

“God’s Exhortation to Elders”

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Scriptural Foundation: 1 Peter 5:1-5, ESV

We have been studying 1 Peter and we come to the final chapter in this great letter, a letter given to encourage us in times of suffering, difficulty, and in the context of our Christian faith, suffering for the sake of Christ. This chapter is interesting because it seems as though Peter breaks away from theme and topic and gives words to shepherds. This is not a break, but it is a natural continuation of what he has been teaching.

Shepherd the Flock of God

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”¹

How does God intend for a local church to be governed? Biblically sound churches are divided over this very question. Episcopalian churches have bishops with regional authority and archbishops over them. Presbyterian churches grant local authority to elders, regional authority to presbyteries, and national authority to general assembly. Baptist churches typically hold to the autonomy of each, individual local church, and yet there is incredible diversity within Baptist churches and like-Baptist churches with regard to how they are governed. Some are governed by a pastor, some by the congregation, some by deacons, and others like ours by elders.

So, who is right in all this? Has God given us a specific pattern for church governance? The answer to that question is: “Yes, absolutely!” and “No.” Yes, God has given us some very clear instructions. I believe certain principles of church governance are so clear no one should miss them. But, also, the answer to that question is, “No.” God has not left us with a printed constitution and by-laws that spell out all the details of church polity for us. Disagreement regarding church governance is legitimate as we try to honestly apply scripture faithfully in the local church.

The Bethany Baptist Church leadership consists of nine lay elders who work alongside the staff pastors to teach, lead, pray for, disciple, exhort, protect, and discipline the flock. The elders hold the staff accountable for their work and act from a human perspective as the authoritative voice of the church.

Every year three elders rotate off of serving on the Elder Board for a period of at least one year, and three new elders replace them. The process for selecting new elders includes a nominating committee, a vetting process, and an opportunity for the church at large to speak into those who are set before us to be considered as elders. Finally, there is a vote of the entire church for approval. I ask you to pray for the nominating committee as they are currently meeting to discern the Lord’s and what He would have us to do with regards to our church leadership. We need God’s direction. Jesus is the Head of the church and yet Jesus entrusts faithful men into roles as shepherds under Him. The role of the nominating committee is not to determine and choose the next three elders, but to seek God’s leading and to affirm God’s leading in that regard. We hope in early April to be able to set before you three new names, but I ask you to begin to pray for that now.

Some may be saying, “Boring! You usually begin with some story. What are you talking about – church governance? Let us move on to something more interesting.” I understand completely. Some of the details can be rather dull, but mundane matters are often the most fundamental and important matters to one’s life. It is unhealthy to neglect thoughtfulness of those areas which are significant, but not exciting. If you are a born-again Christian, this matter of church leadership is a matter of enormous practical importance. The elders’ leadership in the church impacts us powerfully in our personal walk with God, in the fruitfulness of our personal ministry with Christ’s church, in the

¹ Proverbs 3:34

lives of families and of moms and dads and children, and in the direction of our church family. So significant is the ministry of elders to a church, I encourage those looking for a church home to make the quality of spiritual leadership one of the top three considerations before committing to a church family.

Interestingly, I believe many do not consider this at all before choosing a church. Instead, other questions dominate: Is music pleasing? Does message keep my attention? Do I like the people? What programs do they have which meet needs of our family? These questions are legitimate, but I believe considering the spiritual quality of leadership is worthy of such consideration because of what God says to us regarding our responsiveness to church leadership once we voluntarily place ourselves under their leadership. Hebrews 13 tells us,

¹⁷ 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.

It is prudent to be slow before we submit our lives to a group of spiritual leaders, knowing God is going to call us to obey them. Peter knows how vital spiritual leadership is to a church. That is why he begins Chapter 5 the way he does.

In this study we will look at the work of the elders in the church, the warnings to elders in the church, the wait of elders, and finally the worth of elders in a church, how we are to esteem them.

We first consider the work of elders in the church,

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed...

The New American Standard Bible rightly translates the word “So...” as “Therefore”. Peter is not allowing his thoughts to meander into a wholly new subject, but rather he is keeping his train of thought and he is connecting this exhortation to elders with his previous comments in Chapter 4:12-19. Remember, Peter’s teaching,

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings...

Peter knows a fiery trial is coming upon the church. It is yet in the future and he talks about it in Chapter 4. He knows they have already experienced some suffering, but the fiery ordeal is yet ahead of them as well. He is not encouraging them that it will let up, and in fact, he indicates it is going to get worse. He understands the leaders of the church will be tested first and foremost and in the midst of their own pain of suffering for the cause of Christ, they still must keep their eyes upon the care of the church. They cannot allow their pain and persecution to cause them to look deeply inward only at themselves. They must keep their eyes up and outward, even as they are being stretched and pressed, even in their own misery. They cannot shrink into a self-focus in the midst of the difficulty. The shepherd’s leadership in rejoicing in the midst of persecution will set the course for the whole church’s response to persecution.

Then, in Chapter 4, Peter makes what seems to be at first a curious statement,

¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel...

At first this seems to be curious comfort for those who are suffering. He is writing to encourage them and he says, “I want to encourage you, in the midst of your suffering, in this way: know God’s judgment, first, comes upon God’s household.” How is that a comfort? First, notice Peter uses the word “judgment”. He does not use the word “punishment” or “condemnation”. We know, for those who are in Christ, and those are to people to whom Peter is writing, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.² God’s people are judged not unto condemnation but unto salvation and purification and glory.

² Romans 8:1

Here is a group of people who already born again into a living hope and who have escaped God's wrath, yet God is reminding them, in the midst of their suffering, judgment begins with the household of God. He is communicating to them, God is so interested in the eradication of sin and of its effects from His good creation, He begins this purifying process, this eradicating of sins, from His good world, first, in God's very house. He does not say, "They are covered by the Blood of the Lamb, so I can neglect sin and its presence in My people. No, this is where I begin to deal with sin, right here in the midst of My people."

The principle Peter is teaching us is: if He begins responding to the presence of sin in this world by dealing strongly with His own people, we can be absolutely certain He will not gloss over sin in the lives of those who do not obey the Gospel. The first issue at and for everyone reading this letter is: Have I obeyed the Gospel, because if I have not, then I am outside of God's grace.

What does it mean to obey the Gospel? In great simplicity, I believe John 3 answers that for us,

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Obedying the Gospel means believing in Jesus, humbling yourself before Christ, turning from your sin, and embracing Christ as Lord and Savior for one's own self. Have you obeyed the Gospel and have you received eternal life?

I believe Peter's thoughts have not been random, but they are being directed by God as Peter meditates upon Scripture. I do not believe Peter is writing this letter saying, "I wonder what I should say to these folks?" I believe he is meditating upon Scripture and God's Truth is flowing in him, through him, and out through his pen, underneath the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I believe Peter is specifically meditating upon the Book of Ezekiel. Why do I believe that? In Ezekiel, the first twenty-four chapters of his prophesy, is a pronouncement of God's judgments upon Israel, because Israel has been on a course of rapidly descending deeper and deeper into idolatry. King Josiah brought reforms and he tore down some of the places of idol worship. There seemed to be a natural revival, but then Josiah dies and immediately after him come some kings who lead the people back into idolatry.

Ezekiel, writing in that time, is saying, "Israel, wake up. The Judgment of God is coming upon you." But, interestingly, after Ezekiel writes about the Judgment of God upon Israel, in Chapters 1 through 24, what does he write about in Chapters 25 through 32? He writes about the Judgment of God coming upon the nations who are completely filled with idolatry, and that teaches us judgment begins, first, with the House of God and then with the nations. That is God's course and His process. We read in Ezekiel 9,

¹ Then he cried in my ears with a loud voice, saying, "Bring near the executioners of the city, each with his destroying weapon in his hand...⁶ Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were before the house.

He is saying, "Jerusalem, get ready because God's just response to idolatry is going to come upon you." Even in the time of judgment, condemnation, and punishment, God is setting aside His own for the protection of their physical life. Again, God is saying, "You are not only to go to the Nation of Israel, but go the holy city of Jerusalem, and then to the holiest place in Israel."

The elders bore the judgment first because they were the ones who were responsible for leading the people into faithful worship. Instead of leading the people into faithful worship, they were leading the people away from faithful worship. I believe Peter has been chewing on this passage as he is thinking about the fiery ordeal God is about to send on His church. It is quite natural his thoughts turn to the elders of the church as he makes this great principle: It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God. Therefore, elders, judgment begins with the household of God, but judgment first begins with the elders.

I believe James is thinking of the same principle when he says, in James 3,

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Elders and spiritual leaders, in view of this context, does God have our attention? This is a sobering thing when we consider the work of the Lord. God says, “So, I exhort the elders among you. In view of My judgment beginning with the household of God, I must talk with elders. I must get them ready for this.”

The first thing we must observe is: the churches had elders who exercised oversight over the churches. The churches in the 1st Century were not willy-nilly groups of people loosely tied together by love. No, they were organized with an identifiable, structured leadership. Remember we learned from 1 Peter 1:1, Peter wrote this letter to churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. This is an enormous area with incredible diversity of culture. There are likely dozens of churches in this huge span Peter is addressing in this letter. These churches have been established by the time Peter writes this letter, around 62-64 AD, roughly thirty years after the resurrection of Jesus. We see very established churches with elders and there is an assumption Peter gives, every church is going to have elders. Without qualification and without hesitation he simply says, “Therefore, elders...” These churches had a structure which was identified and recognized. Leadership though a group of elders was the norm for the church in the days of the Apostles.

I make much of this truth because many today have decided there is no place for the organized church. They contend to like spirituality, but to hate religion. Several months ago, a sharp young man named Jefferson Bethke wrote a lyric that went viral, tallying nearly 20 million hits during which people listened to the lyric of a song this fellow from the Northwest wrote. The song is entitled, “Why I hate religion, but love Jesus.” In it he said, “What if I told you Jesus came to abolish religion.” Jefferson Bethke writes many excellent and true points in his song, but he leaves the definition of religion ambiguous, and in doing so, he opens the door for believers to think they can legitimately walk away from organized Christianity and still love Jesus. I do not believe he intends that, but that is an impression which may be left upon the listener. But, frankly, the New Testament does not allow that.

Jesus loves church government and church organization. We know that because of the way He designed the church, for the church instituted by Jesus is a church with a specific dogma, or doctrine; with at least two specific, defined rituals, the Lord’s Supper and baptism; with orderly worship services which are scheduled, because we know that from the letters Paul, Peter, and the other Apostles write; with an open invitation for all to join in the worship services; with a very identified and specified leadership; and with an obligation to pay for some of the leaders who work hard at preaching and teaching God’s Word. The religion Jesus founded had remarkable structure and form to it from the beginning.

As an aside, Jefferson Bethke has responded to very well to those who have written critically about this song and I praise God for that because this is the way the body of Christ is supposed to work. We are to speak into each others lives and we are to be humble and consider whether or not God is speaking through His Spirit and through His Word to other believers.

In this text, Peter writes as a fellow elder. He does not write as a boss of the elders. He is not the one who is telling the other elders what to do because he is the “arch elder”. No, he is a fellow elder communicating he is working along side of other elders, the way God intends, and he is experiencing the very suffering they are experiencing.

What is God’s duty for leadership oversight? To what is He calling us? Here is the command which rings through this passage,

² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly...

With one word, Peter describes the whole of the work of the elder: “shepherd” them. We get the word “Pastor” from this word shepherd. Again Peter borrows this language from Ezekiel 34, and in this passage God tells Ezekiel,

² “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and

harshness you have ruled them.⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts.

He is angry with shepherds; judgment begins with shepherds.

What does shepherding involve? I believe this passage in Ezekiel outlines four specific actions involved in shepherding: Love, Feed, Defend, and Lead.

First, shepherding means elders have a loving concern for the sheep. Hirelings flee when they face danger that threatens their life, but the shepherd is willing to lay down his life for his sheep. We cannot become aloof when sheep are weak, or sick, or injured, or straying, or lost. We are called by God to work tirelessly for their welfare.

Secondly, elders are to feed the sheep wholesome food. God's shepherds labor to glean God's Truth from Scripture and then to prepare it so God's Truth is easily taken in and so it will nourish the souls of God's people as it is applied.

Third, elders are to defend the sheep against wolves. Shepherds cannot be fearful of standing against those who would harm God's people through deception or false doctrine or temptation toward evil.

Finally, elders are to be the leadership of the whole flock. This is the point Peter emphasizes when he writes the words "exercising oversight." In one sense, the shepherds are sheep like everyone else in God's flock. Jesus is our Chief Shepherd who loves us, feeds us, defends, and leads us. But, here also, there is another sense Peter wants us, as shepherds, to grab hold of: those whom God sets aside as human shepherds possess a remarkable stewardship and a solemn responsibility. Hebrews 13:17 says shepherds will give an accounting to God for the way they shepherded God's people. That weighs heavy on my soul when I think of the significance of this charge God has given to me. We do not listen for the applause of men, but we look for the smile of God in our work. That is what is valuable.

The authority of the human shepherds is a derived authority. We know our authority to shepherd extends only as far as Jesus the Chief Shepherd leads us. The church is still His church; the flock is still His flock. The church belongs to God and we are merely stewards of it.

Let us consider the warnings for elders in the church. Again, there is such a great warning from Ezekiel 34, which sets the tone of Peter's words,

⁸ "As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep,⁹ therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰ Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds..."

Those are solemn words. It is a great trust God has given to shepherds. What can we do as shepherds to avoid this indictment of God saying, "I am against you"? I believe Peter offers three warnings so elders can emulate our Chief Shepherd and we can avoid that indictment. First,

² ...not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you...

There is a danger of laziness and neglect in ministry. The church does not need leaders who grudgingly go to meetings and do their duty, but the church need shepherds who have a passion for Jesus, for the flock as a whole, and for the people as individuals. We are not hirelings who do a good job for a decent wage. We are shepherds who love God and love His children. We do not view ministry as an unwanted burden, but as a high privilege and honor.

C.S. Lewis observed the distinction between love and duty this way: "A perfect man would never act from a sense of duty, he'd always want the right thing more than the wrong one. Duty is only a substitute for love . . . like a crutch which is a substitute for a leg. Most of us need a crutch at times; but of course it is idiotic to use a crutch when our legs can do the journey on their own." C.S. Lewis is saying duty is a substitute for love and if we can minister out of love that is what a mature person desires because it is best. If we do not need the crutch, let us throw it away. The reason why a shepherd needs to be connected to God and to His Holy Spirit is because the Holy Spirit alone sheds God's loves abroad in our hearts, enabling us to be able to serve others, not out of obligation, but willingly out of the love God provides for us.

Compulsion will only ask us for the minimum requirements and it ultimately leads to laziness and a dereliction of our role. The difference between doing something in a way which is eager and in a way which is willing and doing something out of duty can be seen in the way we ask requests of our children. If we ask a child to go and clean their room, it is doubtful it will be done in any way other than out of obligation. It will be difficult to get them really excited about that responsibility and eager for it. But, if we ask them to go fishing or to go out and play football with their friends, then we are tapping into a motivation which is greater and stronger. One is an obligation and a duty; the other is fun and I believe ministry has to be fun in the sense of enjoying doing the will of God.

What are we to do if we are motivated by duty? We repent of our lack of love. We see this as a serious issue. We ought never to do our ministry simply out of a sense of cold duty. If that is the controlling, motivating influence in our hearts, then we must repent of that and turn to God and recognize only God can change our heart. God has provided everything in Christ we need so we can delight in Him and delight in the work He has given to us.

Why would a shepherd be tempted to serve out of duty, rather than out of willingness and out of delight? The answer is: because the work is hard and sometimes dangerous, especially in 1st Century context of persecution! Being a leader in the church made these men targets of those who hated Christ. The work of shepherding was difficult because it took them away from a life free from threats and hassles brought on by their allegiance to Jesus. It took them away from their jobs, costing them time and money. It took them away from sweet fellowship with their wives and children. It took them away from physical sleep and rest. It took them away from leisure hobbies they enjoyed, and it placed them in the middle of other people's sins, other people's conflicts, other people's trials, and other people's misery. For all these reasons, there is a temptation for a spiritual leader to do the work out of obligation as opposed to out of a willing delight. We ruin ourselves and the ministry God gives to us if we do not strive to be motivated by a loving heart.

Then Peter instructs a shepherd to serve "not for shameful gain, but eagerly". The danger here is not so much in laziness, as in the first one, but it is the misuse of money, covetousness. He likely is referring to shepherds who legitimately earned a living through their work. 1 Timothy 5 communicates it is a good thing, for those who work hard, particularly in preaching and teaching, to receive wages for their labor. That was established in the 1st Century, but an elder or a pastor is never to do the work because of the money offered. Money is necessary to purchase the necessities of life, food and clothing, but it is not to be the driving love of the shepherds. When it does become that, something twisted happens in the church,

¹⁷ Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

Even those elders not receiving a paycheck directly from the church may see a financial benefit from the business contacts they make in church and the elbows they rub against. Unfortunately, we find too many pastors and spiritual leaders who seem to be driven in their work by a love for money. Spiritual leaders, God calls for us to be known more for our giving than for our receiving. May God make that so.

The third warning Peter gives to shepherds is,

³ ...not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples...

Here the danger is the misuse of power. Elders win through encouragement, which is the way we work, and not through abusing our power and forcing others to do that which is against their will. The power of leadership is like dynamite, it can be very helpful, but it can also destroy. Spiritual leaders lead by serving, not by lording. There is never a call for us to flaunt our power. It is not a call to stand in the limelight. It is not a call to love the titles of respect given to us. It is not a call to crave the praise of man, but it is a call to be gentle and never harsh with people. It is a call to lead through the way we live by way of our example, rather than through criticism, through bullying, through edicts and pronouncements, through harsh words, or through the negative condemnation of others. It is a time to lead by service to Christ.

This is the way Jesus taught us about leadership. He said, in Mark 10,

⁴² And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Dwight D. Eisenhower used to demonstrate the art of leadership in a simple but forceful way. He would place a single piece of string on a table and say, “Pull it, and it follows wherever you want it to go. But push it, and it goes nowhere.” Leaders, do not lord it over them and push the flock, but if we get out in front and live a godly life as an example, we are able to pull others along with us for the glory of Christ.

The third point is the wait of elders in the church,

⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Peter subtly acknowledges elders may be engaged in thankless work and with very little reward in this realm. That is okay, because God sees the work and He will reward that work; wait upon the Lord to bring His reward. We should not become impatient about the reward. If we are impatient about the reward, receive getting much joy, or kickback, from the work now, we will become discouraged and one of the three warnings, if not all of them, will happen in our life. We are to wait for that day because it will all be worth it.

Paul talks about that as well in 1 Corinthians 15. He is talking about the resurrection of our bodies, the day Jesus returns and our bodies become transformed, and he says,

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

There is a payday some day for all those who work and do the will of God.

Finally, let us consider the worth of elders in the church,

⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Be subject, here is the responsiveness to the church. Do we want leaders who will lead us well, then we must respond appropriately to their leadership. We should be eager to cooperate. We should not make leadership difficult for them. We should be willing to support them and their work.

This does not mean we always agree with all their decisions, but it means if they are not violating biblical principle, then we must get behind their decision. It may not be the decision we would want, but we must not sabotage their work or disrupt their efforts. When elders are leading according to God’s Word, they are leading with God’s glory in view and with our good in view. We must rejoice God has given such hard working, Christ-centered leaders. We must be subject to them.

I love the redemptive aspect of all of our being able to be a part of God’s work. Here is Peter writing about being a fellow elder, writing to the shepherds of the flock of God, and I cannot help but think he is thinking back to a day, thirty years earlier in his life, when he got up early in the morning, went out to the Sea of Galilee and began to fish. This incident occurred after he had denied the Lord Jesus three times. It occurred after Jesus was crucified on the cross. It occurred after Jesus rose from the dead and Peter was able to see Him. This is recorded in John 21. Peter goes fishing because, I believe, he believes God is through with him because he failed God. Yes, Jesus rose from the dead. Yes, there is hope for life, but Peter felt He was through with him.

As they are out, they do not catch any fish. As they come back they find Jesus, the resurrected Lord, standing on the shore. Jesus cooks them some breakfast, and

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “*Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?*” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “*Feed my lambs.*” ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, “*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “*Tend my sheep.*” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “*Feed my sheep.*”

Two truths emerge from that great story. First, God is a God who redeems us in the midst of our fallenness and our brokenness and failures. Second, our love for Jesus is connected with our love, as shepherds, for God’s people. If we love God we will attend and shepherd God’s sheep with faithfulness, with willingness, with great eagerness, and with energy. May God help us and may God encourage you, God’s flock, to pray for your leaders in this way.