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Bridgeway Church

Hebrews #46

Joyful Leaders and Those Who Follow Them

Hebrews 13:17-19

Two weeks ago the Pew Research Center released the results of its most recent survey of *America's religious landscape*. I wasn't at all surprised by the statistics. The survey indicated that whereas in 2007 more than 78% of Americans identified as Christian, that number has plummeted to just over 70%. In other words, there was **a 7.8% decline in those who identify as Christians**. The biggest losses were in mainline Protestant denominations and among Roman Catholics. The percentage of those identifying as Evangelicals remained basically the same.

I mention this to you today because the most intriguing statistic concerns the so-called *Unaffiliated*. There are three groups designated Unaffiliated: Atheists, Agnostics, and those called "Nothing in particular." It is this latter group that fascinates me. They have increased by nearly 4% in the past 7 ½ years. Often you will hear them referred to as **"Nones"** (not "Nuns"!). That is to say, when asked, "What is your religious affiliation?" they respond by saying, "None."

The "Nones" are not atheists. In fact, most of them self-identify as being "spiritual" but they have no relationship to any organized church body, whether denominational or independent. Some profess to be born-again Christians, but for whatever reason they have chosen to distance themselves from involvement in the local church. In other words, they believe that they can be spiritual and have a relationship with God independently of any involvement in a church.

The question is, Why? ***What has prompted these people to write off the local church as irrelevant, or in some cases harmful, to their spiritual experience?*** There are, as you might imagine, a number of reasons they mention. Some believe the church is culturally primitive and is out of touch with what is happening in our world. Others point to specific doctrines that they find unloving and too narrow, such as the belief that salvation is possible only through faith in Jesus Christ. The doctrine of hell has played a role in driving some from the local church. The mistaken belief that to be an evangelical one must also be a Republican has alienated quite a few.

Perhaps the most decisive factor in recent days is the issue of homosexuality and gay marriage. Churches that stand firmly on the teaching of Scripture that marriage is exclusively the covenant relationship between a man and a woman have seen the slow but steady departure of many who think that is unkind and unloving. But there is another reason why many who used to be active in a local church no longer are. As I said, it isn't that such people formerly were believers and are now atheists. These are people who still profess faith in Jesus Christ but have decided they want nothing to do with the church. And the reason they give for this decision is ***their painful experience with abusive and authoritarian leadership.***

I strongly suspect that many here today have experienced, to some degree, the wounds that are inflicted by overbearing, excessively controlling, self-serving leaders in the local church. I hear this all the time. People will often simply drop out of church for months and even years at a time because either they or someone they know and love was mistreated by a pastor or an elder or another leader in the church. Perhaps the pastor was a bully or an ego-maniac. Perhaps church leaders were overly intrusive in the private lives of the people. Or it may be that a pastor thought it was his responsibility to control the people in his church when it came to such personal matters as whom to marry or what job to take or where to live.

The bottom line in each case is that the structure and atmosphere and oppressive leadership of the church offended and wounded them. So they just walked away. Sometimes they never come back. When they do return, they are, understandably, very cautious and defensive and guarded.

That is what makes this passage in Hebrews 13 so critically important for all of us at Bridgeway. This text addresses such questions as: Should there even be leaders in the local church who have a spiritual authority greater than that of others? If so, what is the nature and extent of that authority? Who are these leaders and does it matter how many there should be in any one local church? What does it mean to say that Christians should "obey" their leaders? What if church leaders tell people to do or believe something that they are persuaded is unbiblical? What does the word "submit" mean and how far does that extend? How do pastors and elders "keep watch" over the souls of other Christians in the church? And perhaps most important of all, ***doesn't all this smack of institutionalism and traditionalism and hierarchicalism and authoritarianism in such a way that it stifles freedom and becomes a breeding ground for abuse and greed and pride?***

I think you'll agree with me that these are very, very important questions that must be answered. Here at Bridgeway we are very open and forthright about what we believe on such matters. We want you to know how we are governed and why. By the way, the big theological word for that is ***ecclesiology***. We want you to understand why we think it is important that a church be structured

and led in accordance with what this verse says, together with numerous other passages in the NT that address the subject.

So we're going to take time today to answer the questions I just raised. I want all of you to understand our ecclesiology. The simple fact is, ***bad ecclesiology hurts people***. If you have any doubts about that, go study what happened last year with Mars Hill Church in Seattle and the eventual demise of Mark Driscoll, the former senior pastor.

But more important, ***I want you to feel both safe and free at Bridgeway***. I want you to have room to grow and develop in accordance with your own unique gifts at the same time you are lovingly led and nurtured by those whom God has raised up as Elders and Pastors. I want you to be protected and guarded from heresy without being forced to believe something that in your heart and conscience you know to be false. I want you to feel the love the Elders and Pastors have for you. I want you to understand that we are both joyful and serious about what God has called us to do. And we want you to be confident that we are leading you well without you feeling controlled or coerced or in any way exploited or used for our personal gain. Now that's a tall order! That's why ecclesiology is so vitally important! So let's get started.

What Elders Do

Let me say once again that I am keenly aware of how ***sensitive*** some people are, perhaps I should even say how ***frightened*** they are by any reference to leadership or authority or the call to submit. We are Americans for the most part and we pride ourselves in our individuality and the freedom to determine our own course in life. We often don't respond well when the Bible says things like this:

“We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thess. 5:12-13a).

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17).

“So I exhort the elders among you, . . . 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; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pt. 5:1-3).

Five Questions

(1) *Who are these that our author refers to as “leaders” (v. 17)?* They are, I believe, the Elders of the local church.

There is nothing in the NT to suggest that any church was led or governed by anyone other than those designated as Elders. We see this pattern affirmed by the description of Paul’s ministry in Acts:

“And when they [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23).

(2) *What is the purpose of spiritual leadership?* Simply stated, the aim or purpose or goal is to lead individual “souls” into maturity in Christ. I see this in v. 17 in the reference to the fact that Elders must eventually give an account to God for the “souls” of their sheep. I also see it in the closing words of v. 17 where we are told that the leadership of the Elders is designed to be an “advantage” to each individual believer. In other words, ***Elders and Pastors are appointed to help you experience spiritual benefits and blessings so that you will progressively look more and more like Jesus.*** Simply put, it is for the spiritual welfare and blessing and benefit of your soul that leaders are to be diligent and watchful and serve as loving shepherds.

(3) *How are Elders and Pastors supposed to lead?* What characterizes the exercise of that spiritual authority and responsibility for the souls of others? Our text provides us with a two-fold answer: ***Elders and Pastors are to lead (1) with joy and (2) with a heightened sense of accountability.*** Let’s look at each of these in turn.

First, Elders are to keep watch over your souls “with joy and not with groaning” (v. 17). Dare I say that none of you wants a grumpy sour-puss for a pastor! If I or any of the Elders and Pastors fail to find our satisfaction and delight in Christ, what hope is there that you will be more successful? We simply must minister and lead and serve you out of the overflow of our joy in Jesus. The meaning of this is best seen by looking at what Peter says in his first epistle.

“So I exhort the elders among you, . . . 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; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:1-3).

Leaders are not to pastor or shepherd the flock of God “under compulsion, but **willingly**” (v. 2). In other words, they must never fulfill this ministry under constraint or by force. The impulse must come gladly from within, not oppressively from without. Don’t lead under the pressure imposed by other ministers, people in the church, parents, educators, mega-church leaders, or the fear you may have of failure or the desire to merit favor with God. Those who serve as Elders must **want** to be Elders (see 1 Tim. 3:1). No one should ever be pressured into serving as an Elder. God wants our ungrudging service.

Why would anyone ever submit to pressure to serve as an Elder? What could possibly motivate a man to serve under compulsion? It may be his love or desire for the praise and approval of others. Or perhaps his desire is to avoid their disdain and rejection. He doesn’t really want to serve, but he sees it as a great opportunity to become famous and well-known and praised in public.

My sense is that ***the word translated “willingly” here in 1 Peter 5 is synonymous with the phrase “with joy” in Hebrews 13:17. God wants happy Elders and Pastors. He wants joyful leaders.*** He wants those who take great delight in caring for souls. And that joy must come first from their own personal satisfaction in Christ and then from seeing in the souls of those they lead a reflection of the goodness of God himself.

If spiritual leaders are always belly-aching and grumbling and resenting and “groaning” under the responsibility given to them to care for Christian men and women they should immediately resign. Our author’s point is that ***you will not gain any spiritual benefit in being led by men who don’t delight in giving themselves to your care and nourishment and protection.***

Peter also says they must not pastor God’s people “for shameful gain, but eagerly” (v. 2b). In other words, don’t do it for the money! Don’t do it because you think it will lead to riches. Don’t do it for the reason Judas Iscariot accepted the invitation to be treasurer among the apostles, namely, so he could steal from the financial resources. Peter doesn’t mean that church leaders shouldn’t be paid. Paul clearly says they should in 1 Timothy 5:17-18 and in several other texts. It isn’t “gain” that Peter denounces, but “shameful” gain. Cf. Titus 1:7

To pursue the office of an elder or pastor for “shameful gain” means thinking of ministry primarily in terms of whatever perks are associated with the job, be that long vacations or days off or retirement benefits or whatever other financial or material profit may come with the position. It means exploiting the authority you have to get ahead in life rather than thinking primarily about the importance of the sheep in your charge and the preciousness of the truth in God’s Word and the power of the Holy Spirit and the coming glory of the Chief Shepherd.

And I especially want you to notice what Peter says next: they must not “**domineer**” those in their charge but rather be “examples” to them (v. 3b). ***This word translated “domineer” is perhaps the closest thing we find in the NT to our concept of spiritual abuse.***

Peter here has in mind that sort of individual who exploits his position of authority to lord it over others, always exerting his power, always demanding rather than serving, always insisting on his way even when he knows he’s wrong, always flaunting his position.

How might you know if you are being domineered? How might you discern the presence of spiritual abuse in a Pastor or Elder? ***What makes a man a pastoral bully?*** I’ve given this a lot of thought, and here is my answer.

A man can “domineer” or “lord it over” his flock by intimidating them into doing what he wants done by holding over their heads the prospect of loss of stature and position in the church.

A pastor domineers whenever he threatens them with stern warnings of the discipline and judgment of God, even though there is no biblical basis for doing so.

A pastor domineers whenever he threatens them with public exposure of their sin should they not conform to his will and knuckle under to his plans.

A pastor domineers whenever he uses the sheer force of his personality to overwhelm others and coerce their submission.

A pastor domineers whenever he uses slick verbiage or eloquence to humiliate people into feeling ignorant or less competent than they really are.

A pastor domineers whenever he presents himself as super-spiritual (his views came about only as the result of extensive prayer and fasting and seeking God. How could anyone then possibly disagree with him?).

A pastor domineers whenever he exploits the natural tendency people have to elevate their spiritual leaders above the average Christian. That is to say, many Christians mistakenly think that a pastor is closer to God and more in tune with the divine will. The pastor often takes advantage of this false belief to expand his power and influence.

A pastor domineers whenever he gains a following and support against all dissenters by guaranteeing those who stand with him that they will gain from it, either by being brought into his inner circle or by some form of promotion.

A pastor domineers by widening the alleged gap between “clergy” and “laity.” In other words, he reinforces in them the false belief that he has a degree of access to God which they don’t.

Related to the former is the way some pastors will make it appear that they hold sway or power over the extent to which average lay people can experience God’s grace. He presents himself in subtle (not overt) ways as the mediator between the grace of God and the average believer. In this way he can secure their loyalty for his agenda.

He domineers by building into people a greater loyalty to himself than to God. Or he makes it appear that not to support him is to work at cross purposes with God.

He domineers by teaching that he has a gift that enables him to understand Scripture in a way they cannot. They are led to believe they cannot trust their own interpretive conclusions and must yield at all times to his.

He domineers by short circuiting due process, by shutting down dialogue and discussion prematurely, by not giving all concerned an opportunity to voice their opinion.

He domineers by establishing an inviolable barrier between himself and the sheep. He either surrounds himself with staff who insulate him from contact with the people or withdraws from the daily affairs of the church in such a way that he is unavailable and unreachable.

Related to the above is the practice of some in creating a governmental structure in which the senior pastor is accountable to no one, or if he is accountable it is only to a small group of very close friends and fellow elders who stand to profit personally from his tenure as pastor.

He domineers by viewing the people as simply a means to the achieving of his own personal ends. Ministry is reduced to exploitation. The people exist to “serve his vision” rather than he and all the people together existing to serve the vision of the entire church.

He domineers by making people feel unsafe and insecure should they desire to voice an objection to his proposals and policies. To question him is to become his enemy.

He domineers by convincing them, ever so subtly, that their spiritual welfare is dependent on his will. People are led to believe that their faith hinges (i.e., rises or falls) upon his life and decisions. To cross him is to cross God!

He domineers by misinterpreting and misapplying to himself the OT command: “Don’t touch God’s anointed.”

He domineers by building a culture of legalism rather than one of grace. People are thus motivated to embrace his authority and bow to his will based on extra biblical rules that supposedly are the criteria for true spirituality.

He domineers by arguing or acting as if his movements and decisions are ultimately determinative of the spiritual welfare of others (cf. 2 Cor. 1:23-25).

He domineers when he uses people as a means to his own satisfaction rather than enabling them to experience satisfaction in Christ alone.

I said that there are two ways in which spiritual leaders are to fulfill their ministry. First, they are to do it with joy. ***Second, they are also to do it with a heightened sense of accountability.*** Spiritual leaders “will have to give an account” for the way in which they keep watch over your souls, or more literally, “on behalf of your souls.” The verb translated “keep watch” literally means “to pass sleepless nights”! Thus, spiritual leaders in the local church are ***watchmen***. They must remain constantly alert to any threat that might come your way. Paul issued this exhortation and warning to the Elders of the church at Ephesus:

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:28-30).

By the way, did you notice here that Paul tells us that ***even Elders can go rogue?*** It is “from among your own selves,” that is to say, from among the Elders that on occasion someone will emerge who will speak twisted things and attempt to lead God’s people astray.

That is why spiritual leaders must pay close attention to the Word of God. They must be diligent to keep Christ central and supreme in the affections of all the people. They must labor in God’s grace to keep a close eye on each of you, to monitor your spiritual growth and to warn you when you tend to stray.

Here is the simple but sobering truth. One day every person who has served in spiritual leadership in this church will stand before Jesus Christ who will ask them: “Did you faithfully proclaim the whole counsel of God, or did you pick and choose what biblical doctrines you would defend, perhaps avoiding the ones that were difficult and potentially divisive? Did you warn my people about the threat of Satan? Did you expend yourself in caring for their hearts and their families and their relationship with me? Did you guard them from the destructive and deceitful ways of the world? What did you do to encourage the discouraged and to comfort those who suffered and to draw near to those who were lonely?”

I tremble at the thought of that day.

(4) What is the proper, biblical response of the people in a local church to their leaders? Our author mentions two things: “Obey” your leaders and “submit” to them.

The word translated “**obey**” literally means “to be persuaded.” It is used in Hebrews 2:13 and there means to “trust” and in Luke 11:22 means “to rely upon.” The idea is that the people are to listen to what their leaders say and embrace it. Of course, your obedience is ultimately governed by the Word of God and not by any human being. If I or any other Elder or Pastor should ever teach you something contrary to Scripture or counsel you to act in a way that is inconsistent with the truths of God’s Word, don’t do it! A Christian’s “obedience” or “trust” in their spiritual leaders is not absolute. We are not your “lord”. Only Christ is! Follow us only so far as we follow Christ. Imitate our lives only insofar as we imitate his. Listen to and heed our teaching only so far as it is consistent with the Bible.

The word “**submit**” means to yield and has the notion of willing compliance. The idea, then, here in v. 17 is that the members of a local church should be disposed in their hearts to trust their leaders. The disposition or inclination and spirit of their response to the Elders and Pastors should be one of trust, not suspicion.

But there are limits or boundaries to this exhortation. The Elders and Pastors of this church have no authority to dictate to you how to conduct yourself on matters where the Bible is silent. We have no right to tell you whom to marry or where to live or what job you should take. Our task is to provide you with loving wisdom and discernment and biblical guidance to help you make those decisions for yourself.

(5) What have we done at Bridgeway to ensure that authority and leadership do not deviate from the biblical standards for shepherds? In other words, what have we done at Bridgeway to safeguard our leadership of you, the people of this congregation? How are we seeking to avoid spiritual abuse and authoritarianism? I’ll mention five things.

First, we believe that the NT pattern for leadership in the local church is a **plurality** of Elders. Hebrews 13:17 says obey your “leaders” not your “leader”. No one person can commandeer this church or lead it in a direction that suits his beliefs and desires. This leads directly into my second point.

Second, as Senior Pastor I bear no more or greater authority than do any of the other Elders. I have one vote on the Board. I can be out-voted by the other men at any time. I can be fired by the other men at any time. I am wholly accountable to them for my preaching and the way I lead this staff.

Third, we have a process in place where the covenant members of Bridgeway are given the opportunity to nominate for consideration as Elder any man they believe is qualified. The covenant members also have the right and freedom to vocalize their concerns or opposition to any man who has been nominated as an Elder.

Fourth, our by-laws have recently been revised so that there must always be at least two more Lay Elders on the Board than there are staff Elders. There have been instances in other churches where Staff Elders conspired with the Senior Pastor to lead the church in a way that is decidedly unbiblical. There is nothing in the Bible that requires there be more Lay Elders than Staff Elders, but we believe this is wise in that it provides another check against any potential abuse of power.

Fifth, all of the Elders embrace a covenant of commitment to the members of this body, to lead them with humility and fidelity to the teaching of Scripture. You who are covenant members are aware of this, insofar as in our Blueprints class the Elders publicly pledge and commit themselves to you in covenant that they will love you and care for you and abide by the teaching of Scripture.

In conclusion, let it be said with utmost clarity, humility, and conviction: we who serve as your spiritual leaders do so *from* our joy and *for* your joy (2 Cor. 1:24) and in full assurance that one day we will stand before Christ himself to give an account for the way in which we cared for and pastored your souls.