

## How Should Members Relate to Pastors?

Every church member will stand before God's throne and give an account for how he or she worked to protect the gospel in the lives of his or her fellow members (see Galatians 1). That said, the Holy Spirit has made pastors and elders the overseers of the church (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:2). That means pastors or elders represent the church's work of oversight in the day-to-day life of the congregation. Submitting to the church often means submitting to them. Broadly speaking, how should members relate to pastors?

1. *Members should formally affirm their pastors.* Different traditions disagree on this, but I believe that since Christians are ultimately responsible before God for what they are taught (see Galatians 1), church members are responsible for choosing their leaders. Congregations should let elders lead in this process, but the final affirmation is the church's. (It may also be the case that the church's authority to affirm its leaders is an apostolic authority, which it inherits through the apostolic keys. See Acts 14:23; see also the congregation's role in Acts 1 and Acts 6.)
2. *Members should honor their pastors.* Our culture's ability to understand honoring seems to be diminishing continually. But just as the Bible calls children to honor their parents, so Christians should honor their pastors. The Bible even says to give them "double honor" (1 Tim. 5:17). And this includes paying them (5:18).
3. *Members should submit to their pastors.* These two verses in Hebrews need to be incorporated into our understanding of the Christian life: "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7). "Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you" (Heb. 13:17).
4. *Members should pray for their pastors.* These men are the ones whose lives and teaching help to sustain the church. Will it not benefit us to pray for them?
5. *Members should bring charges against disqualified pastors.* Since they are out front, Paul protects leaders by requiring two or three witnesses to level a charge against them (1 Tim. 5:19). That said, the congregation should not allow an elder who has disqualified himself to continue serving.
6. *Members should fire gospel-denying pastors.* When false teachers entered the Galatian church, Paul did not correct the elders. He corrected the church. When pastors begin to deny the gospel or teach other heresies, God calls church members to fire them.

## When You Should Not Submit

All of us, at times, will be called to endure humbly a leader's mistakes and sins. Nonetheless, should you find yourself in a church where the leadership is characteristically abusive, I would, in most cases, encourage you to flee. Flee to protect your discipleship, to protect your family, to set a good example for the members left behind, and to serve non-Christian neighbors by not lending credibility to the church's ministry.

How do you recognize abusive leadership? Paul requires two witnesses for a charge to be leveled against an elder (1 Tim. 5:19), probably because he knows that leaders will be charged with infelicities more than others, often unfairly. That said, abusive churches and Christian leaders *characteristically*...

- Make dogmatic prescriptions in places where Scripture is silent.
- Rely on intelligence, humor, charm, guilt, emotions, or threats rather than on God's Word and prayer (see Acts 6:4).
- Play favorites.
- Punish those who disagree.
- Employ extreme forms of communication (tempers, silent treatment).
- Recommend courses of action that always, somehow, improve the leader's own situation, even at the expense of others.
- Speak often and quickly.
- Seldom do good deeds in secret.
- Seldom encourage.
- Seldom give the benefit of the doubt.
- Emphasize outward conformity, rather than repentance of heart.
- Preach, counsel, disciple, and oversee the church with lips that fail to ground everything in what Christ has done in the gospel and to give glory to God.