

# Churches' Submission --- to --- *Their Pastors*



Andrew Fuller  
(1754-1815)

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# Churches' Submission to Their Pastors

*“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.”*

—Hebrews 13:17

I think it is unusual for ministers in their ordinary labors to speak often on their people's obligations toward them. They probably feel that on such a subject they might be suspected of selfishness; and if their people indulge such a suspicion, however just and proper the admonitions might be, they would be only of little use, and might work to their disadvantage. Nor is this a subject that a humble and holy man would ordinarily choose, even if there were no danger of it being misconstrued. He would rather inspire in his people the love of Christ and of one another, hoping that, if this prevailed, it would constrain them to whatever was proper toward himself. It does not follow, however, that this aspect of Christian duty should never be focused on. The glory of God, the success of the church, and the spiritual advantage of individuals are all involved in it. No one could more strenuously renounce an inappropriate assuming of power to himself than the apostle Paul. In many instances, he did not insist on the authority that Christ had given him. Yet, when addressing the churches on behalf of others, he uniformly insists on the treatment which private members owe to their pastors, as well as on other relative duties. To this I may add, if there is any

one time when an exhortation on this subject would be especially appropriate, it is when the relation between pastor and people is publicly solemnized. I will, therefore, proceed to explain and enforce the exhortation which I have read to you [in the text].

## 1. The nature of this submission

Let us try to determine what are the obedience and submission that are required of a church toward their pastor. The very terms *rule*, *obey*, and *submit* may be grating in the ears of some; and it is true that there have been great abuses of these things. A great deal of priestly domination has been exercised in the name of Christ. Yet there must be rule in the church of Christ as well as in other societies. Without this, it would not be a body, growing up unto Him in all things which is the head, even Christ—but a number of scattered bones. Or, if everyone aspired to rule and guidance, the question of the apostle would be applicable here: “If the whole were an eye, where were the hearing?...But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him” (1Co 12:17-18). Christian ministers are called overseers, as having the oversight of the flock and the principal direction of its concerns.

The church of Christ, however, is not subject to a despotic government. Ministers are forbidden to “lord it over God’s heritage” (see 1Pe 5:3). The power that was given them and all other officers, ordinary or extraordinary, was for edification and not for destruction. There are three things which are necessary in order that the authority of a pastor be legitimate and unobjectionable, namely, 1) that he be freely chosen by the church; 2) that the standard by which he rules be not his own will, but the will of Christ; and 3) that the things which he urges

on others be equally binding on himself.

*First, it is necessary that your pastor be freely chosen by you to his sacred office.* If he had been imposed on you by any human authority, against or without your own consent, I would not be able to prove from the Scriptures that you were bound to obey or submit to him. If someone objects that pastors are represented as the “gifts of God,” and such as the “Holy Spirit hath made overseers,” I should answer, True, but the Holy Spirit performs this work, not immediately,<sup>1</sup> but mediately, by inclining the hearts of His people to choose them. No one, indeed, pretends that it is done immediately. Human choice is involved in all cases; and the only question concerns whether it is by the choice of the people or by one or more who chooses on their behalf.

The early churches elected their own officers. The apostles ordained them, but it was by the suffrage<sup>2</sup> of the people. The power of election was with the people, and with them it continued during the purest ages of the church. If the early pastors had been chosen by the apostles, it had also been their right to have rejected or silenced them, as occasion should require. But when false teachers arose among the Corinthians and the Galatians, we do not find these churches, not even the purest part of them, applying to the apostle, but the apostle to them, for their removal. The false teachers of the early church sought the favor of the people and despised the apostles. This is an unanswerable proof, to everyone acquainted with human nature, that the powers of election and rejection lay with the people. If your

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<sup>1</sup> **immediately** – directly; without the people’s intervention.

<sup>2</sup> **suffrage** – vote; election.

pastor, I say again, had been imposed upon you by any human authority, against or without your own consent, I should not be able to prove, from the Scriptures, that you were bound to obey or submit to him. But it is not so. You have heard him and known him; and from an observation of his spirit and conduct, and an experience of the advantages of his ministry, you have chosen him to watch over you in the Lord.

*Secondly, the rule to which you are required to yield obedience and subjection is not his will, but the will of Christ.* Pastors are to a church what the executive powers or magistrates of a free country are to the state—the organs of the law. Submission to them is submission to the law. If your pastor teaches any other doctrine or inculcates any other duties than what Christ has left on record, obey him not. But, when he insists on these, it is dangerous for you to resist him; for, resisting him, you resist Him Who sent him. It is in this respect, as teaching divine truth and enforcing divine commands, that the servants of God have been invested with divine authority in all ages. Of the sons of Levi, it was said, they shall teach Jacob “thy judgments” and Israel “thy law”; and, upon this ground, it was added, “Bless, LORD, his substance, and accept the work of his hands: smite through the loins of them that rise against him, and of them that hate him, that they rise not again” (Deu 33:11). Here lay the sin of Korah and his company, of Elymas the sorcerer, and of Alexander the coppersmith. They each resisted God by resisting the servants of God in the proper execution of their work and brought upon themselves the sorest of judgments.

*Thirdly, the things which he urges upon you are equally binding upon himself.* When he exhibits to you the only name given under heaven, among men, by

which you can be saved (Act 4:12), and charges you, on pain of eternal damnation, not to neglect it, remember his own soul also is at stake. And, when he exhorts and warns you, if he himself should privately pursue a contrary course, he seals his own destruction.

There are, it is true, those who lade men with heavy burdens, grievous to be borne, to which they themselves will not put one of their fingers. These, however, are not the commands of Christ. Instead of being the commands of Christ that are not grievous, except to unholy men, these are merely human traditions. But even if they were [God's commands], the inconsistent conduct of ministers would not exempt either them or you from obligation. Should we enforce the will of Christ upon you while neglecting it ourselves, woe be unto us! Yet this will fall upon our own heads. If we are wicked, depose us from our office! But, while we are in it, let not the Word of the Lord be disregarded because of us.

Let me point out a few particulars, brethren, in which it is your duty and interest to obey him whom you have chosen to have the rule over you and to submit yourselves.

*With respect to his public ministry.* Do not avoid plain dealing from the pulpit. I trust that good sense, as well as the fear of God, will preserve your pastor from dealing in personal reflections or anything intended to offend; but do not be reluctant for him to come close to cases and consciences. You may as well have no minister as one that never makes you feel. I hope the house of God will continue to be to you what it has been: a rest in times of trouble, a house of consolation. But do not go with a desire merely to be comforted. Go as well to learn your failings and defects, with the hope of



having them corrected. It is not the mere hearer, but the doer of the word, that is blessed in his work. I hope you will always exercise your judgments as to what you hear and compare it with the oracles of God; but, if you attend preaching merely as judges of its orthodoxy, you will derive no advantage to yourselves, and may do much harm to others. It is the humble Christian who hears in order to be instructed, corrected, and quickened in the ways of God who will obtain the consolation the gospel affords.

*With respect to his private visits.* You do not expect him to visit you in the character of a loiterer, but of a pastor. And, if so, be open to a free exchange of opinions on your best interests. No minister is always prepared for profitable conversation, and some much less so than others; but, if he perceives in you a desire after it, it will be much easier for him to introduce it. Be free to share your cases<sup>3</sup> with him. It will assist him in his preaching more than a library of expositors. If, while you are conversing with him, he should be directed to share the mind of Christ with you, as suited to your particular case, do not treat it lightly, but submit yourselves to it.

*In presiding over your business meetings.* When you meet together as a Christian church to settle your concerns, he is entitled to your respect. Every society places enough authority in its president as might be necessary to restrain disorderly individuals and to preserve proper decorum. Of course, it is only right for him to be gentle and temperate in the exercise of

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<sup>3</sup> **cases** – either 1) various spiritual conditions or 2) “cases of conscience,” questions of how to resolve recognized principles of faith and obedience in practical situations.

authority, especially while he is a young man; and it will be right for you, no less, to submit to his authority. When churches argue with heat and bitterness—when everyone speaks, and no one pays respect more to one than to another—they debase themselves below the character even of civilized societies.

*d. In the private reproofs which he may have occasion to administer.* You do not want your pastor to offer personal reflections from the pulpit, but there are situations that call for personal reproof. Therefore, if he fulfils his responsibility, he must be free and faithful in telling you what he sees wrong in you. For a long time, I have thought that there are some faults in individual members which are not proper objects of church censure<sup>4</sup> but of pastoral admonition. [In this category, I would include] spiritual declensions, hesitating on important truths, neglect of religious duties, worldly anxiety, and early approaches to any evil course. A faithful pastor, with an eye of watchful tenderness, will perceive the first symptoms of spiritual disorder, and, by a timely hint, will counteract its operations. But, if nothing is said or done till the case requires the censure of the church, the party may be excommunicated but is seldom recovered. You may easily suppose this to be a self-denying work for your pastor. He had much rather visit you with a smile of affectionate congratulation. But this work may be one of the most important to you and to the church. Do not make this disagreeable part of his work more disagreeable by an irritable and resentful disposition, but receive reproofs with openness of mind. “Correction is grievous unto him that

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<sup>4</sup> **censure** – formal judgment in church discipline.

forsaketh the way: and he that hateth reproof shall die” (Pro 15:10).

## 2. Reasons for this submission

Let us observe the important reasons that enforce this obedience and submission. You will notice these are partly taken from the care you have for yourselves (“they watch for your souls”) and partly from your sympathy with them (“that they may do it with joy, and not with grief”). Even the part that seems to respect their comfort ultimately concerns your own; for, if they discharge their work with grief, “that is unprofitable for you” (Heb 13:17). Give us your serious attention, brethren, while we review these important motives.

*a. Your pastor “watches for your souls.”* I presume that your salvation will be his great concern; and, while he pursues this, you may well be expected to agree with him and submit yourselves to him in the Lord. You would submit to a surgeon performing an operation to save your life, or to a lawyer who offers you his advice for the security of your property, or to a commander who leads you out to save your country; but these are inferior objectives when compared with your soul. Observe the force of every term.

Pastors *watch*. The word literally signifies to keep awake. Here it denotes vigilance. Ministers are as watchmen on the walls or in the streets of a city, by whose care and faithfulness the inhabitants enjoy security. Their work is to rise early, to sit up late, and to eat the bread of care; for so it is that God giveth his beloved sleep. Aware of your temptations and dangers, he must be continually on the watch that he may be ready to give the alarm. Your pastor may be thinking, and

caring, and praying for you when you think but little of him, and perhaps, in some instances, when you think but little of yourselves. Do not hinder him, but help him in his work.

Pastors watch *for you*. Remember that you are being watched on all sides, but not in the same way. Satan watches you, but only that he might seize his opportunity to destroy you. He watches you as a wolf does a sheepfold. But your pastor watches you as a faithful shepherd, to protect and save you. The world also will watch you, and that with the eye of an enemy, waiting for your failing. But your pastor will watch you with the tender concern of a father, to do you good. Do not oppose him in this his important work.

Pastors watch *for your souls*. If your pastor were stationed to watch over your health, property, or life, and should discharge his trust with skill and faithfulness, you would think him worthy of your esteem. But it is not for these things that he is primarily concerned. Of course, he would be happy to do you good in any way; but none of these is his specific responsibility. You employ other people to watch for you in such matters. Nothing less than your eternal good must engage your pastor's attention. He watches over something that makes kingdoms and empires insignificant in comparison. He watches over something that, if you gain it, you gain all; and that, if you lose it, you lose all forever. Do not resist him in his work, but cooperate with him.

They watch *as those that must give account*. What an important station! There is an account for everyone to give of himself; but a pastor has to give, not only an account in common with his people, but also an account *of them*. At his hands the chief Shepherd will require it. And what will be the account of your pastor? Will he be

able to say about you, “Here I am, and the children whom the Lord hath given me”? (Heb 2:13). Oh, that he might! But I truly fear that some of you who are today committed to his charge will in that Day be missing! And what account will he then have to give? Will he not have to say, “Lord, some of them have neglected Thy Word. Some have resisted it; some have reproached me for preaching it. Some have deserted it and turned aside after lying vanities. Some who have continued have not received the love of the truth that they might be saved. Hearing, they have heard, and not understood; seeing, they have seen, and not perceived; their heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed.” And what if, when asked, he should not be able to clear himself? What if it should prove true that he did not warn you, nor seek after you, nor care for you? Ah, then you will perish, and your blood will be required at his hand! Who—alas!—who is sufficient for these things? At all events, for your own sake, and for his sake, do not hinder him in his work. Woe unto him if he preach not the gospel! And woe unto you if you oppose him in it! Do not object to his dealing faithfully, both in and out of the pulpit, so long as he intends it for your good. Do not side with transgressors and hinder him in the work of reproof. In short, if you have any regard to your own souls or the souls of others, obey the counsels of heaven communicated to you through his ministry, and submit yourselves.

*b. His work will bring him either joy or grief according to the spirit of the people among whom he labors.* I am sure you do not wish to grieve and distress a servant of Christ. It would be better to never have chosen him than to break his heart; yet such things do happen!

In his *public preaching*, if he has a zealous, modest, attentive, wise, and affectionate people, constant and early in attending, sincere and tender-hearted in hearing, and desirous of obtaining some spiritual advantage from all they hear, you cannot imagine what joy it will bring him! He will pray for you and preach to you with more abundant interest. Such a situation may contribute much to the success of his labors, for God works not only by the Word preached but by the effects of it in the spirit of believers. The apostle supposes that some, on whom the Word itself had no influence, might yet be won by the chaste conversation of godly women. But if your pastor has a slothful, selfish, cold-hearted, critical, conceited, and contentious audience, what a source of grief must it be to him! Moses, the meekest of men, was overcome by such a people and was tempted to wish that God would kill him out of hand rather than continue to cause him thus to see his wretchedness.

*In handling the business of the church*, let every individual consider that others have understanding as well as himself, and have the same right to be heard and regarded. Let all try to cooperate and never oppose a measure just because they are not inclined to it, but strictly from conscience or a persuasion that it is wrong. These things will be a source of joy to your pastor. But, if pride and self-will prevail, they will produce “confusion and every evil work” (Jam 3:16). And if he has any concern for religion or for you, this will be the grief of his soul.

If the *deacons* whom you have chosen to be helpers in the truth be wise, faithful, active, and tender-hearted, ready to stand by their pastor in every right cause, willing to impart the counsel of maturer years, and careful to preserve the purity and peace of the

church, your pastor will discharge his duties with joy. But, if the deacons mind earthly things and leave all to him, or, though they should be active, yet if it be with the spirit of a Diotrophes (3Jo 1:9), instead of diminishing his load they will increase it and render his work a daily grief.

*In the exercise of church discipline*, if there is a unity of heart, a willingness to follow God's Word, whoever may be affected by it—if, like the tribe of Levi, you in such matters “know not your father, nor your mother, nor acknowledge your brethren, nor know your own children; but observe God's word, and keep his covenant” (see Deu 33:9)—this, to an upright man, will be a source of joy and solid satisfaction. But if, whenever a formal church decision must be inflicted, no unanimity can be obtained—if members regard their friends and family and set aside Christ's revealed will—nothing will be done effectively. They will attribute the zeal of the few to personal prejudice. And instead of the disciplined person being convinced and humbled, he will be hardened in his sin. Thus the work of the ministry will be a burden of grief.

Finally, if you are a *spiritual, affectionate, and peaceable people*, your pastor will perform his work with joy. But if you are carnal and contentious—if there are whisperings, swellings, tumults, party allegiances, jealousies, antipathies, scandals—alas! He may sow, but it will be among thorns. He may preach, but it will be with a heavy heart.

*c. You cannot cause the work of your pastor to be grievous but at your own expense: it will be “unprofitable for you.”* It is to no purpose that you have a pastor ordained over you in the Lord unless his ministry is profitable to you. Everything, therefore, which

promotes this end should be carefully cherished; and everything that hinders it, as carefully avoided. But profit under a ministry greatly depends, under God, upon mutual attachment. I do not mean to approve that fondness and partiality that would render you the devotees of a man, or prevent you from hearing any other preaching than his. They that cannot be edified except by one minister give sufficient proof that they are not truly edified by him. But there is an attachment between a pastor and a people that is necessary. Without it, attendance on public worship would, in a great measure, cease to be an enjoyment. This attachment, my brethren, should begin with you, and be cherished by a course of kind and faithful treatment. Delicately meet his needs, gradually inspire his confidence, tenderly participate in his afflictions, and I may add, if occasion requires it, affectionately suggest to him his faults and defects. By these means, he will insensibly be attached to you in return. He will prefer preaching at home to all his occasional labors in other places. By an acquaintance with your cases, his preaching will be seasonable and savory, proceeding from the fulness of his heart. Of such words it may well be said, "How good they are!" But I need not enlarge on these things to you. Perhaps they were never more fully exemplified than in the person of your late affectionate and beloved pastor. You loved him for the truth's sake that dwelt in him; and he, on the other hand, was not only willing to impart unto you the gospel of God, but his own soul also, because ye were dear unto him. May the same spirit be cherished between you and your present pastor!

*Love is the grand secret to make you all happy.* Love, however, is a tender plant; a slight blast of unkindness will



greatly injure it. If you unintentionally grieve him, come with a prompt explanation. If unkindness is repeated, his attachment to you will be weakened, and then yours to him will be the same. This will be followed by various misunderstandings, slights, distances, and offences, and the result might be a deeply rooted antipathy. When this enters [a person], all profit under his ministry is at an end. If he could preach like an angel, all would be in vain so far as your advantage goes.

### 3. Conclusion

From these remarks, you see and feel, my brethren, that, if your pastor performs his work with grief, it will be at your expense. You see that every kind of treatment that wounds his spirit undermines your own welfare. Aim, therefore, to make his work his joy in every way possible, which will be to your benefit. Study, by constantly treating him kindly, to endear yourselves and your families to him. Invite him to intimate fellowship in spiritual things, to know and be known by him. As he proclaims the holy efficacy of religion, enable him to look its enemies in the face by your holy, humble, and uniform conduct in the world and in the church.

The reward of a true pastor is in the people of his charge, in their sanctification and salvation. What else is his hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Do not withhold from the laborer his hire! You might be his hope, without being his joy. You might be his hope and joy for a season, without being his crown of rejoicing at the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming. But do I need to tell you that this would be unprofitable for you? If he has a full reward for his labor, you must be his hope, and joy, and crown. Brethren, consider what I have said, and the Lord give you understanding in all things. ❧