

Supporting Our Leaders



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ps. 51:3, 4, 10; 1 Pet. 2:9; Eph. 1:22, 23; Col 1:18.*

Memory Text: “Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (*Ephesians 4:15, NIV*).

To be a leader in the church is not always easy. In fact, we live in a general climate in which leadership is suspect. Leadership, in general, is often almost synonymous with *politics*, and *politics* usually has connotations of power, self-interest, and even dishonesty or corruption. Church leadership is not totally immune to those accusations either.

Thus, more than ever, the church needs good leaders at all levels, and we must use the best possible processes to select those leaders. And while we must hold them accountable for the decisions that they make while in power, it's even more important that we seek to support them in all ways possible. We owe that to them and to God.

This week we look at the important topic of how, as Christians, we should relate to our church leaders.

The Week at a Glance: Does the idea that we are all equal before God mean that there's no need for church leadership? In what ways are we all unequal? Who is the Head of the church? What does the Bible teach about the necessity of church leaders?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 18.*

All Are Equal (*1 Pet. 2:9*).

One of the great rediscoveries of the sixteenth-century Reformation was that all people have the same standing before God. We do not need other human beings as our mediators. We all have the same direct access to our heavenly Father (*Heb. 10:19*).

How is the fundamental equality in status before God underlined by the apostle Peter? *1 Pet. 2:9; see also Exod. 19:6.*

The idea of a priesthood of all believers was one of the great concerns of the Protestant Reformers. The concept recognizes that every church member has a spiritual ministry to perform. The ordained ministry does not have a more privileged form of service than do others in the church body. The clergy merely performs a different service. All members have spiritual gifts, and all have important contributions to make. As a church, it's important not to forget this principle.

What other assurance is given in the Holy Scriptures that affirms our equal standing before God? *Gal. 3:28. What is this text saying?*

“No distinction on account of nationality, race, or caste, is recognized by God. He is the Maker of all mankind. All men are of one family by creation, and all are one through redemption. Christ came to demolish every wall of partition, to throw open every compartment of the temple, that every soul may have free access to God. His love is so broad, so deep, so full, that it penetrates everywhere. It lifts out of Satan's circle the poor souls who have been deluded by his deceptions. It places them within reach of the throne of God, the throne encircled by the rainbow of promise.

“In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free. All are brought nigh by His precious blood.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 386.

Dwell on the thoughts for today's study. Why is this principle so important for Christians to understand? How can it be a cure for one of the greatest and most dangerous of all sins: spiritual pride? What practical changes would you see in your own church were this principle put into practice?

We Have Different Roles

What a paradox: We are all equal and, yet, we are not. Though we all have the same status before God, we do not all function in the same role. It is God’s design that there is order, and that the church—as a spiritual organization—has leadership. Strong support for the principle of “the priesthood of all believers” does not mean that leadership arrangements are unnecessary. From the earliest days we have evidence of God instituting leaders for His people.

How do the following texts establish the legitimacy of leadership among the people of God, in Old Testament as well as in New Testament times?

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| 1. Moses | <i>Exodus 3</i> |
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| 2. Assistance for Moses | <i>Exod. 18:21-27</i> |
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| 3. Deborah | <i>Judg. 4:4</i> |
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| 4. David | <i>1 Sam. 16:1-13</i> |
| <hr/> | |
| 5. The twelve disciples, or apostles | <i>Mark 3:13-19</i> |
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| 6. Stephen and the other deacons | <i>Acts 6:1-7</i> |
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| 7. Elders | <i>Titus 1:5</i> |

Though the Bible does not prescribe a detailed organizational model that is to be implemented in all times, God wants His people to do things in an orderly manner. Organization and leadership are not only legitimate but necessary, as is, choosing the right kind of leadership.

Even Saints Are Not Perfect *(Ps. 51:3, 4, 10).*

Reading biographies of famous missionaries and great religious leaders can be extremely inspiring. Often one wonders: Would I have been able to demonstrate that same commitment? Would I have been able to persevere under such adverse circumstances? Would I have had the faith and spiritual strength to help and direct people? When we think of the history of our own church and of the energy, courage, and determination of many of the Adventist pioneers, we cannot help being impressed and inspired.

Take a good look at Hebrews 11 and list some of the great heroes of faith who, “by faith,” were sure of what they hoped for and persevered in their leadership role, often despite countless challenges. What was the secret of their success?

The Bible presents us with inspiring examples of faith but also informs us, in all honesty, that even the greatest leaders of ancient times were not perfect. It is not difficult to find examples of how great leaders made serious mistakes. Sometimes the mistakes were such that they could not be maintained in their role. But in many cases, God was willing to continue working through them.

Go back again through Hebrews 11. Pick out some of those mentioned there who were, in one capacity or another, in leadership roles. What mistakes did these great people of faith make, despite their calling before God? What message do their mistakes have for us concerning how we should view our leaders?

Leaders, as are the rest of us, are sinners in need of grace, forgiveness, counsel, and encouragement. At the same time, to be a leader is a great privilege, and with privilege comes responsibility. Though our leaders aren't perfect, they are still leaders, and in that role they should be expected to act accordingly.

Should church leaders be expected to adhere to a higher moral and spiritual standard than someone not in that role? If so, why so? If not, why not?

Supporting Our Leaders

We owe it to our leaders to support them in whatever way we can. As Aaron and Hur supported Moses and helped him to reach out to heaven, we have the sacred duty to help our leaders in their ministry (*Exod. 17:12*).

What may those who are full-time employed in the gospel ministry expect from the members of the church? *Matt. 10:9, 10; Rom. 16:23*.

God has arranged for a system of support for those who serve Him as full-time ministers so that their material needs are provided for as they preach the gospel and nurture the church. If all church members gave according to the plan that God instituted, there would be more than sufficient means to meet the needs of many more church workers.

What other form of support for our pastors and other leaders is just as essential as material support? *Eph. 6:18, 19; 2 Thess. 3:1*.

“Leaders know the importance of support. It comes in many different forms—regular prayer, encouragement through calls, conversations, and notes, interaction on ideas and communicating what is going on in the organization. Often it is as simple and straightforward as asking the leader, ‘What can I do to help you?’”—Leith Anderson, *A Church for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), pp. 230, 231.

While support for leaders shouldn’t be blind—that is, we do whatever they say we should do, no questions asked—true support doesn’t mean we support them only when we absolutely agree with everything they do. Sometimes leaders might make a decision that someone disagrees with. Here, too, out of respect for the position the person is in, we should as *much as possible* seek to work with those decisions.

How’s your attitude toward your church leaders? Are you showing them the mercy Christ has shown you? What changes might you need to make in relating to them?

Christ Is Our Leader *(Eph. 4:15, 2:20, 1 Pet. 2:25).*

Read the following texts. What are they all saying about Christ and His church?

Eph. 1:22, 23

Eph. 4:15

Col. 1:18

As we have seen this week, though we are all equal in the sight of God, this fundamental equality does not imply that there should not be any leaders, or even a *hierarchy* of leadership, among us. The biblical model teaches that there is, indeed, a structure, and that the church does have human leaders at various levels.

At the same time, however, we (and our selected leadership) must remember that Christ is the head of the church and that He alone is the Source of its authority. Not only is Christ the Head of each person, He is the Head of the church, in a corporate sense. As individuals, and even more so as leaders, we can be faithful to our calling only to the degree that we are faithful to Christ. Only as we submit to Him in faith, repentance, and obedience can we fulfill whatever role He deems for us in His church.

“It is Christ who makes the church important, not the other way around. As his body, the church derives its significance from him. The church is what it is because of who Jesus is, not because of who its members are.

“The symbol of the body also suggests subordination. As Christ’s body, the church is subject to his authority. He is ‘the head over all things for the church’ (Eph. 1:22). Recognizing that Christ’s authority in the church is supreme prevents us from exaggerating the importance of any church official or organizational structure. The church needs organization, of course, but no organization should obscure Christ’s authority.”—Richard Rice, *The Reign of God* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1985), p. 190.

How can those who lead out in the local church or occupy some position of leadership in the conference or some other organizational unit ensure that they never lose sight of the fact that Christ is the ultimate Leader of the church? If you could give some practical advice to any of our leaders on what’s the surest way to stay connected to Christ and allow Him to lead the church through them, what would you say?

Further Study: “Since His ascension Christ has carried forward His work on the earth by chosen ambassadors, through whom He speaks to the children of men and ministers to their needs. The great Head of the church superintends His work through the instrumentality of men ordained by God to act as His representatives.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 360.

“There have ever been in the church those who are constantly inclined toward individual independence. They seem unable to realize that independence of spirit is liable to lead the human agent to have too much confidence in himself and to trust in his own judgment rather than to respect the counsel and highly esteem the judgment of his brethren, especially of those in the offices that God has appointed for the leadership of His people. God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for he who does this despises the voice of God.”—Pages 163, 164.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Though it's important to work with the leadership of our church, at what point, if ever, should a person stand up and openly challenge leadership? Is this ever the correct Christian response? If you answer Yes, what biblical or historical precedents can you cite? If you answer No, defend your position.
- 2 Sometimes, when our leaders fall, we tend to be harder on them than on others who might make the same mistakes. Why do you think that is so? Should it be so?

Summary: On the one hand, we must never lose sight of the fact that we are all, truly and fully, equals before God. Yet, it is God's purpose that not all have the same role. Some have a special calling to be leaders, of different kinds and at different levels. Leaders must be held accountable, but we must not expect them to be perfect. We owe our leaders our wholehearted support, in particular in our prayers. But both the *followers* and the *leaders* must remember always that Christ is the Leader of His church.

Left *for* Dead

by CHARLOTTE ISHKANIAN

On June 24, 2002, a runaway train crashed in Tanzania, killing hundreds of men, women, and children. On that train were 350 Adventists, mostly women returning home from a Women's Ministries meeting. Some 54 Adventists, mostly women, were killed.

When the train's brakes failed, the train rolled backward, reaching speeds of 160 miles (240 km) an hour. The two pastors aboard went from car to car comforting and encouraging the women, who prayed and sang during the 20-minute terror ride before the train crashed. One of these pastors lost his life; the other lost his arm.

Joyce Ager was one of the passengers. Shortly after the crash, Valentina, Joyce's sister, learned that Joyce had died in the wreck.

Valentina traveled to the rural crash site to identify her sister's body. She searched the large stadium, where most of the bodies had been laid, but she did not find her sister. Hopeful, she went to the hospital and searched for Joyce's name on a list of patients, but she found nothing. Sadly, grimly, she walked to a smaller makeshift morgue to search for her sister among the dead.

The bodies were piled on top of one another until space could be made for them in the stadium morgue. Valentina began searching through the bodies for the face she hoped she would not see. As she walked among the bodies, she saw a familiar face. She touched her and found her body warm. She felt for a pulse. Yes, she was still alive!

She shouted and ran to find a doctor. "Come, come! My sister is in the morgue, but she's still alive!" Joyce was carried to the hospital. She was unconscious and suffered from multiple fractures, but she was alive.

Joyce woke up six days later and was transferred to a hospital in the city of Dar es Salaam. She suffered some memory loss caused by a fractured skull, and it was several weeks before she could recognize those she loved.

Joyce continues on her long road to recovery, but she thanks God and her sister for saving her life. She is eager to be well enough to serve Him as He wishes.

No one knows why one person died and another lived in that terrible crash. But the Adventists most deeply affected by this tragic wreck hope that through their suffering God will reveal Himself to those who need to know Him.

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