

1 Peter 5 (1) – The Call of the Elders

So – in 1 Peter 4:12-19, we studied God’s purpose in suffering, God’s presence in suffering, God’s principle in suffering, and God’s providence in suffering. Peter is applying what he said there to church leaders in vs.1-4, and to the assembly in vs.5-10. Suffering doesn’t just affect us as individuals; it also affects us as a community. The elders have an important role to play in the life of a suffering believer, and also in the midst of a suffering body of believers. We will examine vs.1-4 in three parts; the call, the commission, and the crown of the elders.

I exhort the elders among you – This exhortation to the elders was given in the context of a public letter, to be read before the entire congregation. And this letter was going to be read by several congregations (1:1). But why didn’t Peter send a separate letter to be read only by elders? If you are not an elder, why do you need to hear this? How does this matter to you?

It matters because every believer is to be part of a local assembly, led by elders. This text, and the rest of the NT, makes that abundantly clear. Since that is true, it’s important to know who the elders are, what they are supposed to do, and how you are supposed to respond. Peter gives you the right view of elders and what their work is. And this helps you to know how to pray for your elders, and hold them accountable. You need to know how your response to leadership affects you, the elders, and the whole assembly. When you see how this exhortation in vs.1-4 relates to the exhortation given to the whole congregation in vs.5-10, you’ll understand how vital this all is. If you want to learn to suffer well, to really give your anxieties to God, to resist the devil, to be firm in your faith, and to be restored, confirmed, strengthened, and established, as an individual, and as a church, you need to hear what Peter is saying to the elders.

the elders – who are the elders? The elders are the leaders of the local church, those who have authority from Christ to shepherd the church. They are to oversee the congregation and to give pastoral care and guidance to the church in general and individuals in particular. As you will see in vs.2-3, they are to gather, guard, and guide the local “flock”. You see this concept in the Old Testament (cf. Exodus 3:16, 12:21, 19:7). The term elder refers not specifically to age (cf. 1 Timothy 4:12), but to the wisdom and maturity that an older person should have. The pastoral epistles give us qualifications for the office (1 Timothy 3:1-7 / Titus 1:5-9). When you look at those lists, you’ll notice that they speak of how elders must be good leaders in their homes.

Notice that Peter uses the plural word *elders*. The New Testament pattern for church rule is for there to be a plurality of elders in each church (cf. Acts 11:30, 14:23, 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23, 16:4, 21:18 / Philippians 1:1 / 1 Timothy 5:17 / Titus 1:5 / James 5:14 / 1 Peter 5:1-2). Other terms (bishop or overseer) are used to refer to the same individuals (cf. Titus 1:7 / Acts 20:17, 28). But even when other more generic terms are used of church leaders, the pattern is that there are several such leaders for each church (**1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 / Hebrews 13:7, 17**).

Within the plurality of elders, there should also be an organizational structure. There will be differences and distinctions in roles. For example, there will typically be a main pastor-teacher, or “senior pastor” (cf. Ephesians 4:11 / 1 Timothy 5:17 / James 3:1), and this elder is the primary leader within that group. He will be “first among equals”, setting the teaching agenda and generally leading the spiritual direction of the congregation as a whole.

The example of biblical marriage provides us not only with a practical illustration of how this elder relationship should work, but the elder relationship illustrates how the marriage relationship should work. Godly leadership is a product of listening, learning, and loving.

The role of a pastor with his elders resembles the role of a husband with his wife. The husband must usually take the primary initiative and be the responsible decision maker in the home. Yet a good husband will carefully listen to his wife, and love her and learn from her. He should be taking into consideration her ideas, admonitions, concerns, and even her directions.

In a marriage, it isn't as if the husband is just the tiebreaker if they disagree, because this wrongly applied could mean the man always gets what he wants and never considers his wife's ideas or opinions. Since no one is always right, the man should realize that he might sometimes use his tiebreaking vote for her idea. A man who forsakes the counsel of his wife is a fool. He's ignoring God's provisions for his decisions. Now the wife is to submit to her husband's requests if he isn't commanding something God forbids or forbidding something God commands. But with all things, it is supposed to be their combined wisdom and discussion on matters, with his leadership a product of that. That's what makes him look good and do well. A spiritually healthy, happy, and holy family is one where the husband and wife work together as a team. A good, godly marriage of love and respect means a framework of teamwork toward common godly goals. When the goal of a couple is the honor of God, a good marriage is the result.

So too, it is with the plurality of elders in a local church. Just as a marriage is not a singular enterprise, so the pastor is not involved in a "one-man ministry". It is a "we are one in our pursuit of God" ministry. That's what helps make a good church. The pastor-teacher must lead, but he must also listen, learn, and love. He won't always be right, and he doesn't have all the gifts needed for the church to function properly. Therefore, he should always be listening to the other elders. To do otherwise is foolish, and it leads to abuse. By not following God's design and direction, in the name of his personal power, he will be losing the Spirit's power.

Practically speaking, the senior pastor should be letting the other elders lead on certain issues and with certain areas of ministry, especially where they excel. The pastor-teacher has primacy, because preaching has primacy (cf. Acts 6:1-4 / Romans 10:13-17 / 2 Timothy 4:2 / Titus 1:1-3). The primary leadership role is tied to the preaching office. But the pastor should consider yielding his desires in cases where the other elders are surer of an issue than he is. That might happen a lot, especially in certain areas. The pastor doesn't have the greatest gifts, skills, and talents in every area of ministry. And "first among equals" is not a license to be the Lone Ranger.

A husband and wife both take care of the family, and their duties overlap at certain points, but there are role distinctions. So, too, it is within the plurality of elders in a church. All elders are called to do the work of shepherding, but not all elders are pastor-teachers. All elders must be qualified and able to teach, but not all elders are given the call and gift of preaching.

Like in a good marriage, the husband and wife work together, and the wife will be better able to do certain things than the husband. That is God's design for their mutual benefit and his glory. So too, not all pastor-teachers will be able to minister as well as certain elders in certain areas. This is meant to foster unity, and proper function, not envy, pride or division. Just as a local

church is a dynamic body with differing gifts and roles (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27), so too, it is to be within the body of elders. The elders serve as a leadership team of shepherds, guided by the word of God, led by a pastor-teacher, sharing the work of caring for a particular congregation.

There can be and hopefully there is more than one elder who is called and gifted to preach in a congregation. Even then, one of those elders must assume a place of primary leadership for the purpose of order and organization. The other elders must be wise and mature enough to submit to the leadership of the pastor, as long as he isn't commanding something God forbids or forbidding something God commands. But just like it should be in marriage, it is supposed to be the combined wisdom and discussion of the elders on matters, with his leadership a product of that. That's what honors Christ, and makes for a spiritually healthy, happy, and holy church family.

as a fellow elder – Peter could have started his call of the elders by pressing his credentials and his authority as an apostle. Instead, he first appeals to them as a peer. He says I'm one of you, and I understand what this job is like and how difficult this is. I'm out there doing the same sort of work. Like you, I have sheep that I gather, guard, and guide. Like you, I also have to lead and not drive. I'm not asking you to do anything I haven't or wouldn't do (cf. John 21:15-17).

Peter is expressing his track record and his willingness to suffer in the refiner's fire along with the rest of the elders. He is being an example that they might learn to be an example. True elders don't just stand above or outside the church telling people how to cope with the fire. Peter had learned that elders don't back away from the fire (cf. Luke 22:31-32). They lead the church into the fire. Peter is motivating them by coming to them in a posture of humility, sympathy, and empathy. By doing this he is demonstrating how the elders ought to motivate their own sheep.

and a witness of the sufferings of Christ – Peter witnessed how Jesus was arrested, tried, beaten, crucified, and yet rose again. Peter knows how Jesus shepherded him through his suffering even though Jesus was suffering himself. Jesus left the apostles an example which Peter is giving the leaders of the people for whom Christ suffered and died. Peter also shared in Christ's sufferings (cf. Philippians 3:10 / Colossians 1:24 / 1 Peter 4:13-14), having been arrested (Acts 4:3, 5:18), beaten (Acts 5:40), and imprisoned (Acts 12:3-5) for preaching the gospel.

Peter had previously said that the refiner's fire of purifying judgment, through suffering, begins at the household of God (4:17). Therefore, since the household of God begins with the elders, this means the judgment begins with the elders. You have to learn to suffer as a shepherd so that you can shepherd others through their suffering. To be able to shepherd others through their suffering, you will have had to be shepherded by Christ through your own suffering. And you must shepherd others through their suffering although you may be suffering yourself.

as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed – Peter was sure about being a partaker in the sufferings of Christ. He was just as sure that he would be a partaker in the glory that is to come. He says I've walked with Christ, suffered for Christ, and along with you I will be glorified with Christ (cf. Romans 8:17 / 2 Timothy 2:12 / 1 Peter 1:7). True elders don't get to experience less suffering than others. The weight of caring for souls means they are most often heartbroken in some sense (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:28-29). But when they lead their flock by being an example of how to suffer well, their faith has authority. It speaks, strengthens, and supports.