

## Introduction

Years ago before Dawnae and I had kids, we were part of a church and served where we could. We knew we needed to grow in our faith so we decided to join a class that was said to be “all ages”. As a young couple in our early 20s it was clear that “all ages” meant, you know, all ten years of the 40s, all ten years of the 50s, all ten years of the 60s, etc. We were, by at least 20 years, the youngest in the class. Still, we knew that spiritual growth happened in community so we pursued it.

I remember the first time a man named Larry spoke up. It was clear he was a simple man who worked hard in his factory job. He worked hard on his small hobby farm. He loved his wife and kids and he loved his church. He didn’t say much but when he did, people *listened*. I remember him telling the class he really needed to grow in his faith so he and his wife decided to stop using credit cards to pay the bills. He shared how tested he was when their washing machine broke. He also shared how God provided without going into debt. My wife and I were really struck that this man *pursued* spiritual growth, when we thought he had already *arrived*. Further, he shared his life with us and was open and honest about his struggles.

I remember another man in the class. He was like a bad movie trope. His collared shirts always had the top three or four buttons undone so you could see his gold necklace. His hair was slicked back. He was a bit loud and showy. He was *schmoozy*. He seemed like he was always selling you something.

Then there was Mark. People loved Mark. Mark loved sports and loved talking to people about sports. In fact, he loved sports so much he disappeared for months at a time because of various sports leagues that played on Sundays. He wanted to support his children so he traveled to their games instead of participating in his church.

These men all had something in common: they were elders in that church. Larry was wise and could calm any situation. Mr. Schmooze ran a successful business and was a “leader”. In this particular church the elders were self-perpetuating. They themselves chose new elders and the church didn’t have a say in the matter. I once asked why Mark was an elder when he was almost never there on a Sunday. I was told by one of the elders that he had once been very involved in the church and they had hoped that making him an elder would draw him back in more faithfully.

I remember being bothered by all this, but not quite knowing why. As I look back on this with nearly 30 years of processing, but also having spent all of that time studying what Scripture has to say about the Lord and his church, I am saddened by it, for this church did not recognize the gift elders ought to be to a church. Only one of these men did the work assigned to him. Only one of these men was actually qualified to serve in this capacity. Only one was a gift to the church, and he was the one you’d least expect to be a leader.

We are in week four of our series “Beyond Labels: Who Is New City?” We have been following this rubric:

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We are . . .  
catholic, not Catholic  
reformed, not Reformed  
baptist, not Baptist  
presbyterian, not Presbyterian  
orthodox, not Orthodox  
charismatic, not Charismatic  
Christian, not christian

Today we will see that we are presbyterian but not Presbyterian, and the role of presbyters—or elders—is intended to be an incredible gift from the Lord to his people. To get there, we'll take a look at the apostle Peter's words.

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<sup>1</sup> Pet 5:1 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: <sup>2</sup> 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; <sup>3</sup> not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup> And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. <sup>5</sup> 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 Peter 5:1–5

## Coming to Terms

Right away we see some terms we need to understand. Peter exhorts the elders as a fellow elder, which historically has been translated as "priest". He tells them to shepherd, or *to pastor* the flock of God. "Pastor" has become the predominant title in Protestant circles. He tells them to exercise oversight, or do the work of an overseer, which historically has been translated as "bishop".

We need some quick history of words here. The word "presbyterian" comes from the Greek word for elder: presbyter. The word presbyter in English was shortened to "prester" then to "preost" and eventually to "priest". The word overseer comes from the Greek word "episkopos". In English episkopos was blurred to "biscop", which became "bishop".

In the early church presbyter and overseer was the same office. Peter tells the presbyters to do the work of oversight. The *elders* must do the work of *bishops*. Beginning in the second century churches began to separate the role of overseer from elder by elevating overseers over elders. This is the origin of bishops being in charge of priests, though this was not the original structure of the apostolic churches. Jerome in the fourth century made this point numerous times in his writing.

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Therefore, as we have shown, among the ancients presbyters were the same as bishops; but by degrees, that the plants of dissension might be rooted up, all responsibility was transferred to one person. Therefore, as the presbyters know

that it is by the custom of the Church that they are to be subject to him who is placed over them so let the bishops know that they are above presbyters rather by custom than by Divine appointment, and ought to rule the Church in common. . .

Jerome, Commentary on the Epistle to Titus, PL 26:563

He says it was because of false teaching that churches began designating one individual to have authority over those who had been his fellow elders. After the time of the Council of Nicea in the early fourth century, this structure was the dominant one, with a single bishop in authority over not only the elders of a single church, but over all churches in a particular city. Jerome says this was by custom, rather than by command from the Lord.

Eventually some bishops became known as “metropolitan bishops” and were in charge over groups of local bishops, or over multiple cities. This hierarchy continued to form until there were five “Patriarchates”: Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, Jerusalem, and Constantinople. These five bishops would oversee the entire world. Over time the bishops of Rome began claiming more and more authority with the argument that Peter had such authority over the entire church.

Notice what Peter says in our text. He exhorts the elders in the churches in Asia Minor. These churches were suffering persecution when Peter writes. He says he is a witness of the sufferings of Christ. Scholars don’t think he means the crucifixion, but the ongoing suffering of Christ’s people. Peter himself has suffered persecution, as had all the apostles.

In verse 1 notice that he says he is a *fellow elder*. He doesn’t say he exhorts the elders as one in charge over them, but he exhorts them as *one of them*. As an apostle he certainly had authority over them, but that authority did not come from his role as a special elder or special overseer / bishop. Like them he was an elder in Christ’s church. Like them he was an overseer in Christ’s church. Like them he was responsible for shepherding—*pastoring*—Christ’s church.

To understand this text we need to understand these terms are interchangeable. This is why in Acts 20 Luke says Paul called the elders from the church in Ephesus and says the Holy Spirit made the overseers. To use the modern terms many use today, he says Paul calls the priests in Ephesus and tells them the Holy Spirit made them bishops.

We see the same thing in the writing of Clement of Rome—likely the same Clement Paul mentions in Philemon. In the late first century Clement wrote a letter to the Corinthians and indicated there were two offices in the church: overseer and deacon. A church, including the church in Rome, had multiple overseers or multiple bishops, not *one*. The Didache, written as early as the year 50, before the church in Corinth existed, indicates there are overseers and deacons. This only makes sense if “overseers” and “elders” are the same persons.

## **Shepherd the Flock**

With that out of the way, Peter exhorts his fellow elders in Asia Minor. He indicates he, too, has been suffering for the Lord. He also says in verse 1 the outcome of this suffering is he, like they, will partake in the glory that is going to be revealed. He’s holding out reward for his fellow elders to encourage them to remain faithful. Not only is he a fellow elder, he is a fellow witness of the sufferings of Christ, and he is a fellow partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed!

This world is not as it should be. There is pain and suffering and hunger and disappointment and death and sin and all sorts of things that demonstrate this world is not as it should be. Peter recognizes this and reminds his fellow elders that one day it will be. One day the world will be as it should be. The Lord Jesus will return to this world to finish the work he started. He came to save all of creation and while this salvation begins with the transformation of his people, it will extend to the entire universe. The glory *is going to be revealed*.

See the motivation: because the glory is going to be revealed and because his fellow elders will participate in that glory, they must shepherd the flock of God. As we will see more clearly in our upcoming series in Ephesians, Scripture never calls elders “pastors”, though elders are commanded *to pastor*. They must shepherd the flock of God.

Think of what a shepherd must do. Shepherds care for sheep, and this care is extensive. Shepherds have to move flocks to proper grazing. If they’re allowed to overgraze an area, they will cause problems for the future by preventing regrowth of the grasses they need. A shepherd keeps them moving to fresh grass where they will get the nourishment they need. Shepherds have to provide fresh water as well. They have to lead the sheep not only to fresh, clean water, but water that is safe to drink.

If a sheep were to try to drink from water that is too deep or that is flowing too rapidly, it doesn’t matter how cool and refreshing it is. If a sheep stumbles, the water could weigh it down, particularly if it has heavy wool, and drown the sheep. Shepherds have to be mindful of this. They have to know their sheep and their tendencies.

Shepherds also have to be prepared to face danger. Bears and wolves and lions love sheep. Sheep are rather slow-moving and other than being able to butt a predator, they have little defensive capabilities. A shepherd must be prepared to defend his sheep against such danger. A bear might have a hankering for lamb kebabs, but from a bear’s perspective, shepherds are made out of meat, too. A good shepherd embraces the risk to himself in order to protect his sheep. Any man not willing to put himself in danger for the sheep is just a hired hand. Here’s what Jesus said:

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Jn 10:12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup> He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

John 10:12–13

Jesus is, of course, the Good Shepherd, yet he calls elders to *be shepherds*, not hired hands. I said last week that I don’t seek to be controversial, but let me say this: any man who preaches in a church but is not actively shepherding the flock of God outside of the Sunday morning sermon is not a shepherd but a hired hand. Any church that tolerates such a hired hand is putting itself in danger for when trouble comes, he’s gonna bounce. If his fellow elders are merely decision-makers and are not actively shepherding the flock of God by caring for them, they, too, are not shepherds but hired hands, even if they’re “lay elders” and not paid by the church.

Video

Listen: trouble doesn’t always come from outside. Difficulty and suffering are not always the result of persecution. Pain can come from within. Sometimes the sheep can hurt

shepherds. Sadly it's often much easier for a sheep to just join a new flock after attacking a shepherd, while claiming the shepherd was the problem all along. It's far too easy for that sheep to get on social media and post all sorts of accusations, knowing full well the shepherd cannot actually respond to the accusations without revealing all the details conveniently left out. A shepherd is willing to embrace the risk. A hired hand is not.

Jesus said a shepherd is one who gladly enters into danger, knowing the harm that can come to the shepherd—whether it comes from outside or within—because a shepherd cares for the sheep. Peter says in verse 2 his fellow elders are to shepherd the flock of God, but not under compulsion. They must do so willingly. It is because a shepherd, rather than a hired hand, loves the sheep that he will care for and protect the sheep.

## Exercise Oversight

Peter tells these shepherds they must exercise oversight. That is, they must do the work of bishops. The real difference between elders and overseers is “elder” is more of a Jewish concept and “overseer” is more of a Greek concept. Both really imply the same things. In Jewish communities elders cared for the community. They had authority in the community but their primary function was to lead and protect and care for the people. Overseers essentially did the same thing. There is a bit more of an emphasis on managerial functions, including overseeing a community's finances, but the role is essentially the same. Overseers had authority in a community but their primary function was to lead and protect and care for the people. Elders-slash-overseers were to shepherd those placed in their care.

Peter says the elders must do this as God would have them, willingly and not under compulsion. They must do the work of oversight. A man must desire the role. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 3 if anyone *aspires* to be an overseer, he *desires* a noble task. Too often we ignore that little word, “task”. It means “work”. Exercising oversight, leading a church, shepherding the flock of God is *work*. That's not the same thing as “job”.

The truth is I am not actually paid to be an elder. This is not a job. I don't actually have a job. I have *work* to do, but not a job. What this church has done is free me from needing to earn a living so that I can be an elder with more time to exercise oversight and to shepherd the flock of God. The only difference between me and *my* fellow elders is they each have a job. I do not. In addition to their jobs they serve this church as elders. Because I do not need a job and therefore because I do not need to earn an income, I am able to do the same task as they, but more of it. I *labor* at preaching and teaching with more time to devote to the task of exercising oversight and shepherding the flock of God.

I find it quite extraordinary that Peter adds, “not for shameful gain”. It is because of the authority over a church's finances that Peter says this. Those whom a church sets apart, that is, those whom a church frees from having to earn a living should not seek to be set apart for financial gain. This is a significant reason why the other elders determine my compensation. I do not have a say in it. I can't sign checks or even walk into the church's bank and conduct a transaction. *They* exercise oversight of the church's finances. I have never determined my salary; it has always been determined by the elders. This frees me from even the possibility of doing this work for shameful gain.

Peter says instead of engaging in the work for shameful gain, elders should pursue it *eagerly*. Peter's making a contrast and not simply listing things that ought to be character-

istic of service. Just as elders must shepherd the flock of God willingly rather than under compulsion, so they must serve not for shameful gain but eagerly. That is, rather than seek gain for themselves, elders must seek what is in the best interest of *others*.

Peter is saying that those who serve as elders must serve for the benefit of those God has placed in their care. Any man who is self-serving is not qualified to be an elder in Christ's church. Too many want to separate out the roles among elders in such a way that obviates any real need for them to care for people. Some elders are gifted at administration. Some are gifted teachers. Some are really gifted in shepherding. Exercising oversight includes administrative responsibilities, which means each and every elder must be involved. The responsibility isn't limited to particular gifted elders.

A qualification to be an elder is the ability to teach. This doesn't mean the *gift of teaching*; it means teaching is part of the responsibility. Every elder must shepherd. Frankly, Dave is spiritually gifted as a shepherd and therefore *will always be better at it than I am*. This does not mean I get to hide away in my office and spend all my time in books and in writing instead of meeting with and caring for people. These responsibilities are *shared responsibilities*.

I know it's not an issue here at New City, but in many churches level of giftedness trumps level of character. To isolate those unwilling to care for people personally, many churches separate "preachers" from the other elders. They separate the teaching function from the shepherding function. This often happens because the preacher is merely a hired hand and not a shepherd. Listen: if you're a jerk it doesn't matter how gifted you are in preaching and teaching, you're no elder in Christ's church. You're a fraud. You're a hired hand.

Picture There is a book written by Lynn Anderson about spiritual leadership in the church. We're going to take a moment and read it this morning—well, we're going to read enough of it for you to understand the point Peter is making here. It's called, "They Smell Like Sheep". Can you read that? "They Smell Like Sheep". That's all you need to know! If a shepherd doesn't smell like the sheep, he ain't a shepherd! When you live among the sheep you're gonna start to smell like 'em! If you don't, you're not really among them!

Peter says, "Shepherd the flock of God *that is among you*". If I or the other elders ever stop "smelling" like you, we're not doing what we're told! Being an elder is so much more than just showing up to preach and oversee the sacraments on a Sunday morning. Elders must be involved in the lives of God's people. It is impossible to shepherd without *living among the sheep*.

## **Clothe Yourselves With Humility**

In verse 5 Peter addresses the rest of those in the churches in Asia Minor. He calls them the "youngsters". The elders were generally older men in the church who were actively shepherding others and who were gifted and qualified to serve in an official capacity. Age is not a requirement; as we saw in 1–2 Timothy, Timothy was a young man in his 20s and was not only serving as an elder, he was set apart vocationally to serve as an elder. Generally speaking, however, elders are older, for they must be spiritually mature. Keep in mind that age is not synonymous with maturity.

Everyone else is here called a "younger". He simply means he is now addressing all the non-elders in the churches. He tells them to be subject to the elders. He means they should

voluntarily follow the leadership of the elders. There is no sense of forced obedience here. It is an attitude of the heart. Since the elders bear responsibility for everyone in the church and since Hebrews says the elders of a church will one day give an account for the church, those who are younger should submit to them.

Remember the earlier instructions to the elders. They must exercise oversight willingly, not under compulsion. They must shepherd the flock of God as God would have them, not for shameful gain but with eagerness. They must not shepherd in a domineering way but as examples to the flock. It is in response to this sort of leadership that the non-elders should willingly follow the elders.

Then Peter includes everyone in his instructions: clothe yourselves with humility toward one another. The general demeanor we are to have toward one another in the church must be humility, not arrogance, and certainly not a pursuit of power and influence. In far too many churches elders are chosen from among those successful in business, with positions of power and influence. Nowhere is this said to be a qualification for elder! In fact, notice closely what Peter is saying.

He calls his fellow elders to do the work given them. They must shepherd the flock of God, which includes exercising oversight and caring for God's people. They shouldn't do this for what they get out of it, but for what they give others. They must not be domineering with their authority but instead should be examples to the whole church. Peter then says that both elders and non-elders must clothe themselves with humility toward one another, and the reason for this humility is significant: for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble".

For an elder to act in a domineering way, as if he's "the boss", is to stand opposed by God himself. The church isn't your organization to run as if it were your business! At the same time, to refuse to submit to an elder in humility is to stand opposed to God himself. This is not a position any of us wants to be in. You can't square up to God. What this means is both leadership in the church and submission to leadership ought to look an awful lot like humility, for if it does not, God will be opposed to you, and you won't stand before him for long.

But see what else Peter says. Whereas God opposes the proud he gives grace to the humble. God's favor is given to those who are humble. Humility is the attitude of faith. Think of the broader context of 1 Peter. He's writing to Christians in Asia Minor as they are suffering persecution for their faith in Jesus. He exhorts his elders to lead the churches in a particular way and he urges the churches to follow their leadership. Both elders and non-elders should serve one another in humility. New Testament scholar Karen Jobes helpfully writes,

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True humility, as opposed to a contrived, self-degrading humiliation, flows from recognizing one's complete dependence on God and is expressed by the acceptance of one's role and position in God's economy. With such humility one is freed from attempts to gain more power or prestige. Instead, humility expresses itself in the willingness to serve others even beyond one's self-interest.

Karen Jobes, "1 Peter" BECNT

In the first century, humility was the attitude of slaves. Humility was the recognition of one's dependence on another. Such dependence was frowned upon by the culture. In the

church, this dependence is on God, who richly provides all we need in Christ. This is why humility is the attitude of faith. This is why arrogance and pride are the opposite of faith. It is in this that elders are to be examples to the flock. Elders should exemplify what a life of faith looks like. This is why a man who is domineering and a bully is unqualified to be an elder; his life is not a life of faith but of pride and arrogance. If he's an example, it's an example of how to have God oppose you.

What this passage shows us is God has given elders to his church to lead them and to show them through their teaching *and their lives* what following Jesus looks like. Following Jesus looks a lot like humble faith.

## presbyterian

Smarty  
Word

This is why we are presbyterian. God has given presbyters, or elders, to his church to point his people to Jesus. Everything Peter instructs the elders to do, Jesus has already done. Jesus shepherds the flock of God. In fact, Jesus is *the* Good Shepherd. As the Shepherd, he laid down his life for his sheep. He cares for his people and provides for them and protects them, even if he does so through his under-shepherds, the elders.

Jesus exercises oversight over his church. Jesus and Jesus alone is the “chief Shepherd”, or as I like to say, only Jesus is the “senior Pastor”. He guides and directs the affairs of his church, for he is the one building his church, even if he uses us to do so. Jesus does not do this under compulsion. He prayed in a garden for there to be another way yet humbly submitted to his Father's will. He certainly did not come for his own gain, but that we might gain everything through him.

To say we are presbyterian is simply to say we are led and governed by a group of presbyters, a council of elders. These men serve the church in humility, and care for the flock of God by leading us to green pastures and by guiding us to cool, clean water. That green grass and that clean water is the Lord Jesus, for the Lord is our chief Shepherd. He has everything you and I need.

I don't need to explain why we are not capital-P Presbyterian because our Reformed brothers and sisters are nearly identical theologically with our Presbyterian brothers and sisters. The same thing applies. I will say this: my single greatest influence, and therefore this church's single greatest influence is the great Presbyterian Tim Keller. His writings and his public engagement with believers and unbelievers alike was truly *presbyterian*, that is, he interacted with others in a way that truly fulfilled the office of presbyter.

Whether Keller interacted with folk online or in the media or from the pulpit in the church he served or at various conferences he was invited to speak, Tim Keller pointed people to Jesus and his gospel. He held out the good news of who Jesus is and what he has done as the only hope for you and for me and for the nations. In this he was truly *presbyterian*. He did the work of an elder.

He understood what Peter is getting at in our text. In a time of great difficulty as the churches in Asia Minor were suffering, Peter exhorted his fellow elders to do the work they were called to do. Those churches didn't need the latest hot-take on social media. Last week in response to the terrible attack on Israel, a theologian I once respected greatly thought the best take to offer the world was to say the attack demonstrated Americans weren't voting for “national pastor” and so we need to vote for the guy who he thinks can win the next



election. In the face of horrific destruction and loss of life, the thing you and I needed to hear was that character in a leader doesn't matter. What matters is winning elections.

This is not the work of presbyters. We do not need to be stirred up with political partisanship. You and I need to be reminded again and again that Jesus is Lord. Whether nation rises up against nation or terrorists blow up another building or natural disaster strikes and brings great suffering, our hope is in Christ. I don't mean we shouldn't be involved in our system of government. I mean we should not hold up our system of government as the solution for evil and suffering in this world.

Church, the Prince of Peace is coming! Jesus said he is coming again and when he comes he will bring about cosmic transformation. He will re-create the heavens and the earth and all suffering and pain will be forever destroyed. He promises he will wipe away every tear from every eye. *Jesus* will do that, not some political candidate, even if that candidate gets control of both Houses!

When your marriage is suffering and you don't know if you have the strength to endure, I have good news. Jesus endured to the end. Because Jesus endured to the end, so can you. You can fight for your marriage. I don't mean to say that Jesus was such a good example by enduring to the end. I mean you can endure because *his power* to endure is available to you. He promised he wouldn't leave us as orphans. He has sent us his Spirit who fills us with his power to endure.

When you're struggling with sin and you feel like giving up and embracing it, you can fight against it. Jesus was tempted in every way that we are, yet he was without sin. Because Jesus resisted temptation, you and I can resist temptation. Again, I don't mean that he was just a good example. I mean that his power to resist temptation is given to you and to me by his Spirit who dwells within us.

When the medical diagnosis is grim or you've lost a loved one, whether expected or unexpected, when it seems all hope is lost in your life, you need to be reminded that there is a glory that is going to be revealed. We will partake in that glory because Jesus has done everything necessary for our life and salvation.

I've told you this before and I will continue saying it: I am not called to get up here on a Sunday morning and stir your emotions with excellent oratorical skill. My calling isn't to cause the hairs on the back of your neck to stand up, or to give you goose bumps, or to cause your heart rate to quicken, or to get you *excited*. I am not your spiritual hype machine. I and the other elders have a simple task: we are to lead you to Christ.

In those quiet moments of darkness when the world seems to be caving in on you, you won't recall the fog machines and the laser light show. When you struggle with your next breath because the pain of loss or the suffering is so great, the thing that will get you through it isn't some funny joke I shared in order to be "engaging". When you feel defeated and crushed and utterly hopeless, you don't need programming at church or an elder who is a really great business manager or has lots of social capital as a mover and a shaker in the community. You need Jesus.

If churches would insist that their elders do the work given them, there would be no #churchtoo movement. There would be no spiritual abuse. There would be no sex scandals or yet another celebrity pastor disqualified yet somehow still invited to preach at other churches. If our elders will heed Peter's exhortation here, we will point you to Christ again and again, but not as a panacea, a thing that magically takes your troubles away. If we will

point you to Christ you will discover that the strength you need is found in found in Jesus.