

## *Following the Leader • Hebrews 13:7*

My older brother Paul is a pastor in New Jersey, not too far from New York City. But earlier in his ministry he was an itinerant evangelist. After a church meeting one night, a lady in the congregation came up to him and asked if he would be willing to come over to her home for some refreshments. She explained that it was a rather complex trip to her home and, rather than giving him directions, she suggested that maybe it would be better if he would just follow her from the church parking lot to her house.

They agreed to that, but unfortunately my brother was somewhat careless in following the right lady in the right car out of the parking lot. At first the car he was following seemed to drive at a normal pace, but then it started going faster and faster. Since he had no directions, he had to keep up with her, so he drove faster and faster, too. Finally, the car he was following pulled into a driveway, went into the garage, and the door instantly shut behind it.

He thought that wasn't the most courteous way to welcome him, but he got out of his car and walked up to the door. When he rang the bell, a man answered the door with a cowering wife hiding behind him waiting to see what would happen. Since he hadn't met the husband, he just assumed that it was the right wife hiding behind the husband, and he walked on in.

The wife had been at that particular church service, and she was delighted to find out that at least the person that was following her was the pastor who had been at the service that night. He thought she looked somewhat different, but he had met a lot of people that night and he couldn't quite remember what the woman had looked like.

He went into the living room and sat down. The man and his wife followed behind sat down, too. The conversation was a bit awkward and finally she asked if Paul would like some coffee

or something. He thought that was rather strange because that was specifically why she had invited him over to the house, but he said he would. She went into the kitchen and came back in a little while with some coffee and some meager snacks.

After an uncomfortable period of time, they fortunately stumbled onto the mistake. They soon sent Paul on his way after making the appropriate telephone calls to the right home where a somewhat distraught hostess was waiting for him.

Now, in his case, it was embarrassing and humorous—at least now after a long period of time has gone by—to follow the wrong leader. But in many cases following the wrong leader is devastating and tragic.

As children we all played the game Follow the Leader, and as adults we have discovered, if we're smart, that following the leader is a necessary part of life. You really can't live life without following leaders. It is simply impossible to function in ordinary life making all of the decisions ourselves, doing all the things that have to be done. So we must delegate authority others who will lead us.

Following the leader is a particularly Christian principle. Until we decide to surrender to the leadership of Jesus Christ, we are not truly "Christian" in the New Testament sense of the word.

But beyond that, we are taught in the Bible that we are responsible as Christians not only to follow the divine leadership of Jesus Christ, but also to follow human leaders as well.

Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." Verse 17 says, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account." And verse 24 tells us, "Greet all your leaders

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and all God's people." Here and elsewhere in the New Testament and in the Old Testament we, as Christians, are instructed to follow, to obey, to greet and to remember human Christian leaders.

Some people, though, go to extremes in this business of following leaders. A stereotypical example is that of Jim Jones and the people in Jones Town in Guyana in South America. They followed their leader to the point of taking their own lives by drinking Kool-Aid containing cyanide. That was following to a fault.

At the other extreme are those who do not follow at all, who are so bent on independence that they disregard what the Bible says and disregard the value of human leadership. They are unwilling to submit to the authority of others.

The Bible teaches us, as Christians, to follow leaders, but that does not mean that we are to follow blindly. Hebrews 13:7 describes the kind of leaders that we are to follow. The first and most important test of Christian leaders is that they must speak the word of God. It is sometimes easy to be deceived by people who have a religious aura about them, but who never actually get around to speaking the word of God.

Some years ago a church leader entered into a discussion with a church member over a controversial decision that was before the church. The church leader said, "Why don't we sit down together and let's see what the Bible has to say about this." Tragically, that church member said, "Let's not bring the Bible into this!"

What a sad commentary!

But it's not just a matter of saying it; it's also a matter of saying it all. When the Apostle Paul said goodbye to the people in the church at Ephesus in Acts 20:27, he said, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God." Paul was saying that the mark of his ministry during those three years when he was in Ephesus was that he not only said it, but he said it all.

The kind of leader we are to follow proclaims the word of God from beginning to end - the whole counsel of God. The kind of leader we are to follow is one who, like Martin Luther, is willing to put his life in jeopardy in order to declare the whole counsel of God.

When Martin Luther was called before the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and was instructed to recant, Luther said, "Unless convinced by the Holy Scriptures or by clear reasons from other sources, I cannot recant. My conscience is a prisoner to God's word." It's no wonder that people followed him as a great spiritual leader. He not only said it, but he was willing to say it all, whether they liked it or not.

When following a Christian leader, when picking a church, when listening to a preacher, the issue is whether or not that leader says the whole counsel of God.

Still, that's not all of it. It's saying it, and it's saying it all, and it's saying it right.

Some Christian leaders, unfortunately, do not always get it straight. They twist the Bible to make it say what they want it to say. Therefore, we must beware of Bible teachers and leaders who take a Bible verse and use that as a jumping off place to fit their own thinking rather than relying on divine teaching.

The leader to follow is the one who is not afraid to have everything that he or she says tested against the word of God. That means that we have to take the Bible seriously. We have to check the Bible all the time. We have to know what's in it from Genesis to Revelation. We need to go home after church and check out what we heard taught. We need to spend our lives learning the Bible. We must discover the truths in the Bible and then seek to test those who would be leaders over us by what we discover in the word of God and what they say from and about the word of God. Follow the leader who speaks the word of God - the one who says it and says it all and says it right. We cannot settle for less!

In Hebrews 13:7 there is a second characteristic of the kind of leaders we should follow. This time it's leaders whose lives check out. The meaning according to Hebrews 13:7 is that we are to examine their lives again and again. The Christian leader to be followed is the one whose life has been checked out, has been examined and examined thoroughly. It's an ongoing process.

If you were to drive your car from Los Angeles to New York City, you would fill the tank

and check the oil and measure the tread in the tires before you left Los Angeles. But you would be a fool if you don't check your car again until you arrive at your destination. You must continually stop and check the oil and replace the air filter and check the tread on the tires—it's an ongoing examination process. And so it is with the Christian leaders we follow.

From a Christian leader's point of view, that isn't always pleasant. It's not easy to constantly have other people checking out your life and examining whether what you say is consistent with the way you live. It's sometimes awkward to have people looking at your family and your finances and your speech and your lifestyle and your witness and all the other aspects of your life. But it is a good and a necessary part of leadership.

We all know too well the frightening dangers of continuing to follow a Christian leader who goes astray, and so we must continually examine the Christian leader's life and teaching against the truths of the Bible.

Checking out someone's life as to whether or not that person practices what he or she preaches does not mean that we are seeking perfection. Christian leaders are sinners, just like everyone else. They have their weaknesses, and they fail. But there must be a basic consistency between what they teach and how they live.

In 1 Timothy 3:2-13, we have a specific criteria which has been given to us by God for the qualifications of spiritual leaders. The titles used here are overseer and deacon, but the criteria can apply to any position of leadership.

Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must

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not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

That's not the only list in the Bible. Titus gives us a similar list, and there are criteria spread throughout the whole Bible that explain what God calls us to look for when selecting Christian leaders. We must take a look at that person's life and compare it on the basis of the criteria found in the word of God and its consistency with the word of God.

But really, the emphasis of the second part of Hebrews 13:7 is on the results: "Consider the outcome of their way of life." The shift is from process to product. In other words, it's not what the leader says that he will do, but what he does, that counts. It's not the splashy beginning, but the long-term results.

And that takes time. That's why the Bible emphasizes that new Christians should not be leaders.

There's a third characteristic in Hebrews 13:7 and that is that leaders live by faith. If they live by faith, it stands to reason that they must have faith because the verse says that we are to "imitate their faith". But what do we mean

by faith?

In the Bible, the word “faith” is used in two different ways? Faith is used, on the one hand, to refer to doctrine or teaching. That doctrine may include such things as the existence of God, the virgin birth of Christ and his resurrection. The word is also used in terms of trust, and maybe that’s the more common way that we typically use the word. We say that we trust in God; we depend on God; we have confidence in him for the circumstances of life.

We’re to imitate faith, but which one? Well, both.

First of all, we need to look to the person who will help us shape our individual systems of doctrine and theology. Now, ideally, one can pick up the Bible and read it through and come to his or her own conclusions about what God says. It’s great when someone can do that. I commend them for that. But in the real world in which we live, we are significantly impacted by the teachings of other people. So we have to be careful whose teaching we follow. We have to be careful who shapes our faith, our belief systems.

“Faith” as to what we believe in, the doctrine or teaching we believe, is one part of all this. But “faith” is also the act of trusting in someone or something. You are most blessed if you can find in your life leaders who really live their lives by trusting God. Men and women who do not have to see to believe—leaders who depend on God for the future even if, in the present, everything seems to be dark and foreboding—godly saints who live moment by moment in dependence upon God.

You can usually find such people in the difficult circumstances of life. It may be in the shadow of death or the reverses of unemployment. Perhaps it is in the midst of a difficult marriage or the aftermath of a divorce. When you find people in difficult situations who have learned to trust God and to take him at his word, even when all of the evidence seems to the contrary, then you have found the kind of leaders whose faith ought to be imitated! Then when you walk through your dark places, and you will, you will know how to behave because you’ve seen

others do it. It is these people about whom the Bible says, “imitate their faith”.

Once again the Bible has given us the most practical of advice. We are not to run the course alone. We’re not to just do our own thing. God has graciously and generously given to us leaders to follow, so let’s do it—in our church, in our homes, in our personal lives, everywhere. Let’s do what God calls us to do. Let us follow the leaders who speak the word of God. Let us follow the leaders whose lives check out. Let us follow the leaders who live by faith.

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*Faith Matters* is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.wooddale.org](http://www.wooddale.org)  
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