

# Supporting Our Leaders



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## 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?

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“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?**

**Key Text:** *Ephesians 4:15.*

### Teachers Aims:

1. To establish that Christ is the ultimate Leader of His church.
2. To understand that God established the hierarchy of leaders and members in His church. To each He gave different roles and responsibilities.

### Lesson Outline:

#### **I. Members and Leaders Have Different Roles.**

- A. In the sight of God we are all equal.
- B. The ordained minister is not above the member in importance before the Lord.
- C. God has given spiritual gifts to His church, and each member has an important contribution to make.
- D. God instituted leaders for His people.

#### **II. Support Your Leaders.**

- A. Many faithful biblical leaders were not perfect.
- B. Some great leaders made serious mistakes.
- C. It is our sacred duty to help our leaders in their ministry.
- D. Support takes various forms as in: financial, spiritual (as in the form of prayer), and social (as in encouragement), and so forth.

#### **III. Christ Is Our Leader.**

- A. The church's structure requires human leaders at various levels.
- B. As witnesses for the Lord, we are called to be His ambassadors to the world.
- C. Christ, the Head of the church, affirms our calling and gives us the power to execute His will.

**Summary:** “Instead of cooperating with Satan, let everyone learn what it means to cooperate with God. In these depressing times He has a work to be done that demands the firm courage and faith which will enable us to sustain one another. All need to stand shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart as laborers together with God.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 184.

## COMMENTARY

### **I. Leaders and Followers in the Church.**

There has always been a tension in Christianity between its message of the essential equality of all Christian believers and the fact that it also prescribes different roles and functions for its members. Furthermore, it is possible for one to view some of these roles and functions as *superior* or *higher* than others. A pastor, of course, exercises a special kind of authority and expertise, and many members

## 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?**

**1. Moses**

*Exodus 3*

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**2. Assistance for Moses**

*Exod. 18:21-27*

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**3. Deborah**

*Judg. 4:4*

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**4. David**

*1 Sam. 16:1-13*

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**5. The twelve disciples, or apostles**

*Mark 3:13-19*

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**6. Stephen and the other deacons**

*Acts 6:1-7*

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**7. Elders**

*Titus 1:5*

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**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.**

will tend to view him as a font of all wisdom, virtue, and knowledge until it is proven otherwise. When this almost inevitably happens, the same people may become disillusioned with the pastor, or even with the church or Christianity itself. Even among the roles usually taken by laypeople, a similar perceived hierarchy of worthiness exists. Elders are supposed to be *higher* than deacons and quite often have an extensive résumé of worldly achievements—money, power, education, etc.—that further adds to this aura in the minds of many. Older, more established members may be viewed as preferable to new converts, who don't know when to stand or sit or how to find things in the hymnal.

Ironically, the Bible and true Christianity have no place for these false values that seem so natural to us. On one hand, the Christian recognizes that different people are suited to different roles based upon abilities, temperament, etc. Yet, all of these are equally essential to the functioning of God's kingdom on earth. Church leaders are not in their positions—one hopes—in order to feel important or superior to others but to guide the church in achieving its mission. And of course this mission could not be achieved without those who keep the lights on and the buildings safe and sanitary. True leaders—such as Christ—don't even shrink from doing dirty or unpleasant things if the occasion should arise.

Also, true Christianity doesn't care how much money you make or how many people respect you in the business community. It just is not relevant. Many important Old and New Testament figures would be considered losers and/or bums by any creditable human standard. As humans, of course, our minds will continue to nudge us toward these mistaken judgments; our job is to allow God to nudge us back to His reality.

## II. Useful Quotes on Leaders and Followers in the Church.

“God calls upon every church member to enter His service. Truth that is not *lived*, that is not *imparted* to others, loses its life-giving power, its healing virtue. Everyone must learn to work and to stand in his place as a burden bearer. Every addition to the church should be one more agency for the carrying out of the great plan of redemption. The entire church, acting as one, blending in perfect union, is to be a living, active missionary agency, moved and controlled by the Holy Spirit.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 8, p. 47.

“It is not alone by men in high positions of responsibility, not alone by men holding positions on boards or committees, not alone by the managers of our sanitariums and publishing houses, that the work is to be done which will cause the earth to be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. . . . This work can be accomplished only by the whole church acting their part under the guid-

## **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?

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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?

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Leaders, as 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?**

ance and in the power of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 8, p. 47.

“In the same way the church of Jesus Christ transcends all differences of status; slaves and free are of equal value in the mystical unity of this body of Christ. There is little doubt, as has been suggested, that both classes were included in the membership of the Corinthian church. That is a great matter. The life of the church is vastly enriched by the peculiar contribution that every member can

## Inductive Bible Study

**Texts for Discovery:** *Proverbs 12:24; 13:17, 26; 18:13, 15, 17; 24:10; 27:21; John 13:14-16; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Ephesians 4:15, 16; 1 Timothy 3:1-12.*

- ① People are skeptical of their political leaders and not without reason. Inevitably, this trend has spread to the church. What model for leadership does the Bible offer? If followed, how would this form of leadership reverse the trend toward skepticism?
- ② Is the leadership of the church ordained by God? If so, what does that mean about our attitude toward church leaders? If so, does it mean church leaders are exempt from criticism except by someone who also is in a church leadership position? When might it be necessary for laypeople to question a church leader’s ability to lead, and what form should such questioning take?
- ③ If God has ordained church leadership, has He ordained the correct form? Are we free to choose, for example, whether the church is to be denominational or congregational in its organization?
- ④ In the church, there is a reciprocal relationship between leaders and membership, which is one reason our own attitudes are so important. In what ways are we called as laypeople to facilitate the task of leadership?
- ⑤ Is leadership necessarily a quality restricted to those who hold official or semiofficial offices in the church organization? In what ways might we as laypeople engage in leadership, whether in the church or in daily life?
- ⑥ List the qualities of good leadership found in the Proverbs texts listed in Texts for Discovery. Discuss why each characteristic is important. Also discuss how Christ displayed each characteristic and how we can display them in our leadership roles.

## 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.*

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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.*

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“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?**

bring to the fellowship.”—*The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10, p. 158.

“When Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, he showed that Christian leadership was that of a servant, not a boss. Service means being sensitive to what people need. Consequently there was no rigid pattern of church government at the beginning: it was flexible according to the needs of the particular church. Nor was there any sharp distinction between ordained and lay members of the church.”—*Eerdmans Handbook to Christian Belief*, p. 408.

### III. The Bible on Leaders and Followers in the Church.

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ” (*1 Cor. 12:12, NIV*).

## Witnessing

David was not only Israel’s king, he was also their spiritual leader. Yet, he slept with another man’s wife. She became pregnant with David’s child. Then, to cover himself, David had the husband killed (*2 Samuel 11*). How was Israel supposed to respect such a leader?

Every one of us falls prey to sin, even our spiritual leaders. That is one reason why we cannot look to them for salvation. They can only point us to the One who can save, and that is Jesus. Although spiritual leaders are there to guide us, they, too, are in need of a Savior. They are sinners who make mistakes, sometimes openly. Because they are fallible, we must be willing to embrace them and forgive them when they fall.

In Ephesians 4:2 we are told to walk “with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.” To forbear is to be tolerant of or patient with something or someone. Our spiritual leaders need our forbearance and understanding as much as we need theirs. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ and need to be ministered to as they minister to others. Remember, we are all members of one body, each member having a different function. Those in leadership positions need the support of other church members, so in unity we can be a light to the world.

Think of the leaders in your local church. Consider not only the pastor(s) and the elders, but the deacons, deaconesses, Sabbath School teachers and superintendents, etc. What special issues might they be facing regarding their church responsibilities? How can you witness to them and encourage them to depend on the Lord?

## 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*

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*Eph. 4:15*

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*Col. 1:18*

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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?**

“ ‘Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you’ ” (*John 13:14, 15, NIV*).

## Life-Application Approach

**Icebreaker:** The *Atlantic Monthly* printed the details of an interview in which a reporter raised the issue of competitiveness between the tenors Jose Carreras, Placido Domingo, and Luciano Pavarotti. Domingo’s classic response was: You can’t be rivals when you are together making music.

How can Domingo’s view help to improve relationships between church leaders? The laity’s relationship with church leaders? Church leaders’ relationship with laity?

### Thought Questions:

- ① Many church members support the idea that church leaders should have a higher level of spiritual maturity than the laity. Is this belief Bible based? Explain your answer.
- ② Jesus used the Greek *paraclete* when referring to the Holy Spirit as “helper” (*John 14:16, NKJV*). This term refers to the Greek military practice of pairing soldiers so they could protect one another’s *back*. Discuss how this practice has value for the relationship between laity and leaders today.

### Application Questions:

- ① Review with your class the relationship between King David and Joab: 2 Samuel 3; 1 Kings 2:5, 6. What lessons from this relationship can you apply to the relationship between laity and leaders?
- ② “Dan’s classroom and coaching duties kept him pretty busy, but he couldn’t help noticing how stressed the school principal seemed. . . .  
“Dan prayed, but he wished he could do more. . . . On a piece of paper he wrote these words: ‘Just a note to say thanks for being a great principal. . . . Let me know . . . how I can help.’ The next time Dan saw [the principal], the principal approached him eagerly [and said], ‘Funny how little things really do make a difference.’”—Colleen L. Reece, *Apples for a Teacher* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour Publishing, Inc., 1998), p. 40. What little things can you do systematically to support your leaders?

**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.