

Follow atonement-centered leaders (Hebrews 13:7, 17)

Verses 7 and 17 of Hebrews 13 are both about the relationship of leaders with the community of believers. The two verses bracket the section expounding the lasting relevance of the atonement, which in turn helps understand the instruction concerning leaders. A proper understanding and application of the atonement to church leadership helps guard against the extremes which we can observe at times in church leadership: dictatorial leadership or none at all, blind following or refusing to submit. Leaders who proclaim and live out the atonement are worth following: imitating their faith and submitting to their instruction.

I. Imitate the faith of past leaders (13:7).

Their past leaders were particularly those who proclaimed the word of God and lived it out to the end of their lives. This verse reveals the responsibilities of both godly leaders and believers.

A. Responsibilities of godly leaders that make them worth imitating:

1. Leading – as shepherds and servants with Jesus as the model who never changes (cf. Matthew 2:6; Luke 22:26–27; Hebrews 13:8).
2. Speaking the Word – that is, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ and all its implications for righteous living and the prospect of suffering with and for Him.
3. Living the Word – as implied by “the outcome of their conduct”.

B. Responsibilities of followers that lead them to imitate those leaders:

1. Remembering your (past) leaders – not only those who had proclaimed the gospel are helpful, but also such as are listed in chapter 11 who lived and died in faith.
2. Considering the outcome of their conduct – that is, give thought to how their faith shaped how they lived and ended their lives.
3. Imitating their faith – Those “who through faith and patience inherit the promises” should be imitated (6:11-12). Human models, though imperfect (except for Christ), can be models to follow as they follow Christ (1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess 3:7, 9; 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; 1 Peter 5:3). That faith is centered in the atonement.

II. Submit to the spiritual direction of current leaders (13:17).

A. The character of submission to Christian leaders which is expected of Christians:

1. It is commanded to obey & submit, that is, being persuaded by the reasoning and yielding to the directions. Like other references, verses 8–16 qualify this as “in the Lord” (cf. Ephesians 5:22; 6:1, 5; Colossians 3:18, 23).
2. Submission is prescribed to be done in a manner that leaders have joy and not groaning. The greatest joy is see believers walking in the truth (3 John 4). Joy is replaced with groaning when believers fail to walk in the truth.
3. Submission can be motivated by knowing that not submitting is unprofitable from an eternal perspective. “Groaning” in leaders robs them of energy and time to get other things done. Even more significant is the lost incurred at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor 3:13–15; 2 Cor 5:10) or the potential of eternal loss, if a profession of faith is demonstrated as false.

B. The stewardship of godly leaders which makes submission reasonable:

1. Leaders are stewards appointed by the Lord to keep watch over your soul. Leaders’ primary task is to care for the spiritual welfare of the believers in their charge.
2. Leaders, because they are stewards, will give account. This is implied by Paul (1 Corinthians 4:1–2) and an essential elements in many of the parables of Jesus about stewards. Leaders should remember and be motivated by that. The sense of accountability which a leader has instills trust in those who follow. The atonement gives leaders the sense of what is important and helps establish priorities.

Godly leaders want victory in Jesus for the people of God and so they proclaim the atoning blood of Jesus and model a life based upon it. Such faith should be imitated and leadership so centered in the atonement should be followed.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- What godly people have influenced you in your walk with Jesus Christ? Have you considered the outcome of their conduct and if so, how?
- What do you believe gives godly leaders joy? Why? What causes “groaning”? What reasons might exist in this life for the unprofitability of causing groaning rather than joy?
- God has appointed leaders in the church and in the family. How does their understanding of their accountability before God make submitting easier? What reveals to you their sense of accountability?
- Would you want to be a leader? Why/why not?