

BaptistWay: Church leaders

July 31, 2015

- *The BaptistWay lesson for August 16 focuses on Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:17-18.*

As a pastor, writing a lesson in which I tell you, the reader, you should obey your pastor gives me more pause than the commas do this sentence. Thankfully (for me), here we are using the NIV, which softens the blow in Hebrews 13:17 with “have confidence in” and “submit to” rather than “obey,” as translated in the ESV, KJV and NASB.

The *Greek Interlinear Bible*, [available free online](#), helps us in understanding passages like Hebrews 13:17-18.

Defer to our spiritual leaders

Hebrews 13:17-18, as read in the *Greek Interlinear Bible*, indicates we should defer to our spiritual leaders, allowing ourselves to be persuaded by them, because they are staying vigilant over our souls and must give account for us.

Two questions arise from such a statement. One, who are these spiritual leaders? Two, what if they lapse in their vigilance?

F.F. Bruce provides an answer to the first question in his commentary on Hebrews. In contrast to local spiritual leaders who have dedicated their lives to caring for a particular group of Christians in one location, Bruce refers to “visitors ... more attractive and interesting ... than ... local leaders,” who bring to us “new and esoteric doctrines.” When we become bored with and grow contemptuous of our local leaders, we may be tempted to bend to new—other—teaching from more attractive personalities.

Considering together Bruce's commentary and what we read in the *Greek Interlinear Bible*, we can understand the charge to defer to our spiritual leaders as instructing us to be guided by the leadership of those who dedicate their day-to-day lives to us, giving it more weight than teaching and leadership coming in from outside the local context.

We might wonder how to apply such instruction to traveling evangelists, revivalists and musicians and to "celebrity Christians" we can watch any time we like on the Internet and whose books sell well in any bookstore ... oh, and to pastors who write Bible lessons for BaptistWay Press and *The Baptist Standard*.

Local vs. visiting teachers

Rather than allowing personality and position to sway our thinking, we should consider spiritual teaching more slowly, doing so within our local community of faith. We should honor our local spiritual leaders' insights into what "visitors" teach us, whether these visitors be guest speakers in our churches or personalities invited into our private lives via the Internet. We should pay attention to who endorses these "visitors" and why. We should "test the spirits" (1 John 4:1), which is not to be confused with "taking a pull."

As to the second question—what happens when our spiritual leaders lapse in their vigilance—we can say first they will give account to the Lord for their leadership. If that is not enough to encourage vigilance, the community of believers in response to such abdication may find new leadership and should do so in a way that honors all involved "out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21).

How do we measure abdication? Or more positively, how do we help our leaders maintain vigilance?

A quick answer is to follow the advice of the writer of Hebrews: "Pray for

us” (Hebrews 13:18). We really do want to do the right thing. We really do want to lead well.

Appreciate your leaders

Another quick answer is to follow Paul’s advice in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13. Show your appreciation for the hard work of your spiritual leaders—assuming they are working hard—by living at peace with each other. In other words, our ability to live in Christian fellowship with one another makes joy of the work of our spiritual leaders. Sounds simple, anyway.

A more involved answer is found in Ephesians 4:11-16. Paul indicates spiritual leadership is a grace given to us by Jesus (Ephesians 4:7). We can define “grace” as a gift Jesus gives us to help us be who God made us to be. It’s a good thing—a really good thing.

To help us be who God made us to be, Jesus gave us apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (4:11). These can be defined later. What is important for this study is that we are to honor these spiritual leaders in trust that Jesus’ voice is being mediated through them.

And we can test whether or not Jesus’ voice is being mediated through our spiritual leaders by measuring our fullness in Christ (4:12-13).

- Are we being equipped for works of service?
- Is the body of Christ—local and beyond—being built up?
- Are we more united in Christ than divided?

We are more united in Christ, built up, and ready for works of service when our thinking and emotions are not easily swayed by each new thing we read and hear and, we can speak the truth in love (4:14-15).

Spiritual leaders worthy of their calling equip us to balance truth in love, not setting aside love in order to be right or truth in order to be liked. Such leaders are few. I hope to be one some day.