

## **Ambassadors for Christ**

**By Paul R. Blake**

Sometimes it is difficult for even the best Bible students to reconcile a passage or a principle with what they already know of the harmony of scripture. For example, 1 Corinthians 16:15-16 states: "I urge you, brethren; you know the household of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints, that you also submit to such, and to everyone who works and labors with us." The problem some have trouble solving is one of authority. The work of the preacher is not authoritative in any sense; rather, it is service in sound edification and diligent evangelism. This verse on the surface appears to be in conflict with that when Paul tells disciples to submit to them. The Greek word for "submit" is "hupotasso," meaning, "to arrange under, to subordinate, to subject one's self, obey." The questions are raised: 1) In what sense was the congregation at Corinth to submit to Stephanus? 2) Does submit refer to only the word of God that he preaches? Does submit mean to respect or esteem him for his work? If it means the preacher is in authority, how does this relate with the authority of elders in the local church (as this is the same type of language used in Hebrews 13:7, 17)? Obviously, some could take this verse and with selfish reasons dominate a local church. Is a preacher who doesn't understand and practice this abdicating the responsibilities of a leadership role.?

In truth, this passage creates no conflict. The Greek word hupotasso is also used to describe the husband and wife relationship (Eph. 5:22), the Christian and government relationship (Rom. 13:1), and the Christian and God the Father relationship (James 4:7). In each case the type and degree of submission is modified and determined by the relationship. In Ephesians 5:21, Christians are to submit to one another in the fear of Christ (hupotassomenoi allellois en phobo Christou). The manner and specific acts of submission rendered to one another varies from that of wives to husbands, Christians to civil government, et al.

Therefore, we can conclude that the submission one renders to an evangelist must be unique to and limited by the relationship between the Christian and preacher. The "humeis hupotassete tois toioutois" or "you also submit to such" of 1 Corinthians 16:16 is a general command needing qualification by specific instructions and Divinely approved examples. As with any other command in the NT, when one is establishing Bible authority for a given matter it is necessary to examine all other texts that bear directly on the question.

First, a clue is given in verse 15. Stephanus and his household are "addicted to the ministry." A form of the verb "tasso" is used here to show that they have ordered themselves and their lives by the gospel. By telling the Corinthians to "hupotasso," or submit, the author is using a verbal mnemonic (poetic or pun) telling them to order themselves under those who are themselves ordering their own lives by the ministry. I view this as a parallel to other texts that order Christians to pattern themselves after those who carefully follow the faith. "Be ye followers of me even as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). "Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as you have us for an example" (Phil. 3:17).

It is not uncommon for Paul to tell disciples to help those who labor in the word (Rom. 16:2; Phil. 4:3). He told the Corinthians to "submit to such, and to everyone who works and labors with us" (not just Stephanus alone). Paul is not making the Corinthians subject (in authority) to every one of his helpers (which might include women). Instead, he wants them to offer their services in the work of spreading the gospel to the use and direction of those who labor in the work all of the time. Practically speaking, members assist the preacher in reaching out into the community to teach the lost. They yield to the evangelist's experience, skill and example of leadership in this work.

Second, when a preacher is faithfully declaring the word of God, hearers are to view that teaching as authoritative and binding. He is speaking on behalf of Christ, and the listeners must submit themselves to the word when it is proclaimed. This does not preclude examining the

scriptures (Acts 17:11), nor testing the preaching (1John 4:1). However, when the preacher presents the truth, the hearer must subject himself to the truth. Paul illustrates this to the Corinthians by saying, "As though God did beseech you by us."

"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be reconciled to God" (2Cor. 5:20). "These things command and teach" (1Tim. 4:11). "These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise you" (Titus 2:15). The authority is inherent in the gospel itself and not in the man who preaches it.

Third, devout preachers are to be honored for their work's sake. "Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness; and hold such in reputation" (Phil. 2:29). (See also Paul's requests for greetings to be given to fellow laborers in Romans 16.)

Fourth, preachers are to be financially supported for their work. Often it will require that one sacrifice his own material goods to remunerate the preacher, who himself sacrifices his own material prosperity to share the word with the hearer. "Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches." (Gal. 6:6).

Therefore we can conclude that the submission ("hupotassesthe") that Christians give to preachers takes the scripturally authorized forms of: 1) devoting ones self to helping the preacher in his work and in following his good example, 2) subjecting ones self to his faithful preaching of the word, 3) honoring him for his dedication to the ministry, 4) honoring him by paying for his physical needs while he attends to their spiritual feeding.

A syllogism suffices to illustrate this point. a) All Christians are to share the gospel message with others, yet need leadership and instruction in how to accomplish this task. b) Preachers provide verbal instruction and examples of leadership in this work. c) Therefore, Christians follow the leadership of preachers in this work.

That is the limit of the submission, that is, the hearers proper response to the preaching of the gospel. The government has been charged with leadership of Christians in civil matters; the husband has been charged with leadership in the home; the elders have the leadership in the church. None are permitted to reach beyond the sphere of ordained authority. Preachers provide leadership in carrying the message of salvation to the world. Christians are told to be their helpers. Preachers cannot interfere in the authority of the elders in the local church. Neither can elders prevent an evangelist from declaring the whole counsel of God nor hinder him from teaching any lost soul. To attempt to do so would exceed the limits of their authority.

There is a false doctrine based on the misuse of 1Corinthians 16:16. It is called "evangelical oversight" in which preachers are viewed as superior to elders in authority, and unlimited in scope (that is, they are not limited to one local congregation). Deliver us from such heretical nonsense!

There is something to be said for honoring a preacher and being subject to his knowledge of truth. However, it is not an honor he can demand because of who he is; rather, it is an honor that is imputed to him, not because of his personal worth, but because of what he does, preaching the message of salvation.

At the same time, there is something to be said to those who do not honor preachers (churches that refuse to compensate them properly, members who scheme and gossip to undermine their work and influence, etc.). They have violated the scriptures and will be judged by God for their sins.

In all things, a preacher must remain a humble servant of the Lord. He works for Jesus Christ, not for the elders or members. As a result, he must be aware that he falls under a greater aegis than he might otherwise receive from men. "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (James 3:1). Yet through it all, preaching is the essential work that accomplishes the purpose for which the Savior came into this world: "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke

19:10). “How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!” (Rom. 10:14-15). As Paul told Timothy, you go out and “command and teach.”