachers there were some who were always criticizing the decisions of the leaders. "I wouldn't have done it like that. It's never going to work if we do it like that." And the temptation for God's people is to do the same. The temptation for members of any church is to follow the elders only when they agree with them, to obey only when it is convenient for them, and if the members do not agree with them, they will do their own will and too bad for the elders. They only obey when the elders' decision pleases them and when it doesn't please them, they whisper and they stay at home. But a church can't work like that. How can we talk about unity in such a church? How can we talk about love? We are establishing a church led by elders, and before we join the church we all need to consider whether we are willing to be a part of a church where the members submit to the authority of the elders. To become a member of this church we must promise to do so.

And in the second part of the verse in front of us, we get the impression that the author anticipates objections. He knows he is asking Christians to do something that they don't necessarily want to do. So the author gives 4 reasons why they should obey and submit to the elders.

The work of the elders - Look at the second part of verse 17: "For they watch over the good of your souls". They look after your spiritual health, your soul. They care about your soul. Many of us are or have been followed by a doctor, for some it is a specialist. And the doctor has the responsibility to look after the good of our body. It's his responsibility. This is his main task. When I go to the physiotherapist, she takes care of my back. She doesn't spend her time asking questions about the problems we're having with our heating system. She doesn't ask why one of our hens gives us fewer eggs than the other. It's not her responsibility. She asks me questions about my back. She tries to figure out what is wrong. And when she advises me on exercises, stretches to do, she does it because she takes care of my back. I accept what she tells me because I know she cares about me. Even though stretches are not easy. Even if they hurt me a little, I do them because I know she wants my good.

And in the same way, the elder watches over the good of the souls of the flock. God is setting elders in place whose main responsibility is to watch over your soul, to watch over your spiritual well-being. This is their responsibility, first and foremost. This is their main task. What is going to happen at the elders' meetings? The elders will pray for you. They will discuss how to provide for your spiritual needs, how to feed you, how to help you grow in the faith, how to help you to flourish in the faith, to become more mature. They will watch over you. They will talk about the spiritual dangers around you and how to protect you from them.

Since our elders will take care of the good of your soul, they will ask you, not just about the weather, about the job, but also about your soul, your relationship with God, your spiritual health. This verb "to watch" literally means "to spend sleepless nights". And yes, sometimes, because of their spiritual concerns for the sheep of the flock, our elders will have sleepless nights. The image is that of a sentry, keeping the town safe. And this is one of the responsibilities of the elders. We saw this two weeks ago. They protect the sheep from spiritual dangers. Maybe the picture here is of elders praying. One of the main responsibilities of the elders that you will choose in a few weeks will be to pray for you. In elders' meetings, much of the time will be spent in prayer. That is why we must listen to them and obey them. Is it unreasonable to submit to such men who look after the good of your soul? This is their job.

The responsibility of the elders - And if you want to understand the seriousness of their work, look at the continuation of verse 17: "for they are watching over the good of your souls, as those will have to give an account."

The elders that you are going to choose in a few weeks, if they accept to take on this enormous responsibility, they must understand that one day they will give an account to God for their work. They will give an account to God for how they took care of the sheep. "Have you watched? Did you pray? Have you protected and fed my sheep? Have you gone to look for the lost sheep? My son died for these sheep. He shed his blood to redeem them. I have entrusted to you my church, my flock, my children. Did you take good care of them? Did you love them as I love them, as my son loved them? The men you choose as elders, they will stand before God, the great shepherd of the flock, and they will have to give an account of how they took care of you. It's a very, very heavy responsibility. And the elder must keep this responsibility constantly in front of him. "Someday I will give an account to God for this work."

The joy and sorrow of the elders - Our verse says, "Let them do this with joy, and not with groaning." The work of the elder can be one of the most fulfilling and joyful responsibilities one can imagine. The elder can experience immense joy in seeing the members of the church grow in their faith, in seeing God at work in the lives of the sheep, in seeing the conversion of the people, in seeing the children in the church coming to faith in Jesus Christ for themselves. It is a great joy to hear church members participate in Bible study, pray in prayer meeting, to see them serve one another, to see a real thirst for the word and for prayer. When the elders see acts of love and compassion in the church and outside the church, it is a source of immense joy for them.

Helping people to grow, helping people to live for Jesus, to love Jesus, to glorify him, to enjoy fellowship with Him, I cannot think of a more glorious activity. The work of the elder will bear fruit for all eternity with the Kingdom of God is advancing in this world, the name of Jesus Christ being exalted. You who will serve as an elder, it will be a subject of immense joy to you. 3 John 4: "I have no greater joy than to learn that my children walk in the truth." This is true of the elder. Members of the church are called to submit to loving elders, who find their greatest joy in seeing the church grow in Christ.

But if the elder can experience joy over the sheep, he can also groan over them. He can sigh. The word "to moan" in verse 17 can be translated "to feel pain". Imagine what the elders feel when the sheep are not thirsty for the word, when they see a sheep going away from the flock and refusing to return, when they see sheep attacking each other. Imagine the grief of the elders when they hear the whispers of their brothers and sisters against them. I have seen elders broken by the nastiness of the sheep in the flock, by cruel and hurtful words.

Once again, I repeat, there must be an opportunity for every member of the church to express reservations about decisions made by elders. It is the right of every member of the church. Any member has the right to disagree. Anyone can present their reservations to the elders. They will listen to him. They will take into account what the member has to say. Maybe they will change their mind. It can happen. But if they don't change their mind, and if the member refuses to submit to the elders' decision, if he continues to make waves, it will be to the great sorrow of the elders.

The welfare of the sheep - Look at the sentence at the end of verse 17: Speaking of the elders deprived of the joy of their office, the elders who groan, the author writes: "for that would be of no advantage to you". What is better for the proper functioning of a church, elders who sorrow, elders who are heartbroken by conflict or hurtful words, or elders filled with joy. The answer is quite obvious. The task of the elders is made much easier and the life of the church is much happier and more joyful when there is unity, obedience and submission, when one lives according to the structure put in place by Jesus in his church. This sentence at the end of the verse says that it is to your advantage to obey, to submit to the elders. It's for your own good. If you have elders who have the qualities that we saw last Sunday, who are looking out for the good of your soul, who know that they will have to give an account to God, elders who love you, if you do not listen to them, if you do not submit to their direction, the person who suffers the most is you. If you reject the work of men given by God for your spiritual well-being you are hurting yourself. God tells us that we need elders for our good. Are we going to tell God that he is wrong? We obey, we submit to the elders, because of their work, their responsibility, their joy and their sorrow and because it is for our good.

God asks his sheep in the church of Jesus Christ to obey and submit. He asks all of us to do this in order to bring joy to others. Does this make you think of someone else? This is not the first time that God has asked someone to obey, to submit in order to give joy to others. This is what he asked his son Jesus. He humbled himself to submit to his Father's will. He said "your will be done and not mine". He obeyed his Father. He obeyed, even to death, death on the cross. And he did this to give joy to others, to his Father and to us too, his people. So when God asks us to obey and submit, he asks us to imitate Jesus. When we obey and submit to the elders established by God, we imitate Jesus, for the joy of our elders, for our joy, and for the joy of Jesus our Lord. Isn't that what we want? May God help us do this, to the glory of our Savior Jesus Christ.