

## CALLING FAITHFUL ELDERS 1 Peter 5:1-4

In *Everyday Discipleship for Ordinary People*, STUART BRISCOE writes about a young colleague who officiated a veteran's funeral. The deceased man's military friends wished to have a part in the service at the funeral home. They requested the pastor lead them to the casket, stand with them for moment of silence, then lead them through the side door. The result was that they marched with military precision into a broom closet, in full view of the mourners, and had to make a hasty retreat to cover the confusion.

There are two conclusions to be drawn from this story. First of all, if you are going to lead, make sure you know where you are going. Likewise, if you are going to follow, make sure you are following someone who knows what he is doing. This is the message of 1 Peter 5:1-4.

Verse 1 says: *"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker of the glory that is going to be revealed."* The word, "So," connects our text to the previous chapter. 1 Peter 4:12-19 is one of the most important statements about Christian suffering in the New Testament. After teaching the church how to suffer as Christians, Peter issues an urgent call for faithful elders. These are not loosely connected subjects. The church needs faithful elders if it is to live and witness for Christ in a hostile environment. We do face the persecution the readers of this letter faced. But we live amidst growing hostility to the Christian faith that may become open persecution in our lifetime. For this reason, Peter's message to the churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor is as relevant as this morning's newspaper. The church needs faithful elders if it is to live and witness for Christ in a hostile environment. 1 Peter 5:1-4 teaches four aspects of biblical eldership.

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### I. THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP

Verse 1 says: "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." Peter addresses the leaders of the church. He calls them "elders." The term "elders" is used in the New Testament to refer to chronological age and an office of church leadership. Literally, the word refers to older men. Peter may use the term in that sense in verse 5: "Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders." But it is clear Peter is talking about church leaders in verse 1. There are two offices in the New Testament church: elders and deacons. The qualifications of elders and deacons overlap. But the roles of these servant-leaders are distinct: Elders serve by leading. Deacons lead by serving. We typically refer to the office of elder as "pastor," which is derived from the Latin word for "shepherd." But pastor or shepherd is only used to refer to the office in Ephesians 4:11. The common term in the New Testament for pastoral leadership is "elders." The essential nature of biblical eldership is male, godly, and plural.

### **A. ELDERS ARE MALE.**

The term “elders” literally refers to older men. When it is used for the church office, the term is metaphorical for spiritual maturity. But the reference to men remains literal. This is a controversial position today. But the burden of proof falls on those who claim God ordains women for pastoral leadership. Finding biblical evidence for women elders is like looking for a black cat in a dark room that’s not really there. 1 Timothy 2:15 says: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain silent.” This binding injunction does not mean women cannot teach or lead in the church. It means women in ministry may not serve in pastoral roles. Men and women are one in Christ. But the Lord has reserved the role of leadership in the home and church to men for our good and for his glory.

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### **B. ELDERS ARE GODLY.**

The term “elders” literally refers to an older man. It became a term for leadership because the assumption was that older men were mature men. Of course, this is not always the case. You can be young and foolish or old and foolish. But age generally brings maturity. This is the reason “elders” became the common term for leadership in the New Testament church. Church leaders do not have to be old. But they do have to be mature. In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul instructs Timothy, “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” Young Timothy was to exercise leadership by the moral authority of a godly example.

1 Timothy 3:2-7 record the qualifications for elders: “Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.” These qualifications focus on godly character. The only gift or skill required is the ability to teach. Everything else is about the life of potential church leader. Elders are to be godly men.

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### **C. ELDERS ARE PLURAL.**

Peter addressed the spiritual leadership of the church. But this leadership did not revolve around one man. The exhortation was to “the elders” – plural, not

singular. In fact, the term is only used in the singular four times in the New Testament. Here in verse 1 Peter refers to himself as a “fellow elder.” 1 Timothy 5:19 instructs: “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” And in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1, John identifies himself as “The elder.” Every other reference is to or about a plurality of elders. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the church. And Christ exercises his authority over the church through a plurality of godly men. One-man leadership is a characteristic of cults, not the church. The New Testament teaches, models, and assumes a plurality of elders leading a local church together.

QUESTION: Does elder-led church leadership cancel out the role of a lead or senior pastor? The New Testament exemplifies team-leadership. But within this model, this is always a first among equals. In 1 Peter 1:1, Peter identifies himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ.” But when he addresses the elders, he does not claim apostolic authority. And he definitely does not claim to be the bishop of Rome, the first pope, or the supreme Pontiff. In 1 Peter 5:1, Peter addresses the elders as “a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker of the glory that is going to be revealed.” Even though Peter witnessed the Christ’s sufferings, he identified with the elders as a fellow elder. And he claimed his share of the future glory of Christ along with all the saints. Yet he exhorts the elders and commands them to shepherd the flock of God. This is the spiritual dynamic of biblical eldership. No one tries to exalt himself over the other elders. Yet the elders willingly submit to the one who is obviously the leader.

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## **II. THE DUTY OF BIBLICAL ELDSHIP**

New Testament passages that address the subject of elders emphasize the character of elders more than their work. It is about why they are, not merely what they do. So it is in our text. But verse 2 issues a fundamental charge to the elders: “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight.” The duty of elders is to shepherd and oversee the church of God.

### **A. ELDERS SHEPHERD THE FLOCK OF GOD.**

Verse 2 says: “shepherd the flock of God that is among you.” The New Testament describes Christians as sheep. It also describes the church as a flock. WARREN WIERSBE rightly asks: “Where would the flock be if the sheep led the shepherd or if every sheep were given his or her own way?” A flock of sheep needs good, strong, and wise leadership. Matthew 9:36 says: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Woe to sheep that have no shepherd or bad shepherds! Ezekiel 34:1-2 says: “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?”

God's flock needs godly shepherds. This is the duty of elders. They are to pastor the church. The elders are not above or below the pastors. The elders are the pastors. Elders are called to shepherd the flock. This happens primarily by feeding the flock the word of God. Ephesians 4:11-12 says Christ gave "the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." The ministry of elders is to equip the saints to do the work of ministry to lead the body to maturity in Christ. The elders are charged to shepherd the flock. But it is not the elders' flock. It is the flock of God. Acts 20:28 says: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."

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## **B. ELDERS OVERSEE THE FLOCK OF GOD.**

Verse 2 says: "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight." What is the work of the elders? "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you." How are elders to shepherd the flock? By "exercising oversight." The work of elders is pastoral. They are to feed the sheep. But the church must not confine the elders to the pulpit and find another way to oversee the life of the church. The shepherds who feed the feed also lead the flock. The spiritual leaders should oversee the work of the church. Hebrews 13:17 says: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." Elders watch over your souls. But this is a contradiction if they are not able to oversee the business of the church. Why would you trust a man with your soul if you cannot trust him with your money? The church needs wise and godly elders to oversee the flock of God.

FOOTNOTE: In verse 1, Peter addresses the elders of the church. He exhorts the elders to shepherd or pastor the flock. They are to do this by acting as overseers, which translates the same Greek word translated "bishop." Here we see there was no hierarchy in the New Testament church with pastors under elders under overseers under bishops. These terms were used interchangeably to refer to the same office. A pastor is an elder is an overseer is a bishop. Elder is the pastor's character. Shepherd is the pastor's ministry. Overseer or bishop is the pastor's authority. The church needs faithful elders purpose the life and work of pastoral ministry, rather than titles and privileges.

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## **III. THE PRACTICE OF BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP**

Peter exhorts the elders to shepherd and oversee the flock of God. Then he explains how that duty is to be practiced in verses 2-3: "not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." In three

succinct couplets, Peter condemns unworthy leadership models and affirms the attitude of servant-leadership elders should practice.

#### **A. A PROPER ATTITUDE TOWARD RESPONSIBILITY**

Verse 2 says: “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you...” “Under compulsion” means to do something by force, constraint, or necessity. Peter uses it to exhort elders to lead because you want to, not because you have to. This does not mean you will also feel like doing ministry. You won’t! During those times, you need a sense of compulsion to keep going when you don’t feel like it. But it must be divine compulsion, not human compulsion. 1 Corinthians 9:16 says: “For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” A sense of divine call should compel leaders to faithful service. But you should never let people pressure you into service or leadership if you are not led by the Lord to do it. 1 Timothy 3:1 says: “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” This statement is meant to encourage timid men to spiritual leadership. At the same time, it is a warning not to let your wife or family or friends or church pressure you into leadership if you do not desire. Elder-shepherds should be willing workers.

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#### **B. A PROPER ATTITUDE TOWARD PROSPERITY**

In verse 2, Peter condemns “shameful gain.” The KJV calls it “filthy lucre.” Peter does not condemn gain itself. The New Testament is clear that the church has a God-given responsibility to meet the financial needs of its pastors. 1 Corinthians 9:14 says: “In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.” Galatians 6:6 says: “Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.” 1 Timothy 5:17 says: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” Shepherds who lead and feed the flock have a right to expect the church to care them financially. But elders must not use or abuse or misuse the office for shameful gain. 1 Timothy 6:9-10 says: “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” Christian leaders must not be motivated by money. 1 Timothy 3:3 says they must not be lovers of money. Elders should serve eagerly, with a ready mind, devoted heart, and unwavering confidence in God. If you take care of God’s business, God will take care of your business!

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#### **C. A PROPER ATTITUDE TOWARD AUTHORITY**

Verse 3 says: “not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” WARREN WIERSBE said it well: “Pastors are overseers, not overlords.” The elder-shepherd must not be like Diotrephes. 3 John 9-10 reads: “I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.” This is the domineering spirit Peter condemns. It is not the pastor’s church. The congregation is place in his charge as a stewardship. But no pastor has the right to act like he is the “Lord” of the church. In Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus said to the disciples: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of the Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Elder have been given spiritual authority. But how is that authority to be exercised? Verse 3 says: “not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” Elders are not ranchers who drive cattle but shepherds who lead the sheep. We must give direction from up front, not orders from on high. You cannot lead where you do not go. And you cannot teach what you do not know. Faithful elders lead effectively by the moral authority of a godly example. 1 Timothy 4:15-16 says: “Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

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#### **IV. THE REWARD OF BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP**

1 Peter provides hope to persecuted Christians. This hope is rooted in the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. In verse 4, Peter affirms this hope to motivate the elders to be faithful: “And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” In verse 2, Peter command the elders to shepherd the flock of God. But in verse 4, He calls Christ “the chief Shepherd.” Pastors are only under-shepherds. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Senior Pastor of the church. This is one of three passages that refer to Christ as our Shepherd. John 10:11 calls Jesus the good shepherd who died for us. Hebrews 13:20 calls Jesus the great shepherd that rose from the dead for us. And 1 Peter 5:4 calls Jesus the chief shepherd who is coming again for us. The chief shepherd will appear again in glory. On that great day, faithful shepherds will receive a crown of glory. This is not a royal crown. It is the victor’s crown. When an athlete won his event, he was given a garland crown made of flowers. But the faithful shepherd will receive an unfading crown of glory. This is the reward that should motivate elders to be faithful.

- We live for Christ’s approval, not human praise.
- We live for heaven’s reward, not earth’s pleasures.
- We live for lasting glory, not temporary gifts.

A faithful shepherd made the big mistake of getting old. Slowly but surely, he was pushed aside for a younger man. When the decision was finally made to dismiss him, some young people tried to console him as he left the meeting. They asked him what he was going to do next. He answered, "I'm going to heaven." They said, "We know, but what are you going to do now?" He answered, "I'm going to heaven." They said we know you are going to heaven one day. But you don't have a joy or money or a place to stay. What are you going to do now?" He answered, "I'm going to heaven." They concluded he did not understand. He understood them, but they didn't understand him. He was trying to tell them that it was his view of the ultimate that enabled him to deal with the immediate. His focus on heaven was helping him deal with hell on earth. His uplook was good even though his outlook was bad.

**YOU MAY BUILD GREAT CATHEDRALS LARGE OR SMALL  
YOU MAY BUILD SKYSCRAPERS GRAND AND TALL  
YOU MAY CONQUER ALL THE FAILURES OF YOUR PAST  
BUT ONLY WHAT YOU DO FOR CHRIST WILL LAST**

**YOU MAY SEEK EARTHLY POWER AND FAME  
THE WORLD MIGHT BE IMPRESSED BY YOUR GREAT NAME  
SOON THE GLORIES OF THIS LIFE WILL ALL BE PAST  
BUT ONLY WHAT YOU DO FOR CHRIST WILL LAST**