

Followship

No, that isn't a typo. I did not intend to write "fellowship," a word we use frequently in church life. I meant "followship," a much less used term. In fact, I'm not even sure it's a real word. Merriam-Webster Online says it doesn't exist. It may not be present in the dictionary, but I'll tell you where it is present one hundred percent of the time: In healthy churches.

We are all familiar with the term "leadership." Much is written about it. We admire good leaders. We want our pastors to be good leaders and that is appropriate. Being the pastor of a local church is a leadership calling of the highest order. If you find a vibrant church of any size, you will usually find a pastor who has been there for years and exercises a high degree of influence in a way that honors the Lord. Effective pastors are leaders.

That takes us back to our made-up word. Followship is the flipside of leadership. It happens when church members submit to the leadership of the pastor and follow his example in mission and ministry. That may not sound democratic, but it is most certainly biblical. The author of Hebrews told his readers,

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:17 ESV)

Paul told the Thessalonian church something similar.

We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 ESV)

From these passages we can put together a definition of followship in the church. Followship means obeying, submitting to, cooperating with, respecting, and loving those whom the Lord has called as leaders in His church. Pastors who give good leadership and congregations who give good followship are a powerful combination. Notice also that members are doing themselves a favor when they follow well. Good followship contributes to harmonious fellowship and the well-being of the church.

We can conclude, then, that pastoral leadership and church followship should be the norm. At this point a legitimate question is, "Are there times when I should NOT follow my pastor?" I am indebted to Dr. J.K. Minton for teaching me many years ago how to address this question. He taught me that the pastor should be followed unless he has a "MELT-down." "MELT" stands for four situations in which the pastor should be confronted rather than followed.

- Moral – If the pastor is doing something immoral

- Ethical – If the pastor is doing something unethical
- Legal – If the pastor is doing something illegal
- Theological – If the pastor is teaching something that is in violation of clear, indisputable biblical teaching.

If a MELT-down occurs, it is the congregation's responsibility to confront the pastor and take necessary action. But I will add two cautions.

First, if you have a concern in one of those four areas, don't participate in gossip or slander. Go to the pastor first, share your concern, and listen. You might find that a misunderstanding or false rumor has been at work.

Second, make sure that your concern is based on clear biblical principles and is not really about ministry preferences or disputable interpretations of difficult Bible passages. Often we try to find moral, ethical, legal, or theological reasons to "dress up" what is simply a matter of preference. We like a particular way of doing things in the church and are unhappy when we don't get our preference. Sometimes we try to pass off our interpretation of a disputable passage or doctrine as the only possible one. Be honest and self-aware. With prayer, submission to the Holy Spirit, and wise counsel, make sure you get to the core issue in your own heart before you do or say anything.

So here's the bottom line. Absent a legitimate MELT-down issue, a church member's biblical responsibility is to obey, submit to, cooperate with, respect, and love those whom the Lord has placed in leadership of His church. Followship is the biblical posture of a member who desires to honor the Lord and strengthen the local church.

May your church be full of such folks!