

IN MEDIO

Volume 2, Issue 7, July 2007

“Submissive to Those Taking the Lead”

The New Testament tells the story of a heavenly being, a spirit Son of God, “the Word,” who was “with God” and who “came forth from God” (John 1:1; 14; 3:13, 16–17; 13:3). He was “sent forth” to “declare the good news of the kingdom of God” (Luke 4:43) and to teach others, not according to his own will or in furtherance of his own glory, but according to the will and for the glory of the God who sent him (John 3:34; 5:30; 7:16–18). By refusing to do his own will or seek his own glory, Jesus as God’s Son became ‘our Lord and our God’ through whom God the Father worked (John 14:10; 20:28). He perfectly represents and expresses the will, the teaching, and the “being” of the “only true God,” his God, the “one God, the Father” (Micah 5:4; John 17:3; 1 Corinthians 8:4; Hebrews 1:3). As Jesus followed his God and Father, so Christians should today follow Jesus Christ:

John 13:12–17 (NWT)

When, now, he had washed their feet and had put his outer garments on and laid himself down at the table again, he said to them: “Do YOU know what I have done to YOU? YOU address me, ‘Teacher,’ and, ‘Lord,’ and YOU speak rightly, for I am such. Therefore, if I, although Lord and Teacher, washed YOUR feet, YOU also ought to wash the feet of one another. For I set the pattern for YOU, that, just as I did to YOU, YOU should do also. Most truly I say to YOU, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one that is sent forth greater than the one that sent him. If YOU know these things, happy YOU are if YOU do them.

This is the example set by the one who exactly represents and expresses Jehovah God, the Father (John 8:54). It naturally follows, then, from texts like the account quoted above that today Jesus’ followers, especially those who are described in the New Testament as “taking the lead among” the congregations of God (Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24), would be like Jesus and be known for doing the equivalent of, if not in fact, ‘washing the feet of one another.’ But how can Christians today both ‘take the lead’ in the congregations and “be last of all and minister of all” (Mark 9:35)? How can “the one acting as chief” also become “as the one ministering” (Luke 22:26)?

To help answer these and other related questions, in this article I intend to present the biblical and in particular the New Testament teaching concerning what it means to ‘take the lead among’ Christians today in matters of teaching, ministry, and congregational activity. To aid us in understanding what it means in a Christian sense to ‘take the lead’

in the congregations of God, we will also look at what is meant by being “submissive” and “obedient” to those who are in fact “taking the lead,” for such leading and the accompanying ‘submission’ should today correspond as closely as possible to the model left for us in the New Testament. In the congregations of God today we should find nothing short of a match or an evident and ongoing attempt to match the examples of Jesus, Paul, Peter, and others in the first century Christian congregations, for such men surely show us what it means to ‘take the lead’ and they also show us how to be properly ‘submissive.’

“Taking the lead” naturally involves some element of risk in the Christian congregations of God, since those leading could potentially cause harm to others by setting an example that is not good for others to follow. In other words, if the wrong people are put into positions of responsibility, or kept from being held accountable for what they do and what they teach while “taking the lead,” then problems could quickly grow from bad to worse and stifle Christian growth and the development of a rational approach to faith and doctrine based on good reasons. Therefore, after we consider the New Testament pattern left for us of how first century Christians ‘took the lead’ in doing various things, we will consider the nature of and the extent to which others were and Christians today should be “obedient” and “submissive.” For if the wrong concept of “submission” and “obedience” is taught simultaneously with unqualified or unfit persons “taking the lead,” then it is only a matter of time before various types of spiritual, mental, and even physical abuse occurs (Matthew 7:15; Acts 20:29–30; 2 Timothy 2:16–18; Titus 1:10–11; 2 Peter 2:1–3). Finally, I will consider what it means to ‘promote a sect’ (Titus 3:10) according to the New Testament, and how those who do so should be treated or viewed by other Christians.

The objective here is to give a model for Christians today to follow when “taking the lead” among the congregations, show the proper, that is, the biblical teaching regarding ‘submission’ and being “obedient” to those who are “taking the lead,” and to help identify what it is that constitutes a “sect” according to the Bible. True, the New Testament teaches that “there must also be sects” among Christians, but this is so “the persons approved may also become manifest” (1 Corinthians 11:19). Thus, though there ‘must be sects’ we must also be on guard against them so that we are “the persons approved.”

“Those Taking the Lead” in the New Testament

The author of the “Letter to the Hebrews,” whom many believe to be the apostle Paul, referred three times to “those who are taking the lead among you” in Hebrews Chapter 13 (verses 7, 17, 24). The expression “those who are taking the lead” in the NWT translates the Greek *hoi hegoumenoi*, which is a masculine plural present participle that basically means “the (ones) leading.” The participial form comes from the root verb *hegeomai*, which can mean “to be in a supervisory capacity, *lead, guide*” (*A Greek-*

English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed., edited and revised by Frederick W. Danker [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000], hereafter, BDAG3,” page 434, under definition “1”). The *Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1985) gives “the (ones) governing” in the interlinear text of Hebrews 13:7, 17, and 24. But in what sense do we find Christians in the first century, in the New Testament, “governing,” ‘leading,’ or ‘guiding’?

The verb *hegeomai* occurs twenty-eight times in the New Testament, and eight times in the participial form *hegoumenos*. *Hegeomai* can also mean to “think, consider, regard” (BDAG3, page 434, under definition “2”). In fact, in twenty texts that is its meaning (Acts 26:2; 2 Corinthians 9:5; Philippians 2:3, 6, 25; 3:7, 8 [twice]; 1 Thessalonians 5:13; 2 Thessalonians 3:15; 1 Timothy 1:12; 6:1; Hebrews 10:29; 11:11, 26; James 1:2; 2 Peter 1:13; 2:13; 3:9; 3:15). In one text it refers to Jesus in some leadership, governing, or ruling capacity (Matthew 2:6). Once it refers to Joseph as “the (one) governing” Pharaoh’s “house” (Acts 7:10), and in the remaining six texts it refers to the role or actions of Christians in the New Testament (Luke 22:26; Acts 14:12; 15:22; Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24). It is to these six passages I will give my primary attention:

1) Luke 22:26 (with verses 24, 25, and 27):

However, there also arose a heated dispute among them over which one of them seemed to be greatest. But he said to them: “The kings of the nations lord it over them, and those having authority over them are called Benefactors. YOU, though, are not to be that way. But let him that is the greatest among YOU become as the youngest, and the one acting as chief [Greek: *ho hegoumenos*] as the one ministering. For which one is greater, the one reclining at the table or the one ministering? Is it not the one reclining at the table? But I am in YOUR midst as the one ministering.

The teaching here is that those who are ‘taking the lead,’ or as translated in the NWT “the one acting as chief,” among other Christians should, like Jesus, be “as the one ministering.” In this particular account that involved Jesus passing out the bread and wine for the Passover meal (Luke 22:14–22). He treated them as his guests, and he cared for them. He put them in the favorable position at the table, not himself.

2) Acts 14:12 (with verses 8–11, 13–15):

Now in Lys´tra there was sitting a certain man disabled in his feet, lame from his mother’s womb, and he had never walked at all. This man was listening to Paul speak, who, on looking at him intently and seeing he had faith to be made well, said with a loud voice: “Stand up erect on your feet.” And he leaped up and began walking. And the crowds, seeing what Paul had done, raised their voices, saying in the Lyc·a·o´ni·an tongue: “The gods have become like humans and have come down to us!” And they went calling Bar´na·bas Zeus, but Paul Her´mes, since he was the one taking the lead [Greek: *ho hegoumenos*] in speaking. And the priest

of Zeus, whose [temple] was before the city, brought bulls and garlands to the gates and was desiring to offer sacrifices with the crowds. However, when the apostles Bar´na·bas and Paul heard of it, they ripped their outer garments and leaped out into the crowd, crying out and saying: “Men, why are YOU doing these things? We also are humans having the same infirmities as YOU do, and are declaring the good news to YOU, for YOU to turn from these vain things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all the things in them.

In this account, the apostle Paul is said to have ‘taken the lead in speaking.’ He did this after first entering a synagogue in Iconium and speaking “in such a manner that a great multitude of both Jews and Greeks became believers” (Acts 14:1). Even after “the Jews that did not believe stirred up and wrongly influenced the souls of people of the nations against the brother,” they “spent considerable time speaking with boldness” (Acts 14:2–3). Only after “a violent attempt took place” did they leave and go to Lystra, where they again spoke and ‘declared the good news’ (Acts 14:5, 7, 12, 15). In *these* ways they, and Paul in particular, ‘took the lead.’

It is also important to note that in “taking the lead” Paul and Barnabas did not allow others to develop an improper view of their role as servants. They would have none of the adoration and religious honor that the Lycaonians sought to give them. Instead they “ripped their outer garments and leaped out into the crowd, crying out and saying: ‘Men, why are you doing these things? We also are humans having the same infirmities as you do’” (Acts 14:14–15). Similarly, today any Christians “taking the lead,” no matter what they accomplish or display while doing so, should never, ever permit others to devote themselves to those who are merely “humans.” All glory and honor for any service must be directed “to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all the things in them” (Acts 14:15), and not to any man or group of men.

3) Acts 15:22:

Then the apostles and the older men together with the whole congregation favored sending chosen men from among them to Antioch along with Paul and Bar´na·bas, namely, Judas who was called Bar´sab·bas and Silas, leading men among the brothers [Greek: *andras hegoumenous en tois adelphois*].

Here Judas and Silas were chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas in returning to Antioch with the decrees decided ‘unanimously’ (Acts 15:25) concerning the eating of “blood,” the eating of “things strangled,” and the eating of “things sacrificed to idols,” as well as from the act of fornication. They were to avoid or “abstain” from such things. But to understand why “the apostles and the older men together with the whole congregation” considered Judas and Silas “leading men among the brothers,” we must look at what is said elsewhere concerning them.

After arriving in Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, Judas and Silas bore witness to the congregation concerning “the letter” that they brought with them containing the decrees that had been decided upon in response to the questions that had come up concerning circumcision and the law of Moses (Acts 15:5, 27, 30). But after the letter was read with ‘rejoicing,’ “Judas and Silas, since they themselves were also prophets, encouraged the brothers with many a discourse and strengthened them” (Acts 15:31). So it appears they were noted for their acting as true Christian “prophets” and teachers and they ‘took the lead’ by giving encouraging discourses that “strengthened” the congregations. They did not merely repeat a scripted talk from those from whom they came, but they spoke in addition to the decrees that had been decided “unanimously” upon by all.

4), 5), and 6) Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24 (with verses 8, 9):

Remember those who are taking the lead among YOU [Greek: *ton hegoumenon humon*], who have spoken the word of God to YOU, and as YOU contemplate how [their] conduct turns out imitate [their] faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, and forever. Do not be carried away with various and strange teachings; for it is fine for the heart to be given firmness by undeserved kindness, not by eatables, by which those who occupy themselves with them have not been benefited. . . Be obedient to those who are taking the lead among YOU [Greek: *tois hegoumenois humon*], and be submissive, for they are keeping watch over YOUR souls as those who will render an account; that they may do this with joy and not with sighing, for this would be damaging to YOU. . . Give my greetings to all those who are taking the lead among YOU [Greek: *tous hegoumenous humon*], and to all the holy ones. Those in Italy send YOU their greetings.

Three times the author of Hebrews refers to those “taking the lead among you,” and in the first instance he identifies these ones further as those “who have spoken the word of God to you.” It is only because of this that he can say to the rest, “As you contemplate how [their] conduct turns out imitate [their] faith.” If those “taking the lead” in fact do so by ‘speaking the word of God’ and by giving others in the congregations an example in “conduct” and in “faith,” then they should be ‘imitated.’ In other words, those being “obedient” and “submissive” should *do the same things*. There should never be a problem with ‘being obedient’ in this way, for those who provide the examples to follow are like Jesus Christ: They are “last of all and minister of all” (Mark 9:35); they are the ones who though “acting as chief” become “as the one ministering” (Luke 22:26).

But what else is involved in being “obedient” and “submissive” to those “taking the lead,” according to what is taught in the New Testament? How can a Christian be humble and “imitate” the “faith” and “conduct” of those “who have spoken the word of God” without being “carried away with various and strange teachings” (Hebrews 13:9)?

Being “Obedient” and “Submissive” in the New Testament

Those “taking the lead” in the congregations of God are charged with ‘speaking the word of God’ and with setting an example in “conduct” and in “faith” for others to follow (Hebrews 13:7). To do so, they must be like Jesus Christ, the one who “set the pattern” for others to follow (John 13:15). They must never abuse their role in the congregations, but “be reasonable, exhibiting all mildness toward all men” (Titus 3:2). “Taking the lead” in speaking and in teaching the congregations does not give one the authority to look down on others, as if they are lesser ones. Rather, at all times those “taking the lead” should, again, “set the pattern” like Jesus did “with lowliness of mind considering that the others are superior to you” (Philippians 2:3).

But there have been and there are still times when “oppressive wolves” enter in and do not set an example in “conduct” and in “faith” for others to follow. Instead they do not “treat the flock with tenderness” and they “speak twisted things to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:29–30). Therefore, anyone who thinks that the ‘obedience’ or ‘submission’ spoken of in Hebrews 13:17 (quoted in the previous section) is required even when “those taking the lead” do not ‘speak the word of God’ (Hebrews 13:7), is not following the teaching of the New Testament. In addition to what we considered above relative to those things that would mark the ones “taking the lead” in a manner worthy of ‘imitation,’ consider how the Greek words for “be obedient” (a form of the Greek verb *peitho*) and “be submissive” (form of the verb *hupeiko*) in Hebrews 13:17 are used elsewhere in the New Testament:

Peitho: This verb is used fifty-two times in the New Testament. BDAG3, page 792, gives several definitions for *peitho*, including “*be convinced, be sure, certain*” (definition 2.,b.), “*to be won over as the result of persuasion*” (definition 3.), and “*obey, follow w[ith] dat[ive] of pers[on] or thing*” (meaning that the person or thing which is to be ‘obeyed’ or ‘followed’ is in the grammatical case known as the “dative”). It is this last definition that fits the grammatical qualification (“with the dative of person”) in Hebrews 13:17. Other instances of *peitho* with the dative or person or thing include Romans 2:8, Galatians 5:7, and James 3:3. These verses read according to the NWT:

Romans 2:8: however, for those who are contentious and who disobey the truth but obey [form of *peitho*] unrighteousness there will be wrath and anger.

Galatians 5:7 (with verse 8): YOU were running well. Who hindered YOU from keeping on obeying [form of *peitho*] the truth? This sort of persuasion [form of *peithos*, a noun related to *peitho*] is not from the One calling YOU.

James 3:3: If we put bridles in the mouths of horses for them to obey [form of *peitho*] us, we manage also their whole body.

Aside from the use in James 3:3 in reference to “horses” who obey their owners, in each of the other two references *peitho* is clearly not used for approved obedience. In fact,

the use in Romans 2:8 shows that people can “obey unrighteousness” and bring upon themselves “wrath and anger,” also because they ‘disobeyed [form of *apeitheo*, the opposite of *peitho*] the truth.’ According to the use of *peitho* in Galatians 5:7 and the related use of *peithos* in verse 8, those in the congregations can be “hindered” from “obeying [form of *peitho*] the truth,” and this is because of a “persuasion” (= the noun *peithos*) that “is not from the One calling you.”

So in no sense should “be obedient” in Hebrews 13:17 be taken to mean that we are ever to “disobey the truth” or “obey unrighteousness.” In fact, other uses of *peitho* and the use of *peithos* in Galatians 5:8 shows us that there is a very real danger of falling victim to forms of “persuasion” that are not from God. Such forms of persuasion even affected the first century congregation, as is clear from Paul’s words above. But in connection with “the holy writings” that we have good reasons to believe are “inspired of God,” Christians should “continue in the things that you learned and were persuaded to believe” (2 Timothy 3:14–16). What about being “submissive”?

Hupeiko: This verb is used only once in the entire New Testament and that is in our subject text, Hebrews 13:17. BDAG3, page 1030, gives “to yield to someone’s authority” and “w[ith] dat[ive] of pers[on] to whom one submits ... Hb 13:7.” But remember that those to whom we are to be “obedient” or to whom we are “to yield” are the ones “who have spoken the word of God” to us (Hebrews 13:7). Christians are not simply to ‘yield to the authority’ of someone, anyone who claims to represent God or Christ but who does not at the same time teach us truth and set a good example in “conduct” and in “faith.” Further, we are warned elsewhere in the New Testament against those who want us to submit *to them*, rather than to the teachings of Jesus Christ and his apostles and first-century followers. Consider:

Galatians 4:16, 17 (NWT)

Well, then, have I become YOUR enemy because I tell YOU the truth? They zealously seek YOU, not in a fine way, but they want to shut YOU off [from me], that YOU may zealously seek them.

Philippians 2:20–22 (NWT)

For I have no one else of a disposition like his who will genuinely care for the things pertaining to YOU. For all the others are seeking their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. But YOU know the proof he gave of himself, that like a child with a father he slaved with me in furtherance of the good news.

To not be aware of the dangers involved in giving unchecked ‘submission’ or ‘obedience’ to others is to ignore the very real dangers that were not only present back in the first century congregations, but it also ignores what was prophesied to be present in the congregations of God during “the Lord’s day” (Revelation 1:1; 2:6, 14, 15, 20). There is no New Testament model supporting the idea of unchecked authority or that

teaches Christians to accept whatever those currently “taking the lead” are doing or teaching in the congregations without first ‘making sure’ (1 Thessalonians 5:21) that they are in line with that which is “beneficial for teaching, for reproof, for setting things straight, for disciplining in righteousness,” namely, “all scripture” (2 Timothy 3:16).

The historical book of Acts tells us of a time when Silas and Paul traveled to Berea and “went into the synagogue of the Jews” (Acts 17:10). These Jews are described in the Bible as “more noble-minded” than those in Thessalonica because they were “carefully examining the Scriptures daily [to see] whether [the things Paul and Silas told them] were so” (Acts 17:11). They did not simply accept what they were told until they first checked what was said against the “Scriptures.” Indeed, even when speaking to the Christian congregation in Galatia Paul established that this was the model to follow while showing “submission” to those “taking the lead”:

Galatians 1:6–12 (NWT)

I marvel that YOU are being so quickly removed from the One who called YOU with Christ’s undeserved kindness over to another sort of good news. But it is not another; only there are certain ones who are causing YOU trouble and wanting to pervert the good news about the Christ. However, even if we or an angel out of heaven were to declare to YOU as good news something beyond what we declared to YOU as good news, let him be accursed. As we have said above, I also now say again, Whoever it is that is declaring to YOU as good news something beyond what YOU accepted, let him be accursed. Is it, in fact, men I am now trying to persuade or God? Or am I seeking to please men? If I were yet pleasing men, I would not be Christ’s slave.

Clearly, then, in no sense are Christians to simply submit and accept what others, in particular those “taking the lead,” teach us. Not even if it is the apostle Paul. Not even if it is an “angel out of heaven.” And certainly not if it is something taught by someone or some group that does not want anyone to carefully review all of the facts concerning the teaching before accepting it and teaching it to others. Christians are to “pay constant attention to [ourselves] and to [our] teaching,” “for by doing this [we] will save both [ourselves] and those who listen to [us]” (1 Timothy 4:16). That can hardly be done when others do not want us to carefully evaluate the teachings that are given to the congregations.

But what should Christians do if it is found out, after careful and prayerful consideration, that false teachings are being accepted by the congregations? What if those looked to as examples are actually not ‘speaking the word of God’ (Hebrews 13:7), but are instead speaking their own words by going beyond what is written in the Bible? How can Christians desirous of doing good and teaching the truth about Jehovah God and Christ Jesus keep others from promoting a sect based on teachings that are not supported by the Bible, when those who are teaching such things forbid others from

questioning their authority and do not, like Paul, hold themselves accountable to the congregations (Matthew 18:15–17)?

Reject Promoters of a “Sect”

Before a “sect” in the biblical sense can be rejected it must first be identified properly. It is also important for Christians to have clearly in mind what it means to ‘promote a sect’ according to the New Testament, this so that misunderstandings and confusion about what some seem to think ‘promoting a sect’ means does not end up preventing a solution to the very problem that needs solving (that is, ‘promoting a sect’). Considering what it really means to ‘promote a sect’ according to the Bible will hopefully help keep others from making the mistake of thinking that those who speak the truth could ever, in a New Testament sense, be considered promoters of a “sect,” which is not much different from saying that “good” is “bad” and “bad” is “good” (Isaiah 5:20).

True promoters of a “sect” seem to have one thing in common: fear. They are afraid of being found out, for that would mean they would lose their place and position (compare John 11:48). They are usually not simply found making a mistake here or there, which is something that will likely happen to us all at some point (compare 1 John 1:8). At times, those appointed to positions of responsibility, such as ‘feeding Christ’s sheep’ like Peter (John 21:15–17), may even ‘stand condemned’ for “not walking straight according to the truth of the good news” and for “compelling people of the nations to live according to Jewish practice” (Galatians 2:11–14). But promoters of a sect are different even from those who commit these kinds of serious errors. Unlike Peter, they insulate themselves from correction and they refuse to be held accountable for their actions as they ‘deviate from the truth’ (2 Timothy 2:18). Likely, that is why Paul was so worried about the state of the congregations after his departure:

Acts 20:29–32 (NWT)

I know that after my going away oppressive wolves will enter in among YOU and will not treat the flock with tenderness, and from among YOU yourselves men will rise and speak twisted things to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore keep awake, and bear in mind that for three years, night and day, I did not quit admonishing each one with tears. And now I commit YOU to God and to the word of his undeserved kindness, which [word] can build YOU up ...

How, though, can we better recognize these “wolves”? It was already seen that the apostle Paul cautioned everyone against “good news” that is different from the one we received from Jesus and from his apostles in the first place, the best record of which we find in the New Testament. So it is really not much more complicated than simply comparing what others present as “good news” with what the New Testament teaches us to accept, over and against what anyone else, including angels from heaven, might tell us is the “good news.” What, then, is the biblical “good news”?

It is the “good news of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23; 24:14). It is “the good news about Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1; Acts 5:42; 8:35). It is “the good news of God” (Mark 1:14; 2 Corinthians 11:7). It is “the good news of the word” (Acts 8:4). It is “the good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:36; Ephesians 2:17). It is “the good news of Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18). It is “the good news of the undeserved kindness of God” (Acts 20:24). It is “the good news about his [= God’s] Son” (Romans 1:9). It is “the good news about the faith” (Galatians 1:23). It is “the good news about your salvation” (Ephesians 1:13). It is “the good news about the unfathomable riches of the Christ” (Ephesians 3:8). *That’s* the “good news” Christians declare in association with all that the Bible clearly teaches concerning it, nothing more, and certainly nothing less.

But in the first century congregations this “good news” was not enough for some. They had to go beyond what Jesus and his apostles taught, making Christian life either too rigid (as in the case of the Nicolaitans [see the discussion of this group in my “The Congregations of God During ‘the Lord’s Day,’” IN MEDIO, June 1, 2007, under **Rev 2:6**]), or by simply choosing to ignore what was taught in favor of “their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:21). Regarding such persons, Paul wrote:

Titus 3:10–11 (NWT)

As for a man that promotes a sect, reject him after a first and a second admonition; knowing that such a man has been turned out of the way and is sinning, he being self-condemned.

“The way” is another way of speaking about Christianity as practiced by Jesus’ early apostles and disciples (Acts 9:2). People who ‘turn away from The Way’ and promote a “sect” outside of it are “sinning.” The difference today between those who promote “The Way” and those who do not can be seen by simply comparing what is said concerning “The Way” in the New Testament with the teachings and actions of those who claim to belong to it. For example:

Acts 19:8–10 (NWT)

Entering into the synagogue, he spoke with boldness for three months, giving talks and using persuasion concerning the kingdom of God. But when some went on hardening themselves and not believing, speaking injuriously about The Way before the multitude, he withdrew from them and separated the disciples from them, daily giving talks in the school [auditorium] of Ty·ran´nus. This took place for two years, so that all those inhabiting the [district of] Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

True followers of “The Way” do not fear speaking publicly or in synagogues, modern churches, or wherever they can use “persuasion concerning the kingdom of God.” They do not hide from the world, but they engage it directly, “with boldness,” giving others an opportunity to either believe or ‘harden themselves by not believing and speaking injuriously about The Way.’ While some choose not to believe, the “boldness” associated

with The Way often results in changing ‘a considerable crowd and turning them to another opinion’ (Acts 19:26). Those who promote a “sect,” however, usually do so in close association with what is true, making it harder for people to distinguish it from what is false. This has the effect of misleading the public and the congregations of God, and so the New Testaments speaks out strongly against such counterfeit forms of Christianity:

2 Peter 2:1–3 (NWT)

However, there also came to be false prophets among the people, as there will also be false teachers among YOU. These very ones will quietly bring in destructive sects and will disown even the owner that bought them, bringing speedy destruction upon themselves. Furthermore, many will follow their acts of loose conduct, and on account of these the way of the truth will be spoken of abusively. Also, with covetousness they will exploit YOU with counterfeit words. But as for them, the judgment from of old is not moving slowly, and the destruction of them is not slumbering.

This text makes clear these facts: there will be “false prophets among the people”; “there will also be false teachers among” the people; these ones will “quietly” introduce “destructive sects” and “many will follow their acts” and because of this “the way of the truth will be spoken of abusively”; the false teachers and false prophets will speak “counterfeit words,” words that seem like the truth but that are intended to “exploit you.”

“The way of the truth will be spoken of abusively...” How can speaking the truth cause “the way of the truth” to be ‘spoken of abusively’? It cannot! That is why once you get past everything else, all you have to do is look at those representing themselves as Christians and compare what they do and what they teach to what is accepted with good reasons as truth by all Christians, namely, the Bible. False prophets and false teachers want to avoid close scrutiny. They want to make it seem like you are being disloyal to the truth if you use the truth to find out whether or not they are teaching the truth. They want to suppress your ability and your desire to ‘carefully examine the Scriptures daily as to whether the things they teach are so’ (Acts 17:11). They are afraid to be subject to Jesus’ counsel in Matthew 18:15–17. They are afraid to subject their teachings to comparison with the teachings of the New Testament, completely unlike the apostle Paul (Galatians 1:8–9). They know that they will not pass the “test” (Revelation 2:2), so they instead try to set themselves above those who might question them, as ‘masters of their faith’ rather than as ‘fellow workers’ (2 Corinthians 1:24). That is why they should be ‘rejected’ after “a first and a second admonition” (Titus 3:10).

Conclusion

Jesus Christ “set the pattern” for those intent on following his ways and teachings (John 13:15). He was God’s Son, the Messiah, the one in whose name ‘every knee will bend of

those in heaven and those on earth and those under the ground, to the glory of God the Father’ (Philippians 2:10–11). To him people could come and ‘find refreshment for their souls’ since he was mild-tempered and lowly in heart,’ and because ‘his yoke is kindly and his load is light’ (Matthew 11:29–30).

Many of his early disciples followed his example and “took the lead” among the congregations of God by “speaking the word of God” publicly before all, in synagogues, and to the congregations, and by their “faith” and by their “conduct” (Acts 14:1–3, 12; 15:22, 31; Hebrews 13:7). For these reasons, others in the congregations were “obedient” and “submissive” to them (Hebrews 13:17). But this was never understood by anyone, not by those “taking the lead” or by those who were “obedient” or “submissive,” to mean that there should be total submission to those “taking the lead,” and certainly not if it ever became manifest that “those taking the lead” were “seeking their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:21).

This could only be determined by considering whether or not those “taking the lead” were obeying the truth” or whether they were ‘disobeying the truth and obeying unrighteousness,’ because there is a “sort of persuasion” that is “not from the One calling you” (Romans 2:8; Galatians 5:7, 8). The “truth,” for Christians, is found in the Bible. In particular, Christian truth has to do with the “good news” recorded in the New Testament. This “good news” does ‘not need anything to be written’ concerning “the times and the seasons,” because those believing it are content with knowing that Christ Jesus will come “as a thief” (1 Thessalonians 5:1). This keeps them ever awake, and it does not ever cause them to fall prey to false predictions or wrong expectations by false prophets or by false teachers.

The “good news” that Christians believe and accept from those “taking the lead” is about the “kingdom” that will come and bring about God’s will for the earth, as it does in heaven (Matthew 4:23; 6:10; compare Daniel 2:44). The “good news” is about Jesus Christ and his resurrection (Acts 5:42; 17:18). It is about the undeserved kindness of Jehovah God (Acts 20:24; 2 Corinthians 11:7). It is about faith, salvation, and “the unfathomable riches of the Christ” (Galatians 1:23; Ephesians 1:13; 3:8). When a “counterfeit” good news is taught today by those seeking to “draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:30; 2 Peter 2:3), it must be rejected no matter who it is that teaches it. It does not matter if the apostle Paul appears in a vision or if a glorious angel comes down from heaven itself to teach some other “good news.” If they do, we are told by one who truly ‘took the lead’ among the congregations, and who may very well have written the counsel to ‘obey’ and ‘submit’ to those “taking the lead,” to reject such messengers as false, even as “accursed” (Galatians 1:8–9; Hebrews 13:17).

Christians today, like in the first century, need to be careful. They need to be careful not only because we live in a world that is filled with temptations and trials of faith, but because the congregations of God are subject to “false prophets” and “false teachers”

whom the Bible says “will quietly bring in destructive sects and [who] will disown even the owner that bought them,” causing “the way of the truth [to] be spoken of abusively” (2 Peter 2:1–2). But even though it was foretold that “there must also be sects among YOU, that the persons approved may also become manifest” (1 Corinthians 11:19), if we “shepherd the flock of God in [our] care, not under compulsion, but willingly; neither for love of dishonest gain, but eagerly; neither as lording it over those who are God’s inheritance, but [by] becoming examples to the flock,” then “when the chief shepherd has been made manifest, YOU will receive the unfadable crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:1–4).

Greg Stafford

(REVISED April 20, 2008)*

***This article was revised only with respect to its formatting. No changes were made to the content of the original article.**