

Shepherds of the Flock

1 Peter 5:1-4

What makes a church, a church? You can be a church without a pastor, that's for sure. You can be a church without a building. That's certainly true, as well. You can be a church and still rely upon outside support, so money doesn't make a church. A church can be pretty small, as well. So a large number of people are not necessary to define a church. But one thing is absolutely essential. It was the one thing Paul identified when he wrote to Titus about the need for Titus to remain in Crete after the apostle left.

Titus 1:5 "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you."

So something was lacking in Crete. Something needed to be set in order. There was a deficiency in the church that had to be corrected. The church needed to appoint or ordain elders.

So what makes a church, a church?

I. THE PRESENCE OF ELDERS.

Now, I should emphasize that the form of government in a church is actually a monarchy. But the pastor is not the monarch, he is not the king. There is only one king and head of the church, and his name is Jesus. That's not just some abstract thought or hypothetical theological proposition. That is the deepest and most profound definition of our existence as a church. Jesus is the King. Jesus sits on the throne. The headquarters for our church is in heaven, for that is place from which the head of our church exercises his authority.

So Jesus rules the church. But what about on an earthly level. How does Jesus exercise his authority as the king and head of the church? Why, if you ask many people or observe many churches, the answer would be, the pastor. And many pastors do, indeed, rule as if they are king. In other churches, the answer to who rules would be the congregation. The congregation rules itself. The church, therefore, is seen as a democracy. One man, one vote. In terms of the exercise of authority, everyone is equal. Everyone rules and the congregation directs the affairs of the church.

But that's not the description that the Bible gives.

1 Tim. 5:17 "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine."

The rulers of the church are identified as Elders. They "direct the affairs of the church", as the NIV translates. The Greek word there means to set someone in place as a superintendent, a ruler. The other common Greek word for the work of ruling in the church is the one often translated bishop. More accurately, overseer. In English, we get the name of the Episcopalian church from this Greek work. It refers to a governor, the one who is charge. The one who rules. And it is always plural. There is always more than one.

I cannot over-emphasize the importance of what Peter teaches here. We will look in a few minutes about what and how the elders are to perform their responsibilities, but first, more broadly, the point is that it is Elders whom God appoints to rule and to govern in the church. So the point is that Peter teaches us of,

A. The necessary place of elders in the church.

Here in 1 Peter, that necessity is assumed, taken for granted. That is a clear and unmistakable emphasis throughout Scripture. I've already read a couple of the important verses, including the reference to ordination in,

Titus 1:5 "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you."

We learn a little bit more about that work of appointing elders in,

2 Tim. 1:6 "Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands."

And, 1 Tim. 4:14 "Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership."

And if you want to add another Greek word to your vocabulary, the "eldership" or "body of elders" is the word that comes into English as Presbytery.

The laying on of the hands of the elders. That's what ordination is. And though it is performed by men, it represents the actions and sanction of God himself, God the Holy Spirit. For Paul writes to the Elders at the church in Ephesus,

Acts 20:28 "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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."

You see, by the laying on of hands in ordination, the Holy Spirit makes a man an elder. The Holy Spirit invests a man with

the authority to rule in the church and the responsibility to care for the souls of God's people. Whether he is a teaching elder, as I am, a minister of the gospel called to preach the word of God; or whether he is a ruling elder, called to exercise rule and authority within the church to include the ability, the biblical office is the same. He is an elder.

The the presence of elders is necessary in a church. Which brings up several obvious questions, including the question of who. Who is qualified to be an elder? What are,

B. The qualifications of elders.

Peter begins with his own qualification as an apostle, noting in verse 1 that he is "a fellow elder." But more so, "A witness of the sufferings of Christ." An apostle had to be an eyewitness of Jesus.

1 Cor. 9:1 "Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?"

But as an apostle, he doesn't something very astounding here. Rather than identify his apostleship, he puts greater emphasis upon the ongoing role in the church of the Elders. And so he addresses those elders, and calls himself "a fellow elder."

For him, that is a title of humility. A position something less than that of the apostles, for the apostles and prophets were the foundation of the church, according to Paul in Ephesians 2. So Peter's point was not his unique position in laying the apostolic foundation of the church, but rather the instruction he gives for the ongoing leadership of the church. Ongoing leadership. Ongoing rule. Ongoing government.

Eventually, the apostles would die. Every one of them. Their foundational office would not continue, so Jesus entrusts the

ongoing leadership of his church to ordained elders. And they are set apart for that purpose. Obviously, they are not just any men, and you can read in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 about the specific qualifications.

Elders also share a great hope, as Peter notes in verse 1 that they are not only witnesses “of the sufferings of Christ, [but] also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed.”

That is,

C. The hope of elders.

They will partake in the glory that will be revealed. Because they are fulfilling the task God calls them to perform for the sake of the church. As they “witness of the sufferings of Christ,” they will also partake “of the glory that will be revealed.’

Similarly,
v.4

Thankfully, Peter puts this in the positive, in the positive expectation of the final judgment. The goal is not personal advancement nor personal stature, not in this world. The goal is not prestige nor a sense of importance. Not in this world. The goal is to be found faithful as a shepherd so that when the chief shepherd appears, when Jesus returns, there will be an unfading crown of glory.

There is, of course, a great warning given in the prophets to false shepherds.

Ezek. 34:1 “And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 2 “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not

the shepherds feed the flocks? 3 “You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. 4 “The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. 5 “So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. 6 “My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them.” 7 ‘Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 8 “as I live,” says the Lord GOD, “surely because My flock became a prey, and My flock became food for every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search for My flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock”-- 9 ‘therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD! 10 ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand.”

So the promise of blessing includes a great warning. And Peter has great emphasis upon the duties that must be performed. The service that must be offered. It’s my second main point.

II. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ELDERS.

What do they do? Two answers are given to that question, two profound answers that teach us a great deal about how the church is to be structured and governed throughout this age. Namely, that Elders are called to shepherd and they are called to govern. They are both shepherd and leaders.

Another word for shepherd is the word pastor, and though we in the OPC use that word to specifically identify ministers of the

gospel who preach the word, the work of shepherding is actually a responsibility of all the elders, together. And it is the shepherd who also rules. To put in an even more pointed way, the ruler in the church must also be a shepherd. The one who leads, with authority, must be one who also cares for the precious sheep which Jesus has bought with his own blood.

Let's look at those two things. First, Elders must be,

A. Shepherds for the flock.

Thankfully, oh so thankfully, we have a good shepherd who loves his sheep so perfectly. We have a good shepherd who knows his sheep, and who laid down his life for his sheep. His name is Jesus. But my point this morning from this text is this, that our good shepherd appoints men in the church to be his under-shepherds. He appoints men to carry out the work of his shepherding. He calls them elders.

So what does a shepherd do? First and foremost, he loves his sheep. And he cares for them. He feeds them and nourishes them. He protects them and defends them, at the cost of his own life!

As I read a few moments ago,

Acts 20:28 "Therefore take heed...to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

I have to admit to you, that tender care of a shepherd is all too often missing today in those who lead in the church. At great cost to the sheep. Too many men are too full of their own sense of importance, their own glory, and even their own power. All too few elders and ministers truly demonstrate the love of a shepherd.

The writer of Hebrews gives elders an appropriate warning, Heb. 13:17 "...they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account."

Now, let me emphasize. I am a very imperfect man. I am very conscious of that. None of this is about me as an elder. And none of this is about any other of my fellow elders. This is about how Jesus governs his church and how Jesus cares for the souls of his sheep. He sets apart elders to "watch out for your souls." And I, as an Elder, am always conscious of the second part of that sentence, "as those who must give account."

I am accountable for my care of your souls. That's how I stand before you this morning, accountable. Not to you, but to God. My fellow elders stand with me in that responsibility. For Jesus entrusts to ordained elders the care of the souls of his people.

In that context, the words of Hebrews 13:17 are key to the spiritual well-being of the church and the key to the spiritual nourishment of your own soul.

Heb. 13:17 "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you."

There is to be obedience, but obedience to those who love you is not a burdensome task. Obedience to shepherds who lay down their lives for the sheep is not an oppressive duty. And shepherds who serve that way show themselves to be,

B. Leaders able to rule.

The shepherd is the ruler. The pastor is the bishop. The servant is the leader. That's how Jesus designs his church to

function. And that is a deep burden of mine, to see such servant-leadership within the church. For Peter gives us very specific warnings. Three warnings about the danger of men who do not rule as shepherds, men who abuse their authority. Men who are overbearing, hypocritical, proud or prone to anger. What great harm such men bring to precious sheep, and so Peter gives us,

III. A WARNING OF DANGER.

In fact, much of this text is in the form of warning. The principle is clear, the principle of leadership. But because of the fallen nature of men, because of sin, the warnings much be sounded loudly and clearly. First, with an elder, there must be,

A. A willingness to serve.

v.2b

The eldership is not something that you try to talk someone into. It is not a board position that you fulfill for a time to meet your duty. It is not something to take on under pressure. There must be a sense of voluntary willingness. What can rightly be labelled a calling.

I learned early in my ministry that I would rather something not get done in the church than to have to talk someone into doing it when they didn't really want to. I'd rather it not get done. I'm not going to pressure people to do things. There has to be a willingness. Most especially, serving as an elder. That willingness must correspond to some sense of calling. Some sense of duty and obligation to God. Some sense of personal conviction that God wants you to do it. Not because someone with a strong personality twisted your arm.

A willingness to serve out of pure motive, the motive of honor, obedience and submission to the call of God.

And similarly, from verse 2, "not for dishonest gain but eagerly." What I would call,

B. A selfless motive.

There is no profit in the job! There is to be no sense of personal benefit. Rather, an elder is to be eager to serve. Willing in mind and soul to accept that responsibility which God assigns to him in that office of leadership within the church.

And then, most importantly, the third warning. An elder must provide,

C. A gentle example to follow.

In other words, to put it negatively,

v.3

What a terrible, terrible danger it is when men who rule become overbearing! And that's true in every sphere of life, isn't it? So God's consistently provides restraint upon those to whom he gives authority.

The Scriptures require children to obey their parents, but parents are restrained by the exhortation, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children." Wives are required to submit to their husbands, but husbands are restrained as well.

Eph. 5:25 "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her."

Do you see the consistent pattern. God establishes authority, he defines the proper context for the exercise of authority, and then he restrains the sinful tendency of fallen men to abuse that authority. That is so clear and obvious here in our text.

v.3

"Not lording it over those allotted to your charge."

This is particularly important because it is particularly appropriate. The best word I can identify in the English language for the warning of verse 3 is the word domineering. Elders must not be domineering. The idea is of a man who is overbearing. Tyrannical, ruling as a tyrant. To rule as a despot, one who is oppressive in the exercise of his authority. One who demands honor rather than earning it.

As it is with parents to their children, such a ruler causes exasperation. He stirs up rebellion. And he does not with the hearts and affections of those he rules. This is such a crucial element of biblical leadership. It is true in every area, including family relationships, but it is highlighted and specified here. Elders must not “lord it over” those entrusted to their care. He is not to be a bully, who gets his own way by bullying people who get in his way or who confront him. He can’t rule by harassing people or intimidating them, by baiting them or teasing them from some pretended position of authority. To the contrary, he is to rule by example.

So the final warning to the elders who rule in the church is that they must provide a gentle example to follow. Intentionally. Obviously. In other words, in the leadership of God’s people, an elder must be able to say, “Follow me.” “Do as I do.” “Imitate me.” “Follow my example.”

So Paul writes to the younger Timothy,

1 Tim. 4:12 “Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. 13 Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. 14 Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. 15 Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. 16 Take

heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.”

Strong, startling language. “In doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.” Only by setting an example worthy to be followed does a man become qualified to lead as an elder in the church.

There is nothing more necessary for the spiritual well-being of a church, any church, than the profitable ministry of godly men who rule the church as faithful shepherds of the flock.

As for myself, there are three events which I readily identify as defining moments in my life. Three things stand out as defining who I am, my very identity and purpose in life. The first, and most importantly, is the day the Lord saved me, a day which, for me, is easy to identify. I was 13 years old.

There are two other days, and I anticipate the 30th anniversary of both of those days coming year. They are my wedding and my ordination. I am defined by my relationship with my wife. It is who I am, and who, by God’s grace, I will always be as long as we both shall live. And then, there is my ordination. A day not six months after my wedding, when the Holy Spirit made me an overseer and an elder. Third only to my salvation and my marriage, that day marks my identity, and I emphasize that not to boast of myself at all, but to acknowledge the significance of the office of Elder in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the significance of the recognition of that office in my own life.

Indeed, I cannot boast. For I am a fallen and sinful man myself. But I am also a recipient of God’s grace, thus the calling I believe God has placed upon my life is inescapable. And the responsibilities are huge. As I exercise leadership, I bear

responsibility for the care of the souls of precious sheep for whom Jesus has shed his blood.

My fellow elders, please always consider these things as of greatest importance. You are called to “shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.” You are to shepherd the people of God as you give them an example to follow. God has entrusted us with that most profound responsibility. You are to watch over the souls of our precious sheep.

And let me also address the young men. You teenage young men. You young adults. Youth. Whatever label you choose. Let these words stimulate you to godliness and maturity in your life. No greater honor could come to you than for a congregation of God’s people to find you qualified to be an elder.

1 Tim. 3:1 “If any man aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a good work.”

So young men, aspire to that office! Aspire to that level of godliness and maturity that would qualify you for the office of elder. And don’t look to other young men your age for the example to follow. Look to your elders. Look to those who give you an example worthy of following, so when you imitate them, you are, indeed, imitating Jesus.

And to all of you, make much of the importance of shepherds in your life. Make much of the importance of elders who are overseers governing the church and shepherds who are caring for your souls.