

# Practical Principles for Church Leaders and Church Members from Hebrews 13

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## Abstract

In the final chapter of his letter, the writer of Hebrews charges his hearers to remember, imitate, obey, and submit to their leaders. From these exhortations we can deduce what he expected from both the church leaders and members of the local church to whom he wrote. In this study some of the expectations of the writer of Hebrews are spelled out, and from them practical principles are given for church leaders and members today.

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## Introduction

In the final chapter of his letter-sermon<sup>1</sup> the writer of Hebrews gives a few final commands. Among other things, he charges his hearers to remember, imitate, obey, and submit to their leaders:

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. (Heb 13:7)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The writer of Hebrews calls his own work a “word of exhortation” (*logos tēs paraklēseōs*) in 13:22. A comparison with Acts 13:15, where the same phrase is used, as well as extensive research on Jewish-Hellenistic sermons in early Christian circles, has led many scholars to accept that Hebrews is a Christian Jewish-Hellenistic sermon with a letter ending. Cf. Gareth L. Cockerill (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 11–15) for a good discussion in this regard. Consequently, along with Cockerill, in this article Hebrews is referred to as a sermon, and the addressees as hearers.

<sup>2</sup> Unless indicated, the Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb 13:17)

From these commands, and from the words in Hebrews 13:7–9 and 13:17–19, we can deduce what the writer of Hebrews expected from both the church leaders and members of the particular local church to whom he wrote. In this study some of his expectations are spelled out, and from them practical principles are given for church leaders and members today.

## **1. *The Framework of These Exhortations***

In order to deduce what the writer of Hebrews expected from both the church leaders and the members it is important to keep the overall message of Hebrews in view, as well as the place of these exhortations within the sermon.

### **1. *The Overall Message of Hebrews***

Throughout his sermon the writer implores his hearers to persevere in the faith. Because of external circumstances (some form of persecution; cf. 10:32–34), some of the hearers' faith has deteriorated to such an extent that they have begun to be apathetic towards God's revelation in his Son, and he warns them of the dangerous course they have taken by highlighting the excellence of this revelation and the excellence of the Son himself through whom God gave this revelation (cf. 1:1–4). He is the eternal Son of God who became man, suffered, and died to be man's unique and perfect high priest. Consequently, one with an unbelieving, unfaithful, and nonchalant attitude toward God's revelation in his Son can expect nothing less than God's judgment and punishment. The hearers should therefore respond all the more with reverent faith and obedience to what God says through his Son (cf. 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; 12:14–29).

### **2. *The Place of Hebrews 13 within the Sermon***

Hebrews 13 can be divided into two pericopes, namely 13:1–21 and 13:22–25. The former is about service and sacrifices pleasing to God, while the latter contains the sermon's final greetings.<sup>3</sup> A closer examination of 13:1–21

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<sup>3</sup> William L. Lane (*Hebrews 9–13*, WBC 47B [Dallas: Word, 1991], 497), among others, makes a strong case that although these final greetings were almost certainly part of the original book of Hebrews, they were probably added when the book as a whole was sent via courier to the hearers. This means that the writer of Hebrews closes his sermon with the benediction in 13:20–21.

makes it clear that verses 1–6 contain some general and shorter exhortations (regarding brotherly love, hospitality, and marriage), while verses 7–19 give specific instructions regarding leaders and going “outside the camp,”<sup>4</sup> while verses 20–21 contain a benediction and doxology. In 13:7–19, three paragraphs can be distinguished:

- In 13:7–9 the writer charges his hearers to remember their leaders and affirms the reality of Christ’s eternal faithfulness with a warning against strange teachings.
- In 13:10–16 the writer for the last time touches on Jesus’s high priestly sacrifice, in this case with specific reference to the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) from Leviticus 16.<sup>5</sup> He explains that as Jesus suffered outside the gate (of Jerusalem), believers should be willing to “go outside” and bear the reproach he endured, continually offering up sacrifices to God through him.<sup>6</sup>
- In 13:17–19 the writer charges his hearers to obey, submit to, and pray for their leaders.

From this analysis it appears that verses 7–9 and 17–19 embrace and emphasize the climactic verses 10–16. This implies that although they concern charges for the hearers concerning their leaders, the writer’s focus is still on Christ (as depicted in 13:10–16). Consequently, the exhortations he gives in verses 7–9 and 17–19 should be viewed as exhortations given to the hearers (and by implication to their leaders) *on the basis of* the sacrifice of Christ. In other words, the exhortations concerning leaders are not things church members ought to do, but things they must do in obedience to Christ.

This conclusion fits well with the overall message of Hebrews, namely, that the hearers should respond with reverent faith and obedience to what God says through his Son.

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<sup>4</sup> The unity of 13:7–19 is confirmed by the inclusio formed by “leaders” (*hēgoumenoi*; 13:7, 17) and “behavior/conduct” (*anastrophē/anastrephō*; 13:7, 18).

<sup>5</sup> The specific prescript from Leviticus 16:27 that the writer of Hebrews refers to is that the bodies of the animals whose blood the high priest brought into the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement should be burned outside the camp. The characteristic terms that bind 13:10–16 together all have to do with sanctuary and sacrifice (e.g., altar, tent, serve, blood, sin, holy place(s), high priest, sacrifice, and sanctify).

<sup>6</sup> The phrase “outside the camp/gate” (*exō tēs parembolēs/pylēs*) runs like a refrain through 13:11–13.

## II. The Meaning of the Word “Leader”

From our modern-day context it is important to note that “leader” in Hebrews 13 is not the common New Testament word used to describe a pastor, elder, or evangelist. The word here is *hēgoumenos*, derived from the verb *hēgeomai*. Originally the verb referred to the action of going before, leading the way, or guiding. In ancient texts it is used, among other things, for guidance in music, war, and politics.<sup>7</sup> In the Septuagint it is mostly used to refer to military leaders or leaders of people.<sup>8</sup> The second usage of *hēgeomai*, which originated at a later stage, indicates the action of thinking, considering, or regarding.<sup>9</sup>

In Hebrews, as throughout the New Testament, both senses of *hēgeomai* are found: it refers either to guiding (Heb 13:7, 17, 24) or thinking (Heb 10:29; 11:11, 26). When the verb *hēgeomai* is used to refer to someone who guides or leads, it is always found in the present participle form, namely *hēgoumenos*. Outside of Hebrews the participle *hēgoumenos* is used five times: for a leader of men (Luke 22:26), for a leader of a nation (Matt 2:6; Acts 7:10), for a religious leader (Acts 15:22), and for a chief speaker (*ho hēgoumenos tou logou*, Acts 14:12).

From the context of Hebrews 13 it is clear that *hēgoumenoi* refers to the religious leaders of the local church (Heb 13:7, 17, 24).<sup>10</sup> Although it is difficult to deduce much concerning the specific status and function of these leaders, the context of Hebrews 13 makes the following clear:

- The distinction in verse 24 to greet “all your leaders and all the saints” indicates that the congregation was “divided into those who lead and those who are led.”<sup>11</sup>
- The writer’s charge in verse 7 that his hearers should “remember” their leaders indicates that they were well known to church members.
- The writer seems to distinguish between leaders who have already passed away (7)<sup>12</sup> and the current leaders of the congregation (17).

<sup>7</sup> Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 763 (hereafter LSJ).

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Büchsel, “ἡγέομαι κτλ.,” *TDNT* 2:907.

<sup>9</sup> BDAG 434.

<sup>10</sup> This title for church leaders is also found in 1 Clement 1:3 and 21:6, a document that like Hebrews is traditionally associated with Rome. Cf. William L. Lane (*Hebrews 1–8*, WBC 47A [Dallas: Word, 1991], lviii).

<sup>11</sup> *TDNT* 2:907. Büchsel states in a footnote that the interest of the writer of Hebrews in these leaders is “ethical and religious rather than ecclesiastical.”

<sup>12</sup> Various words and phrases in 13:7 seem to indicate that these specific leaders have already

- The leaders are called “those who spoke to you the word of God” in verse 7. That this is the first statement made regarding their ministry seems to indicate that this was their most important function.
- They were examples in conduct and faith, as is clear from the charge the writer gives his hearers to imitate them (7b).
- They had a certain authority and consequently status, as indicated by the exhortation to the hearers to obey and submit to them (17a).
- They kept watch over the church’s spiritual life and did so with the knowledge that they would one day have to give an account of this to God (17b).
- The writer’s exhortation in verse 18 to pray for “us” makes it clear that he viewed himself as one of the leaders.<sup>13</sup>

With the amount of data available, it is difficult to come to more specific conclusions.<sup>14</sup> In light of this, we should be careful not to equate these leaders with later church offices or modern-day ecclesiastical positions. But the fact that they “spoke the word of God,” a task biblically and traditionally connected to any leader of the Old Testament people or New Testament church, makes it difficult not to see parallels between the past and the present.

### III. *What the Writer of Hebrews Expected from the Church Leaders*

In light of these considerations concerning “leaders,” attention can now be turned to the specific expectations the writer had regarding church leaders. Three practical principles can be deduced:

#### 1. *Speak the Word of God (13:7a)*

The first qualification the writer looked for in church leaders concerns speaking the word of God. This can be deduced from verse 7: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God.”

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passed away: the hearers are commanded to “remember” their leaders; these leaders “spoke” (past tense) the word of God; the hearers are commanded to “consider the outcome of their way of life.”

<sup>13</sup> Paul Ellingworth (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 725) is almost certainly correct when he argues that the switch between “us/we” and “I” in 13:18 and 13:19 makes it unlikely that “we” is an epistolary plural. Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 396. Contrast Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 402.

<sup>14</sup> Attridge (*Hebrews*, 391) cautiously states that these leaders “are certainly unlikely to have been monarchical bishops, and some sort of presbyterial group is probably involved.”

The verb rendered “speak” (*laleō*) refers to the simple act of talking.<sup>15</sup> What these leaders talked about is “the word of God,” probably meaning that they spoke “the word spoken by God.”<sup>16</sup> Reference to “speaking the word of God” is found elsewhere in the New Testament, especially in the book of Acts (4:29, 31; 8:25; 11:19; 13:46; 16:32; cf. Phil 1:14). In these parallels the act of “speaking the word of God” refers to the preaching of the gospel. In Hebrews 13:7 it seems that it should be interpreted in the same way: the brief confession in verse 8 (“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”; cf. Rev 1:4) hints that the “word of God” that the leaders spoke had to do with Christ. The church leaders in their “speaking the word of God” proclaimed the timeless truth about Jesus Christ to the members of the local church.<sup>17</sup>

However, this does not mean that the leaders did not also proclaim the Old Testament Scriptures to their hearers. Throughout Hebrews the emphasis is on the one word of God that came in the two stages of salvation history (1:1–2a; cf. 4:12; 5:12–13; 6:1, 5). Also it is clear that throughout the letter the writer interprets the New Testament message in light of God’s Old Testament revelation, which makes it probable that the leaders spoke God’s one Old and New Testament word to the members.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, this “word of God” is indirectly contrasted in 13:9 with “diverse and strange teachings” that could lead the hearers astray. From the context it seems that these teachings had to do with “foods,” probably referring to traditions that became obsolete with Christ’s sacrificial offering.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the “word of God” the leaders spoke had to do solely with

<sup>15</sup> Although the verb *laleō* in ancient Greek originally referred to informal communication like chattering or babbling, in later Greek literature it is mostly equated with *legō*. Cf. BDAG 582.

<sup>16</sup> Within the phrase *ton logon tou theou* the genitive *tou theou* can either be a subjective genitive (“the word spoken by God”) or a genitive of origin (“the word coming from God”). The possibilities overlap considerably. Within the context the explanation of *tou theou* as a subjective genitive fits better. The remark of Craig R. Koester (*Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 36 [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001], 566) in this sense is very fitting: “Hebrews affirms that God spoke to the community (1:2), but not in an unmediated way. Human messengers brought the divine message that engendered a community of faith (2:3–4).”

<sup>17</sup> In a sense a parallel is found between the leaders who spoke the word of God to the hearers in 13:7 and the reference to those who attested “such a great salvation” to them in 2:3.

<sup>18</sup> Contrast Gerhard Kittel (“λέγω κτλ.,” *TDNT* 4:113), who says that “it is hard to say whether those who have the rule have spoken and taught the OT Word, the NT Word, or both in one.”

<sup>19</sup> Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 708) comes to a similar conclusion by doing exegesis of the word “foods” in Hebrews 9:10—the only other occurrence of the word in Hebrews. Cf. Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 695–96.

Jesus Christ and not with obsolete teachings far removed from the truth of the gospel.<sup>20</sup>

In light of this we can conclude that the writer expected church leaders to speak the word of God, namely to proclaim God's unique<sup>21</sup> Old and New Testament word with its timeless truth about Jesus Christ and how salvation is found in him alone. Proclaiming the word was their most important function and specific task, and it is what distinguished them as church leaders. It does not strain the interpretation to say that the word proclaimed was most probably the single source of their authority.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. *An Example in Conduct and Faith (13:7b)*

The second principle that the writer expected of church leaders is that they should be examples in conduct and faith, as in verse 7b: "Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." Although this primarily aims at church members and concerns the kind of behavior expected of them, it is not difficult to imagine what the writer also expected of their leaders.

The Greek word translated "way of life" (*anastrophē*) is "conduct expressed according to certain principles,"<sup>23</sup> and it can be translated as behavior, way of life, or conduct. This noun refers to the leaders' moral behavior, namely their metaphorical "walk" according to certain principles. That he exhorts his hearers to consider the outcome of their leaders' way of life implies that the conduct of the leaders was blameless, as was to be expected.

Furthermore, in Hebrews 13:7 the writer seems to refer to former church leaders who have already passed away. This implies not only that the congregation's previous leaders had been excellent examples to the end of their lives, but also that he expects the same lifelong blameless example from the current leaders of this church.<sup>24</sup>

This expectation is also found in his request for prayer in verse 18: "Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act

<sup>20</sup> Although the commentary of James Moffatt (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ICC [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1924], 231) is outdated, his words still ring true: "Human leaders may pass away, but Jesus Christ, the supreme object and subject of their faithful preaching, remains, and remains the same; no novel additions to his truth are required, least of all innovations which mix up his spiritual religion with what is sensuous and material."

<sup>21</sup> The uniqueness of the word of God that the leaders proclaimed is also emphasized indirectly by the contrast between the multiple "strange teachings" and the singular "word of God."

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 526.

<sup>23</sup> BDAG 73.

<sup>24</sup> The reference to the "outcome" (*ekbasis*) of their way of life does not necessarily mean that these leaders died as martyrs, as some commentators have suggested. What it does indicate is that these leaders remained faithful to their way of life to the very end.

honorably in all things.” The phrase “to act honorably” contains the verb form (*anastrephō*) of the noun translated in verse 7 as “conduct” (*anastrophē*). As in the case of previous leaders, the writer is convinced that the current leaders, himself included, were conducting themselves soundly—as they should—and that they should continue in this way. The former leaders had also been examples of faith. The verb “imitate” (*mimeomai*) in verse 7 refers to the action of using something or someone as a model to be imitated, emulated or followed.<sup>25</sup> Current leaders—and by implication future ones—like the past departed, are to be examples of faith.

Church leaders should therefore be blameless examples in both conduct and faith; they should practice what they preach, as the previous leaders had done, by obeying the gospel they preached.

### 3. Keep Watch over the Church’s Spiritual Well-being (13:17b)

Verse 17 is an exhortation to the hearers: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” A third principle can be deduced from this: they are to keep watch over the church’s spiritual well-being.

The verb translated as “keeping watch” (*agrypneō*) literally means to lie awake.<sup>26</sup> In the New Testament the verb is only used figuratively for being alert or vigilant.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, all three other occurrences in the New Testament have a nuance of eschatological vigilance (cf. Mark 13:33; Luke 21:36; Eph 6:18). From the context of Hebrews 13 it is clear that it has the same nuance here. The leaders keep watch over church members’ souls with the knowledge that they will one day “have to give an account.” The combination of the verb (*apodidōmi*) and noun (*logos*) in this phrase implies “paying (out),” in the sense of fulfilling a responsibility. It can be translated “to give an account,” by implication to God (ESV; NIV; KJV; cf. Matt 12:36; Luke 16:2; Acts 19:40; 1 Pet 4:5).<sup>28</sup> The souls of believers are entrusted to them by God, and one day they will have to give an account of their keeping watch to him. They therefore have a “divinely given pastoral authority and responsibility.”<sup>29</sup>

This makes it clear that the phrase “keeping watch over your souls” refers to the leaders’ vigilant, eschatological concern for the spiritual well-being

<sup>25</sup> BDAG 651.

<sup>26</sup> LSJ 16.

<sup>27</sup> BDAG 16.

<sup>28</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 57.153 (hereafter L&N).

<sup>29</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 555. In the Greek text this responsibility is further highlighted by the emphatic pronoun *autoi* (“they themselves”) at the beginning of 13:17b.

and eternal welfare of the members in their care.<sup>30</sup> The overall context of Hebrews shows that leaders have an urgent and challenging calling, since some of the members in their care threaten to become apostate. No wonder this is one of the qualities the writer expected of church leaders.

#### **IV. What the Writer of Hebrews Expected from Church Members**

Keeping in mind the specific expectations the writer had for church leaders, his expectations for members are easy to see. Four practical principles become clear:

##### **1. Remember What Your Leaders Teach You (13:7a)**

The first principle that the writer looked for in church members relating to their leaders is in verse 7: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God.” He expected them to remember their leaders—and to keep on remembering them.<sup>31</sup>

The verb “remember” (*mnēmoneuō*) means “to recall information from memory, but without necessarily the implication that persons have actually forgotten.”<sup>32</sup> But what should they remember concerning their deceased leaders? The parallel “remember” (*mnēmoneuō*) and “consider” (*anatheōreō*) in verse 7 indicates that they should remember their leaders’ example of conduct and faith. This is probably the primary meaning intended by the writer of Hebrews.<sup>33</sup> But another secondary interpretation is that they should remember what their leaders taught them from Scripture. The arguments for this interpretation are the following:

- The fact that the members are explicitly exhorted to consider the leaders’ example of conduct and faith in verse 7b makes the interpretation of the exhortation “remember your leaders’ conduct and faith” superfluous.
- The phrase “those who spoke to you the word of God” is closer to the exhortation “remember your leaders” and syntactically dependent on it.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 385. Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 723) fittingly states: “No separation of soul and body is implied, but the author’s concern is clearly the spiritual good of the community.”

<sup>31</sup> The present imperative “remember” (*mnēmoneuete*) indicates a command to continuous action.

<sup>32</sup> L&N 29.7.

<sup>33</sup> This is the interpretation of Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 702) and Cockerill (*Hebrews*, 690), among others.

<sup>34</sup> The relative pronoun *hoitines* has *tōn hēgoumenon* as its antecedent.

If this secondary interpretation is accepted, members are called to continually recall what their previous leaders taught and what their current leaders are teaching them from the word of God, because the word of God never gets outdated. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8), and it is he who gives permanence and continuity to the congregation. Their previous leaders proclaimed exactly the same Christ as their current leaders. Remembering is thus all the more urgent in light of the “diverse and strange teachings” that threaten them.

### **2. Imitate Your Leaders’ Conduct and Faith (13:7b)**

The second principle is that they should imitate their leaders’ example of conduct and faith. This is clear from verse 7b: “Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”

Much has already been said about this, and we can summarize: The writer expected leaders past and present to be blameless and sound examples in conduct and faith to the end of their lives; he expected members to imitate or emulate their leaders’ conduct and faith—and to do this until the end (cf. 6:12).<sup>35</sup>

### **3. Obey and Submit to Your Leaders (Heb 13:17a)**

The third principle is found in verse 17: “Obey your leaders and submit to them.” The writer directs attention from previous leaders to their current leaders. Both the verbs “obey” (*peithō*) and “submit” (*hypeikō*) are found in the semantic field of obedience,<sup>36</sup> and the form of both implies a continuous action.<sup>37</sup>

The reasons for continuous obedience and submission are twofold. The first reason is stated explicitly in verse 17: leaders keep watch over the church’s spiritual well-being (17b). God has appointed them for this and entrusts the souls of believers to them. If members do not respect their leaders as they keep vigilant watch over the congregation, with all that it entails, they are disobedient to God.<sup>38</sup> Stated positively: by submitting they show obedience to God.

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<sup>35</sup> Again, the present participle “consider” (*anatheōrountes*) and the present imperative “imitate” (*mímeisthe*) in 13:7b indicate exhortations to continuous action.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. L&N 36.12; 36.18; Timothy M. Willis (“Obey your Leaders’: Hebrews 13 and Leadership in the Church,” *Restoration Quarterly* 36 [1994]: 323) makes a strong case for translating 13:17 as “be persuaded by your leaders [in what they teach] and yield yourselves [to them, because you have been persuaded by what they teach].” He argues that these leaders wielded traditional authority, and not a “legal-rational” type of authority.

<sup>37</sup> Both “obey” (*peithō*) and “submit” (*hypeikō*) are present imperatives.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *TDNT* 2:907.

Secondly, from the context of verse 7 it is clear that church members should submit to their leaders because they preach the authoritative word of God. Leaders do not have any authority in themselves; the word of God is their authority. Since they proclaim God's word, they are proclaiming the authority of God with the authority of God. Authority "derives directly from the authority inherent in the word of preaching";<sup>39</sup> it "rests on the proclamation of God's word as fulfilled in Christ (1:1–4)";<sup>40</sup> "heeding and yielding to the leaders means adhering to the word of God that they speak."<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, members are called to obey their leaders and to submit to them in obedience to God and Christ in Scripture—unless, of course, they promote conduct and confession in conflict with the revelation of God.<sup>42</sup> If the members are obedient, verse 17 continues, their leaders are able to keep watch "with joy and not with groaning." For ministry to be hard labor "would be of no advantage to you." This euphemism makes the dreadful consequences of unfaithfulness perfectly clear.

#### **4. Pray for Your Leaders (vv. 18–19)**

The fourth and final principle is found in verse 18: "Pray for us." Again, the form of this verb in Greek indicates an exhortation to continuous action.<sup>43</sup> Believers should pray for their leaders, and keep on doing so, because they are not only speaking the word of God (13:7a) but also setting an example in conduct and faith (13:7b), keeping watch over the church's spiritual well-being (13:17), and showing their desire to act honorably in all things (13:18).<sup>44</sup>

### **V. Practical Principles for Church Leaders and Church Members Today**

Now that we have seen the expectations of the writer for both leaders and believers in the local church to whom he wrote, it is fitting to conclude with some practical pointers for today.

<sup>39</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 555.

<sup>40</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 690.

<sup>41</sup> Koester, *Hebrews*, 578.

<sup>42</sup> As Koester (*Hebrews*, 578) states: "Hebrews assumes that the leaders' integrity is not in question."

<sup>43</sup> The exhortation, "pray" (*proseuchesthe*), is once more a present imperative.

<sup>44</sup> As indicated above, the writer's exhortation to pray for "us" makes it clear that he viewed himself as one of their leaders. From the exhortation to pray for their leaders in general in verse 18 flows the personal request of the writer of Hebrews for prayer in verse 19: "I urge you the more earnestly to do this [i.e. pray] in order that I may be restored to you the sooner."

### **1. *What's in a Name?***

First and foremost, it is vital that the description “church leader” be renewed in the sense of Hebrews 13. They are not called to lord it over the flock or to enforce authority. Rather they are called “to go before,” “to lead the way,” and “to guide,” in service and ministry, showing the right direction by administering with the authority of Christ. They are not more important than others; they only have the specific calling and function to lead.

Equally important, Scripture makes it clear that leaders can only show members the way in service and ministry; they cannot do service and ministry for them. They do not believe, hope, trust, or work in the place of the members. They simply lead the way for others to follow. The age-old saying is also true: “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.” Therefore, members should reconsider their calling to service and ministry based on the input they receive from their leaders (Eph 4:11–12).

### **2. *Proclaiming the Word and Remembering It***

The primary task of any church leader was, is, and will be to proclaim the word of God. It is the most important characteristic of any leader’s ministry, and the single source of their authority, ministering the authority of God through his word (cf. 2 Tim 3:16–17). Moreover, the focus of proclamation of the one Old and New Testament word of God is always the timeless truth about Jesus Christ, and salvation in him alone. Proclamation shuns focus on arcane teachings far removed from the truth of the gospel.

On the other hand, believers are to continually do their utmost to remember their leaders’ teaching of the word, not forgetting the teaching of Scripture, but treasuring it in their hearts. God’s word is never outdated; rather, it edifies for growth in the likeness of Christ, to the glory of God (cf. Rom 8:29).

### **3. *Examples and Imitators***

Together with proclamation of the word, the secondary task of church leaders is to be examples of conduct and faith. They are to excel as people who glorify God by living blamelessly as he instructs and being examples of a godly walk. And this they should do continually to the end of their lives. They are also to be examples of faith, trusting fully in God and encouraging others to do likewise. In difficult circumstances they are to be the first to call others to trust.

Church members, on the other hand, should not only remember the proclamation of their leaders, but also imitate their blameless conduct and faith. This they will and should do if their leaders imitate Christ, and they themselves will become imitators of Christ (1 Cor 11:1).

#### ***4. Watching and Obedience***

As well as proclaiming the word and being examples, leaders are to keep watch over the church's spiritual well-being, vigilantly ensuring that it grows in faith and seeks to glorify God. Theirs is the divinely given pastoral responsibility to ensure that no one drifts away from the faith, but perseveres to the end. This they do with the sober realization that they will one day give account of their keeping watch to God (Jas 3:1).

Members are to obey and submit to their leaders (1 Cor 16:15–16; 1 Thess 5:12), not because they have authority in themselves, but because they are appointed by God to keep watch over the church, and they derive authority from proclamation of his word. Members should therefore do everything in their power to ensure that their leaders live the ministry joyfully, as a privilege. They are to seek to make their ministry easy, not a trial, by their receptiveness, but with an exception: they cannot follow when and if they promote conduct or belief opposed to God's revelation in Scripture (Acts 5:29)

#### ***5. Praying for the Leadership***

Finally, believers are to continually pray for their leaders because they are not working for money, social standing, or the like, but heartily "as for the Lord and not for men" (Col 3:23).