**Core Seminar**

**Living as a Church**

**Class 8: Church Leadership**

*Submission for the Sake of Unity*

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

I. Introduction

Today we consider church leadership, and specifically the interaction between the leadership and the congregation. You’ll recall that a few weeks ago, we looked at the biblical offices of elders and deacons. In that class, the emphasis was on how God’s given us instruction on organizing ourselves in the church for His glory and our good. In contrast, today’s class on leadership addresses more the personal side of church leadership. Specifically, what we as church members can do to promote unity through our faithful submission and encouragement of leadership. While at the same time doing our job as the congregation to protect the church from serious doctrinal error.

***So let me begin this class by getting some of your thoughts on the following question. How can we, as church members, relate to our leaders in ways that promote unity and bring glory to God?***

Hebrews 13:17 tells us to “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.” These are strong words -- Obey. Submit – particularly in today’s egalitarian, individualistic culture.

But these words aren’t simply there to maintain order. We read that submission in the church is to our advantage. It’s through submission that we model the Godly humility that should characterize us. It’s through submission that we maintain unity in the midst of disagreement—demonstrating that our shared calling in Christ is more important than differences of opinion. Ultimately, our trust or confidence in those who are over us is much more than mere trust or confidence in men, for the very best of men will fail. Instead, it’s a confidence in Christ, who gives leaders to his church and works through them for our blessing.

So are we to become unthinking “yes men?” No: in the New Testament it’s actually the members of congregations and not their leaders alone who are held to account for unbiblical teaching in the church. Trusting the leadership doesn’t mean that we take the opinions of our elders as truth without any question. As one writer put it, “Christian freedom is eroded as lay people become more and more enamored with the decrees of elders and the commandments of men.” (Roger Beardmore, ed., *Shepherding God’s Flock* (Harrisonburg, Va: Sprinkle Publications, n.d.) 105-6.).

We’ll start today with what we can do *positively* to encourage the leadership of our church. Making their work a joy as we read in Hebrews 13. Then we’ll devote the rest of the class to examining how we should respond when we disagree with the leadership of our church. So let’s get to it!

**II. Make their Work a Joy**

One of the best things we can do to promote unity in our church is to help our leaders see their work as a God-given delight. Of course, this is complicated by the fact that both we and they are sinners. But recognizing all of that, our calling in Scripture as we saw a few minutes ago is to “Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

We should never underestimate the connection between a congregation’s attitude and their leaders’ ability. So many unhappy church situations would be resolved if congregations saw their leaders as partners in the church’s great calling to reflect the glory of Christ rather than as adversaries to be overcome. Leaders are human beings. They struggle with indecision. They find that the decisions they need to make exceed their wisdom and experience. They can struggle with insecurity. They can be hurt and discouraged in their work by unaware or insensitive church members. So often, we implicitly assume that our leaders must be perfect. Then when we see signs of their imperfection—either in sin, questionable decisions, or annoying characteristics—we feel empowered to deride their leadership.

Remember that *you* are the object of the leaders' careful watch. "They are keeping watch over your souls" Heb 13:17. God values our souls. Therefore, he appoints leaders to warn us of spiritual danger. So how do we help them do their jobs? Let me offer a few ideas. For your reference, these are based on a book by Wayne Mack and David Swavely called “Life in the Father’s House: A Member’s Guide to the Local Church.”

***1. Believe in Jesus Christ and walk in obedience***

The first point is obvious, but always worthy of mention. We can encourage our leaders by believing the gospel and by walking in obedience to God’s word. Think of John’s statement in 3 John: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” (v. 4).

There’s joy in seeing God’s hand working in members to conform them more in the image of Christ. There’s joy in seeing God's people use their gifts for the edification of the body. There’s joy in seeing members share the love of Christ with one another. There’s joy in seeing saints persevere in the faith through difficult times.

Of course, how will church leaders be encouraged by our delight and growth in Christ if we keep it to ourselves? Let the elders know what Christ is doing in your life! And when they ask how you’re doing, tell them. The encouraging—and the ways you need prayer and counsel.

***2. Cultivate and Preserve Unity in the Body***

Paul wrote about this to the Philippians when he said, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.” (Philippians 2:1-2). When the elders look for diaconal candidates, they’re looking for someone who acts as a “shock absorber” in the church. Someone who has a calming and clarifying effect in touchy situations. Well, that’s not something just for deacons; that’s something that we’re all called to do. After all, as James wrote, “peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.” (James 3:18). That kind of a congregation is a great encouragement to its leaders.

Now, how can we promote unity by being “shock absorbers?” Well, that’s what this whole course has been about so some of these suggestions will sound familiar. But it’s good to refresh our minds with these things.

* First, act toward others in love. Remember what Peter writes: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” (I Peter 4:8)

* Second, and along those lines, remember in the midst of disagreement that while our opinions are temporary, the people with whom we disagree are eternal. Be careful in the midst of disagreement that you not tempt a brother or sister to sin in anger or resentment.
* Third, encourage others to trust our leaders. Yes, our leaders aren’t perfect. But we should still be biased toward trust, not cynicism. When someone comes to us with a concern about the decision of a church leader, and we happen to know the reasoning behind that decision, we can explain it to him or her. If we don’t, or if a better explanation doesn’t alleviate their concern, we should strongly suggest that they speak directly with that church leader rather letting things fester.

***3. Pray for church leaders***

In II Corinthians 1:10-11, Paul writes, “On him [that is, Christ] we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.” This passage reminds us of two reasons why we should pray regularly for church leaders. First, they’ve been given a formidable task: to act in human weakness to shepherd a congregation of sinful people. But additionally, we should pray for church leaders so that we may rejoice and thank God when our prayers are answered. Then we’ll be awed by his power and experience the joy that is ours in Christ.

***4. Express your love for them***

Later in II Corinthians, Paul describes how this felt for him. He says: “For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.” (7:5-7).

What an amazing turnaround that Paul describes here. From “this body of ours had no rest” to “my joy was greater than ever.” Consider the fact that your encouragement might be God’s comfort to a leader who’s struggling with *dis*couragement. And if you’re *not* the effusive type who’s often making encouraging comments, your words might sink in even deeper.

***5. Seek their counsel and gratefully accept their reproof***

The advice of church leaders—whether solicited or unsolicited—should be a valuable part of our lives. Part of their job as shepherds is to identify and address problems in our lives before they become damaging. Two comments on this point: First, remember that for either counsel or reproof to be specific and well-conceived, our leaders must know what’s going on in our lives. It’s a good habit to make sure that at least one church leader is aware of what you’re struggling with, with what big decisions are on the horizon, and with what’s discouraging you. So talk regularly with church leaders—both the elders as well as church staff and small group leaders.

And of course, treat Godly rebuke as precious and worthy of careful consideration. As we read in Proverbs 9:8, “Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.” (ESV)

Pray that God would grow in us a maturity in Christ so that we’ll react positively to reproof when it’s offered rather than defensively.

***6. Believe the best about their character and decisions***

In I Thessalonians 5:12-13, Paul writes, “Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.”

Let me read you a paragraph from Mack and Swavely’s book that I mentioned earlier since it captures this point from scripture well.

“Though we are always prone to give ourselves ‘the benefit of the doubt,’ our sinful flesh has a strong tendency to be suspicious, skeptical, and even cynical toward others. This is especially true of church leaders. Many members make a regular habit of enjoying ‘roast preacher’ at their Sunday meal, and labels like ‘power trip’ are often carelessly tossed around when difficult decisions are made by leadership. But biblical love, according to 1 Corinthians 13:7, ‘believes all things, hopes all things.’ A loving member will assume the best about his leaders and trust them until some clear words or actions cause him legitimate concern about their wisdom or motives.”

We should trust our church leaders absent clear reasons to the contrary. And should work hard to not presume their motives unless there’s some objective basis for doing so. So often, we don’t get upset by *what’s* done but by *why* it’s done. Which, of course, is totally presumptive unless the person *tells* us why they did something.

So often, decisions are made about which we have incomplete knowledge. It’s dangerous to place much confidence in *our* opinion of what should’ve been done, without any conversation with church leaders. And it’s hazardous to presume sinful reasons for *why* things were done. Only God knows the heart of a man; we should never presume that we understand his motives.

This is a fitting place to discuss Godly criticism of our church leaders. Our leaders are human beings. They’re imperfect just like the rest of us. So we should remember to be humble, loving, and kind when we approach a leader with appropriate, constructive criticism. We should be cautious that we aren’t being overly critical or coming forward with criticism too frequently. But we should also remember that there are occasions which do call for Godly criticism and we should not abdicate our responsibility in this area. Remember this section of our church covenant:

We will walk together in brotherly love, as becomes the members of a Christian Church; exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require.

It applies to church leaders just as much as church members, doesn’t it? We should work hard to cultivate a culture where loving, thoughtful criticism is given carefully and invited freely. Remember Proverbs 25:11, “A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.”

So, six ways we can obey the Scriptural command to respect those who serve us as leaders -- particularly the elders—and to make their work a joy. (1) walk in obedience to Christ; (2) cultivate and preserve unity; (3) pray for church leaders; (4) express your love for them; (5) seek their counsel and accept their reproof; and (6) trust their character and decisions.

And I can’t end this section without saying how well this church body does this. The care and love that the members here have for their leaders is amazing and evident. Praise God for His grace in that!

***[Questions?]***

**III. What do we do when we disagree?**

The second part of our class is what we should do when we disagree with church elders. Let me just say at the outset that we’ll leave aside for a few weeks what we should do when an elder’s in sin.

Inevitably there will be times for all of us when our elders make decisions that we don’t agree with. Our response will go a long way toward either promoting unity or fostering dissent.

You may have seen a helpful diagram used in our church before, with one axis measuring how clear the answer to a particular question is, and the other measuring its seriousness. It’s in your handout and I’m going to refer to it for the rest of our discussion.

Starting in the upper left quadrant, we have those things that are **clear in Scripture but not serious**. Honestly, it’s hard to think of anything in this category. If God decides something is important enough to be clear on in the Bible, we’d better listen up.

Moving to the lower left, we have matters that are **neither serious nor clear**. For example, which brand of photocopier should we purchase? How long should our time of silence be after the service is completed? It may be good to have spirited discussions on these issues. But a church will do well to submit to the decisions of its leaders—who are probably delegating many of these questions to staff and other church members. If you have an opinion about such an issue, speak up—but never in a way that’s strident or divisive. Church unity is far more important than our preferences and opinions in these matters.

And now for the two quadrants on the right, where the questions get more challenging. What about issues that **are quite serious, but not at all clear**? Should we recognize someone as an elder or purchase a large piece of property? It’s in these situations that a congregation should listen carefully to their elders and give them the benefit of the doubt. This is why God has placed them over us.

Now, that doesn’t mean that some of these decisions are not difficult for us to accept. So how do we disagree in a Godly way about things where the answer is far from clear, but the implications for us as a church are serious? Here are a few suggestions:

**First**, we should recognize that we have an important role to play, and that is to *bring information to the elders*. The elders aren’t always aware of every need in the church, nor do they have perfect information. As a church, we believe this so strongly that we’ve written into our constitution the requirement that no church member may publicly speak against an elder or deacon candidate’s nomination unless they first speak with an elder. The reason for this is NOT that the elders are trying to control your vote. It’s simply that if there’s reason for *you* to be against this person’s nomination, it might well be good reason for the elders to reconsider their decision.

So, you can play a helpful role by bringing information to the elders’ attention. But then we should trust what they do with that information.

**Second**, if you disagree with a decision that the leadership has made, sit down and talk with them to understand their reasoning. The elders are willing and eager to do this. They see their spiritual care for the congregation as their highest duty in the church. So give yourself full opportunity to be persuaded by them, and approach the matter with a teachable spirit.

Perhaps you ask, what if I’m intimidated by the elders? How can I engage in this kind of conversation? Well, in the long-run, counter that feeling by getting to know the leadership better. In the short-term, you should probably talk with them anyway about your concern—though sometimes having a conversation first with another church leader—such as the leader of your small group—can be wise.

If even after talking to the elders you still disagree on a matter in this category, that’s OK. Every Christian is not going to agree on everything all the time. You can trust them and disagree all at the same time. This is really where the rubber hits the road with regard to following Hebrews 13:17. It is one thing to obey leaders when you are enthusiastic and think they have a great idea. It is another thing to submit to them when you disagree with their decision. In the second case, we submit because we are acting in faith. By faith we trust Christ himself to rule over us by his Word and Spirit and through His leaders.

And on this point, let me just say that this is what the elders are called to do when they have disagreement with each other. They are called to submit to the majority of the elders. There will be a time when every elder will be in the minority on a vote on a certain issue. In those circumstances, that elder is called to submit to the majority of elders, trusting that God is working through the elders in this vote. So, if one of the elders comes out on the short end of a vote, he needs to let that go. He doesn’t continue to lobby support after the vote or hold a grudge because the other elders didn’t see it his way. Our elders are doing their best to model submission to the congregation.

**Third**, be careful how you discuss this issue with others. For issues in this category of serious but unclear, our unity as a church will bring greater glory to Christ than the making of optimal decisions. Do not go behind the elders, lobbying support in the congregation, to try and overturn their decision. Do not deride the elder’s decision in your conversation with others and so risk making it more difficult for them to trust the elders. And if you speak about your view at a members’ meeting, do so with grace, kindness and humility. How many times have we heard about members’ meetings in churches boiling over to shouting matches resulting in hurt and angry feelings.

Finally, when others attempt to deride leadership in conversations with you, explain to them that they should talk directly to the elders if they have a concern. That there are good and bad ways to critique those decisions.

Now let’s consider the last category on the matrix where the issues are **clear and also serious**. This is where the congregation becomes the final backstop against poor decisions by the elders. It is on these issues of discipline and doctrine where the apostles appeal in the New Testament for the *church* to act. Would the church at Corinth continue to accept in its fellowship a man in serious sin? Would the churches of Galatia add to the requirements of the gospel? Here the congregation must act. At this point, the reputation of Christ will be better served by our sticking to the right answer than through visible unity. But even here, questions abound. How would this action take place? And how can we fulfill our biblical role as a congregation while caring tenderly for the reputation of Christ in our midst and the souls of those with whom we disagree?

The way this would happen is that the congregation would vote down the motion in question by the elders, again *if that motion is clearly unbiblical*. In some situations, they should also call for the resignation of the elders. But throughout this, a church must keep several things in mind.

First, a church is not a place for secret campaigning and canvassing. If a member of the congregation feels that the elders are crossing a line of discipline or doctrine, he or she should be clear with the elders what they are doing. Even as they speak with other church members about the best course of action.

Second, if there is an issue in this category where the elders are advocating a clearly unbiblical position, this is a good time to seek the counsel of Godly leaders from other churches. Preferably those who know this church and its elders well. Simply because the congregation is the final authority on matters of discipline and doctrine in no way insinuates that they should not look elsewhere for Godly counsel.

Third, we must take great care to protect the name of Christ in the midst of what may well be a heartbreaking disagreement. Sometimes you read a story in the paper that church members have contacted outside media about a disagreement in their church -- presumably to rally support and place pressure on their opponents. How appalling. How worldly. The apostle Paul lambasted the church at Corinth for taking disagreements between church members to civil court. Imagine how he would have reacted at the trumpeting of the disagreement of an entire church to the world at large. More importantly, though, think about how God views such tactics. The reputation of Christ must be paramount in our minds. We must take no action, speak no word—regardless of the circumstances—that would ever defame Christ’s name in the eyes of the world around us. Even more than the unity of our church, Christ is to be our joy and our treasure.

As we look at this last category of disagreement, I pray that our church will never have to walk such a difficult road. But should that day come, let’s take hope in the amazing way that he’s persevered us as a body through three different centuries. And let’s rejoice that God’s purposes will triumph regardless of our behavior.

***[Questions?]***

**IV. Conclusion**

I’ll close with the words of an elderly pastor—Edward Griffin—speaking to his church on his retirement. These are words that we will do well to heed in regard to all those God has given us as leaders.

“For your own sake, and your children’s sake, cherish and revere him whom you have chosen to be your pastor. Already he loves you; and he will soon love you as ‘bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh.’ It will be equally your duty and your interest to make his labors as pleasant to him as possible. Do not demand too much. Do not require visits *too* frequent. Should he spend, in this way, half of the time which some demand, he must wholly neglect his studies, if not sink early under the burden. Do not report to him all the unkind things which may be said against him; nor frequently, in his presence, *allude* to opposition, if opposition should arise. Though he is a minister of Christ, consider that he has the feelings of a man.” (Edward Griffin, “A Tearful Farewell from a Faithful Pastor,” 1809). May we so bring glory to Christ through such care of our leaders.