

FIRST PETER

Lesson 21

Diligent Elders

1 Peter 5:1-4

Who has the responsibility for pastoring a local congregation? Is it the pastor, the elders, the deacons or the congregation? In the broadest sense, it is the responsibility of every Christian in a local church to use his spiritual gift or gifts to minister to the total body of believers. In the narrowest sense, the responsibility for the pastoral care of God's flock rests with the elders in the local church. The pastor is but one of the elders, and he should rightly be viewed as the teaching elder whose primary task is to feed people the Word of God by formal teaching and preaching. The task of all the elders is to shepherd the flock, and this is what 1 Peter 5:1-4 is all about.

The first eleven verses of 1 Peter 5 is one unit which has as its theme "The Conduct of the Christian Church in Light of Suffering." The first four verses deal with the responsibility of shepherds and verses 5-11 deal with the responsibility of sheep.

In this lesson we are dealing with the section pertinent to shepherds (elders), but each member of the congregation should know what the duties of a shepherd are so he can exhort the shepherds to shepherd.

DESIGNATION OF AN ELDER (5: 1a)

"Therefore"

This takes us back to 1 Peter 4:12-19 where the subject is the unjust suffering these Christians were experiencing. They were being persecuted for the name of Christ. They belonged to a hurting church, and Peter knew that a hurting church needed good, sound and caring leadership. It needed not only leaders who made administrative decisions (for all leaders must do this), but, more importantly, leaders who would shepherd them, love them, care for them, and spend time with them when they were hurting.

In a time of crisis the sheep need shepherds, and the shepherds must work overtime to calm the hearts of a hurting, struggling and discouraged flock. A congregation in distress always has a special need for pastoral care.

"I exhort the elders among you"

Notice that Peter politely, suavely and tactfully exhorts the elders to do their duties. Perhaps they had been a little slack in their shepherding responsibilities and Peter had to remind them of their responsibilities. It might also be that God allowed suffering to come to these local churches in Asia Minor not only to strengthen the saints but also to season and mature the leadership so they would truly be effective shepherds.

These leaders in the local church were called “elders.” The first thing to note is they are spoken of in a plurality; that is, there was more than one elder in a church. To be fair to our Baptist and Congregational brethren who believe there is one elder in every local church, and that is the pastor, we should point out that this epistle was not written to just one local church but to many local churches scattered throughout Asia Minor.

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...” (1 Pet. 1:1). Therefore, from the context of First Peter, it would be possible to support a one ruling elder system. However, a plurality of elders is taught in single local churches such as Ephesus and Philippi.

“And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17).

“...to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1).

The evidence certainly favors a plurality of elders in one local church.

“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23).

“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you” (Titus 1:5).

The plurality of elders teaches us that the government of the local church is not vested in one man, the pastor. One man rule has led to serious errors in the local church, for no one man has the wisdom or the ability to run a local church. Any church which has a spiritual dictator (benevolent or not) is unscriptural, for Christ leads His local churches through the authority placed in a ruling body of elders. Rule by elders provides a check and balance system where neither the pastor nor the congregation can control the church.

The elder form of government does not guarantee freedom from problems, but Christ has ordained that His local churches should be governed by elders, and with this system there are fewer problems.

The second thing to note is the meaning of “elder.” It is the Greek word *presbuteros* and our English equivalent is “presbyter.” The word “presbyter” (elder) is actually a Jewish term which was carried over into the New Testament church community. Its first occurrence is in Exodus 3:16, 18, where the heads of the Twelve Tribes of Israel are called “elders” and this is obviously a designation of chronological age and spiritual maturity. The term also refers to the 70 elders who helped Moses rule (Exodus 24:9).

Elders were a definite part of the synagogue (some had three and others seven), and most scholars think the government of the local church was patterned after the synagogue. The elders were generally the older, more mature men in the synagogue. The Sanhedrin also had elders, and we know that a person had to be middle aged to be a member of the Sanhedrin. An older person in the Jewish culture was a person at least 30

years of age, and he was not qualified to rule until this age. The term “elder” was carried over into the Christian community, and it was a title of veneration of dignity which often included chronological age, but not necessarily so.

In the New Testament, the title “elder” looks at the dignity of the office, referring to a man of spiritual maturity. An elder may not have to be old in years, but he must be mature in judgment (and this usually comes with age). In his commentary on First Peter Lange says,

“They (elders) were not always (yet doubtless often) those oldest in years, but rather the most experienced and matured among the converted members of the church.”

While the word “elder” (presbyter) does not always connote age, age in an elder certainly helps. Young men placed into such a position in the local church could be a real headache. Young men tend to be idealistic, impetuous, impatient and harsh with an overzealous attitude for the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law. Young men have not lived long enough to have many experiences which give balance to life.

What then would be the proper age for an elder? The Scriptures never tell us a specific age. However, since the term is Jewish, we can see that from the example of the Sanhedrin, 30 would begin to qualify a man for the office. We know that Timothy was around 35 when Paul wrote to him as the senior pastor of the church of Ephesus (Acts 20). Titus was a very young man, and he ordained elders at Crete (Titus 1). Jesus began His public ministry at age 30 and died at 33. Paul was converted in his early thirties and began immediately to exercise his office of an apostle.

There were exceptions: The Apostle John began his ministry in his late teens. History records for us great preachers, such as John Calvin, Charles Haddon Spurgeon and Robert Murray McCheyne, who were dynamic preachers in their early twenties, and they would have to be classified as elders biblically. While it is impossible to be dogmatic about the age a person becomes an elder, it is wise to have older men simply because of the experience they bring to the office.

The third thing we should note about elders is their qualifications. Peter does not tell us about these, but Paul does.

“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:5-9).

What then is an elder? An elder is a spiritually mature man who has the total oversight of the membership of a local church.

DIMENSIONS OF AN ELDER (5: 1b)

“as your fellow-elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ”

Notice that Peter identifies himself with them as a fellow-elder. He does not look at himself as a superior. He was not in a place of primacy but on the same level with the other elders. He was not a pope, not even an archbishop. He was a fellow-elder in a local church. Apparently, Peter was an apostle to the universal church and an elder to the local church.

He says he is also a fellow-witness of the sufferings of Christ. The Greek word for “witness” is *martus* (martyr). Peter is not only referring to being an eyewitness of Christ’s sufferings, which he obviously was, but also to the fact that he had shared in the suffering of Christ. Peter suffered innocently at the hands of unjust men because of his Christian stand.

“and partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed”

Because Peter suffered for Christ, he knew that he would one day be glorified in Christ at the Second Advent, the revelation, which will be the great unveiling of Christ and the Church. Suffering for Christ on earth guarantees the Christian’s eternal glory; therefore, we can suffer patiently, waiting for the glory.

DUTY OF AN ELDER (5:2a)

“shepherd the flock of God among you”

Peter exhorts these elders to shepherd (feed) the flock of God. Notice first of all that the flock is called “the flock of God.” The universal church and individual Christians in local churches are God’s flock, not a pastor’s flock, not the elders’ flock. It belongs to God and takes its final directions from the Head of the Church, Christ.

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” (Acts 20:28).

Notice, second, that the elders are to shepherd the flock; that is, they are to do the work of pastoring the flock. Nowhere in the Bible is one man called the pastor of a local church. There are many pastors because there are many elders. Pastoring is not an office but a function, a spiritual gift. There are apparently ruling elders and teaching elders.

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17).

There are some elders who give themselves primarily to teaching, but all elders rule and pastor. Obviously, some will have more time to shepherd than others because

some are fully paid to shepherd, others are partially paid, and still others shepherd without pay.

The first, the primary, and the most important task of an elder is to shepherd the flock. This may be done in many ways, so an elder has a many-faceted ministry. He is to have charge over the flock. *“But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction”* (1 Thess. 5:12). He is to teach the flock (1 Tim. 5:17). He is to admonish the flock (1 Thess. 5:12). He is to labor among the flock (1 Thess. 5:12), and lead the flock. *“Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith”* (Heb. 13:7). He is to oversee (supervise) the flock (Acts 20:28). The elder is to watch for the souls of the flock. *“Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account”* (Heb. 13:17). He is to protect the flock. *“Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict”* (Titus 1:9). He is to manage the flock. *“He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?”* (1 Tim. 2:4-5).

It becomes obvious that an elder has a big responsibility, and this is why God has ordained that a multiplicity of elders should govern the local church, for no one man has all the gifts and talents to do all these various activities.

Notice, third, that elders are to shepherd God’s flock. An undershepherd shepherds God’s precious flock. Throughout the Scriptures, God refers to His people as sheep. It is no accident that He has chosen to call us sheep. The behavior of sheep and human beings is very similar—our mob instincts, our fears, our timidity, our stubbornness and our perverse habits are all parallels of profound importance.

To shepherd the flock is a difficult task. Sheep must be lead to water and to food, for they cannot find these for themselves. Sheep must be kept quiet and calm because they frighten easily. A jackrabbit running through their midst or a clap of thunder can cause them to stampede. The shepherd must pull out any poisonous weeds in the grazing land because the sheep do not know how to distinguish good food from bad food. Sheep have no way of protecting themselves and will let ravishing wolves kill them without putting up a fight. All a sheep knows how to do is run away from danger. When a sheep goes astray from the flock, the shepherd must break a leg so as to make it stay in the fold. A sheep can roll over on its back (a cast sheep) and cannot turn back over again, and if left in that position, it will die.

Strong Christian sheep, weak Christian sheep and backsliding Christian sheep all need the love, care, protection, direction and discipline of their shepherds. The elders must see to it that every spiritual, social and material need of the flock is met. The true elder must give much of his time to shepherding the flock of God. His delight is God’s flock. For the elder, there is no greater reward or deeper satisfaction than that of seeing God’s flock contented, well fed, safe and flourishing.

In many ways an elder has an impossible task and often a thankless one. No one should ever be an elder unless he feels this burden to shepherd the flock. However, we must be careful not to set our sights too high for an elder. If we do, we sheep will be

disappointed. We should remember that elders are men. They are human. They struggle spiritually. Sometimes they fail. Sometimes they make bad decisions, especially if they have been given wrong or inadequate information. They are real men who have been called to a high office, and they desperately need the prayers of the flock.

Elders are also working men. Most elders have jobs which occupy at least eight hours of their time a day, and they also need to spend time with the wife and children to be good examples to the flock. So time for an elder is of great value, and while he desires to be an effective shepherd, he may be limited by time.

An elder is also a godly, sensitive man who desires to please God, and yet he never feels like he is doing enough for the flock. Often he operates on guilt because job and family take away from the flock he loves.

Just as it is the elder's responsibility to shepherd the flock, it is the flock's responsibility to see that their elders are doing the task of shepherding. If an elder is not doing his job, confront him about it in a loving way.

DANGERS OF AN ELDER (5:2b-3a)

“not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God.”

Now Peter gives the proper motivations for shepherds in contrast with false motives. Shepherds are not to do shepherding because of external or internal pressures. Elders are not to shepherd because they feel they have to, because they have been talked into it, or forced into it. Nor are they to shepherd because of the internal pressure of guilt. They are to do it because they want to; they love it; they have an eagerness of heart to do the work of the ministry. Elders have a desire to do God's will in the tending and feeding of God's flock. This is consistent with the first qualification of an elder set down by the Apostle Paul: *“It is a trustworthy statement; if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do” (1 Tim. 3:1).*

“and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness”

Shepherds are not to be in the ministry for the money, and let's face it, religion in some circles is a racket and some ministers are making lots of money off religion. Elders are never to be motivated by monetary rewards. They are not in any way to commercialize the ministry. The elder is not to view his office as a professional duty but as a divine calling. There is to be an eagerness, an excitement, an anticipation about serving the flock as a shepherd.

This verse certainly implies that all elders in the New Testament church received some remuneration for their ministries (Titus 1:11; 1 Tim. 5:17-18).

“nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge”

An elder is never to be autocratic in his approach, never to delight in using his authority, and never to have a domineering spirit. A shepherd leads the sheep and does not drive them. Shepherds and sheep obviously need good communications, and the flock must feel free to approach their elders about their concerns. Elders must always be good

listeners. While it is true that elders must govern the flock, they must do it with love, sensitivity and genuine concern for the desires and needs of the flock. Sheep who are driven can become very stubborn. Sheep who are loved and cared for can become very docile.

DETERMINATION OF AN ELDER (5:3b)

but proving to be examples to the flock.”

Elders are to be examples, and this must be their determination. They are to be out front, leading the people. They should never require anything of the flock that they themselves are not willing to do.

Undershepherds should seek to follow the example of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and in doing so they become patterns to be copied by the flock. Remember, elders, leadership is not lordship; it is not tyrannizing people. It is setting the example. It is demonstrating to the flock what it means to follow the Lord. No elder will do this perfectly. Sometimes elders will fail, but there is to be a desire to be a proper example. There is authority in the office of elder, but the right to use that authority comes not from training, experience, or background, but out of the elder's desire to be obedient to truth.

DELIGHTFUL HOPE OF AN ELDER (5:4)

“And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

There are special rewards to be given out at the Judgment Seat of Christ for faithful shepherds. When Christ appears in the Second Advent, there will be glorious rewards for those who are faithful elders and shepherds. The task of being a shepherd is very difficult. Sometimes the sheep are stubborn, sometimes they are disappointing, sometimes they are ungrateful, they misunderstand, and wander away from the flock. If you are a shepherd looking for an easy time, for praise of men, for understanding of all you do, you are going to be disappointed and ultimately disillusioned.

As an undershepherd, called by God to your office, you must keep your eye on the Chief Shepherd and wait for His approval when He says to you, *“Well done, my good and faithful servant.”* The pay comes when elders see the Lord. Shepherds never receive their pay in this life; they labor for the rewards which will be received from the Lord. If you labor for anything less than this, you will always be disappointed.

CONCLUSION

Shepherds, just remember that your task in this life is to be faithful to God and His Word. Don't look at men, at circumstances, at church budgets. Just look at Christ and wait patiently for your reward. We who are the sheep of the flock must seek to live in such a way that we make the leadership of our elders one of joy and not a burden. *“...for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief” (Heb. 13:17).*

If you are not a Christian, you are not in God's flock and not in His fold. How can you get in? How can you become a precious sheep who belongs to God? Trust Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd, who laid down His life for the sheep that they might live. True sheep hear Christ's voice, which bids them believe on Him. They believe that Christ died for their sins and they bow to Him as Lord. They begin to follow Christ, giving allegiance to the Chief Shepherd.

“But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:26-27).