

Shepherds and the Flock

1 Peter 5:1-7

Introduction

It may seem strange for Peter to transition from exhortations about suffering to instructing the elders of the churches he is writing to. However, consider that the leadership of the church would likely be the first targets of the pressures of persecution. How shepherds lead through the tough times is key for the survival of the church. And so Peter also writes to those under the care of the elders with regard to their relationship to these men God has set up over them.

Exhortation to Elders

At all times, but especially times of mounting pressure of suffering and persecution, sheep need shepherds. Jesus is the Chief Shepherd (v. 4, cf. 2:25), but He has established elders in His churches to feed and oversee his sheep. Peter addresses himself to the elders of the churches he is writing to as a fellow-elder and a witness or testifier of the sufferings of Christ and a partaker of the coming glory. Peter indicates that the duties of elders are to shepherd or feed and to take oversight for God's flock. Elders are tempted to shepherd under compulsion, for dishonest gain, and by being lords over the flock. Instead, they should shepherd willingly and eagerly. They should seek to lead the flock primarily by example (1 Cor. 11:1, 1 Tim. 4:12, Phil. 3:17, 2 Thess. 3:8-9, Heb. 13:7; cf. Luke 22:24-30). One of the early church fathers said, "Either do not teach, or teach by living." Peter warns against the sinful reasons why men would aspire to the office of an elder, but he also states that there is a crown of glory to come to those who fill the office faithfully.

It is important for you as the flock of God to know what God requires of the elders He has placed over you. You ought to evaluate your elders by the standard of God's Word. You ought to know what God expects of them so that you know how to respond when they come to you as elders. These exhortations also apply to those who aspire to this office, or to those who serve as "elders" in unofficial capacities. If you lead, if you shepherd, if you oversee members of the church (as teachers, parents, Bible study leaders, etc.) you ought to take heed to these warnings and charges.

Exhortation to the "Younger"

Peter next directly addresses the "younger people" in the church. There are a couple senses to understand Peter's exhortation, and we do not need to be startled by the ambiguity. Those who are young in age ought to submit themselves to those who are their elders (in age), but also to those who have been appointed to shepherd them in the church. There is nothing new under the sun, and the youth in Peter's day needed to hear this charge just as much as the youth in our day. The need for this exhortation might have been heightened because of the increasing persecution. Impetuosity reacts (often violently) under pressure. There is, however, also a sense that the term "younger" here refers to a relationship to those in authority, not strictly to age (cf. Luke 22:25-26).

Clothed with Humility

Out of the exhortation to the younger people, Peter gives a charge to the whole church to be submissive to one another (cf. Rom. 12:10 and Eph. 5:21). Submission involves both recognizing the authority structures that God has established as well as the need amongst believers to give preference to one another.

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This kind of submission is accomplished by being clothed with humility (cf. Phil. 2:3). The imagery of clothing oneself in virtue is not unfamiliar in the NT, but the term in this passage is unique. It comes from a root word referring to the tunic or apron that a slave would have tied on to keep his tunic clean. Peter witnessed the Chief Shepherd act out this kind of humility when He washed the disciples feet (John 13:4). Peter makes clear, though, that humility towards one another begins with humility before God. One definition of humility is “an inside-out virtue produced by comparing ourselves to the Lord.” In fact, humility is impossible without complete dependence on God.

Proud Worry

Peter presents casting our care upon God as the way in which we humble ourselves. Being anxious or worried is prideful. If you are proud, you do not think you need to cast your care upon God. This does not alter the fact of your worry, though. It is still a burden. Either you carry it, or God does. Jesus warns that the worry of the world can choke out the word that has been sown (Matt. 13:22). Pride listens to the dragon in the garden; humility runs to God. If you are plagued with anxiety and worry, leave it behind. Humble yourself before God, let Him take care of you, and draw near to Him. He takes care of the lowly, but opposes the proud and knows them from afar (Ps. 138:6). Do you need grace? Then humble yourself under the mighty hand of God.

This also bleeds into the other things that Peter has been saying. God has appointed under-shepherds as His representatives to guide and care for the flock, so it is the most natural thing for you to also take your care to the elders. Paul also exhorts the body of believers to bear one another’s burdens as an act of humility, fulfilling the law of love (Gal. 6:2-3, cf. Rom. 13:10). Humbly cast your burdens on the Lord and on one another. Humbly receive the instruction of your elders and your brothers and sisters in Christ. “*By pride comes nothing but strife, but with the well-advised is wisdom*” (Prov. 13:10).

Conclusion

What makes a church successful? What makes it “survive” hard times, whether persecution from outside, or divisions from within? This is accomplished through the grace of God by elders leading faithfully, non-elders submitting to elders, looking to them as examples to lead you, evaluating them according to the Word. It is accomplished through all members of Christ’s flock giving preference to one another and clothing themselves in humility. And this is done first by casting every care upon the Lord.

When you have cast your care upon the Good Shepherd, you are able to sit down at the table he has prepared for you, even in the presence of your enemies. He cares for you. He sent His only Son to die for you. Not only that, He has the hairs on your head numbered, and He is working everything for your good to make you into the image of His Son. Who else would you turn to?