

An Exhortation to the Church – 1 Peter 5:1-14
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Introduction

With these challenging days for the church, it is wonderful that we have Peter's exhortation to the church in this final chapter. It is an exhortation directed to the elders, the congregation members and each of us as disciples of Jesus, for how the church is to live in challenging times.

As we read it, we remember what has gone before in the letter. These are the Christians of Asia Minor, who as chapter 1 said "even now are suffering all kinds of trials". He paints a confident picture of trusting in Christ in the midst of this, to sustain the people of God. In our text today he gets very practical for how this works out among leaders and followers.

It would be most helpful if you had your bible open to 1 Peter chapter 5. Today Peter gives an exhortation, an appeal, to three groups: Shepherding Leaders, Humble Followers and Watchful Disciples. Let us look at each in turn:

1. Shepherding Leaders vv 1-4

He begins this way:

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you ² to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising oversight (vv 1-2a)

His first appeal is to the elders in the congregation. An elder in the NT was often a person in some position of leadership in the church. Often an actual older person, but not always so. Remember Timothy was one such elder who was a relatively young man. I think he has in mind those who have pastoral responsibility in the church. They are certainly exercising "oversight", as Shepherds tending God's flock.

I am always a bit perturbed when the bible refers to the church as a flock of sheep. A couple of years ago I met a massive flock of sheep under muster on the Highland Lakes Road around Great Lake. They are not the smartest of animals, especially when running in a herd. But perhaps God knows us well in using this image!

God himself is of course the shepherd of Psalm 23. Jesus called himself the "Good Shepherd", and in verse 4 of our reading today is referred to as the "chief shepherd". But the elders are shepherds too, and this makes them under-shepherds as they in turn are led by their shepherding God.

I often use this passage when talking to our clergy about how they are to conduct their ministry among you. But I am sure it applies to all the elders in every church, those with positions of leadership and oversight in many different spheres – Parish Councillors and Wardens, bible study leaders and treasurers, Sunday school teachers and lay preachers. Elders, shepherds, living under the Chief Shepherd.

I want to show you two paintings today as I speak about this, painted by my friend Libby, who is a very talented member of one of our churches because she has captured something lovely about the work of the shepherd in this first painting.

Peter says three things for shepherd leaders in our churches, that they should be willing, eager and exemplary.

Let me read from verse 2: *tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly.*³ *Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.*

The leader is not to feel compelled or constrained, but is to embrace their leadership with a willing heart. It is hard to lead (as any church warden or Rector will tell you), and especially where there is hardship and persecution, but the heart must be willing, purposeful, intentional.

The leader does not do it for money, for “sordid gain”, for some kind of kick back or special treatment, but is to minister eagerly – with enthusiasm for the intrinsic rewards of serving the Lord. And the leader is to set an example, a pattern for others to follow – not Lording it over people with a domineering stance. Remember Jesus warned against this in Mark 10 calling his disciples to be servants. Hasn’t Libby captured this beautifully – the servant hearted, willing, eager, shepherd overseeing the sheep?

Now we want leaders like this in the Diocese of Tasmania – clergy, lay leaders, parish councillors, youth leaders and children’s ministry leaders, members of our Diocesan Council and Boards, servants in our care ministries, and chaplains and teachers, who are willing, eager and exemplary under-shepherds of the Chief Shepherd. Because this will make for a remarkable church. But Peter’s exhortation is not just for leaders, but for followers as well.

2. Humble Followers vv 5-7

Listen to verse 5: *In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”*

(the last words there being a quote from Proverbs 3:34)

The younger here, may be a reference to the younger members of the congregation. But before you use your “get out of jail free card”, and think this is not for you, I think he is just drawing distinction between those who are the elders and those who are not. This is about ordinary congregation members. One commentary I read said it was obviously written for the younger members as they are more prone to “act rebelliously”. The writer obviously leads a very sheltered life!

I have another of Libby’s paintings to show you while we think of this. Because here are the sheep in the flock. If the model for the shepherd is willing, eager, service, the model for the people is humble submission. This is not the first time this has been set as the model for our behaviour in this letter. Remember back in chapter 3, the humble submission to government, slaves and masters, husbands and wives? Now here in the church as well.

The followers are to accept the authority of the elders, and to do this with humility. Our leaders are entrusted with heavy responsibility, not to lord it over the congregation, but a weighty duty to teach and to pastor. And we can help them but submitting humbly to them.

I was reminded as I prepared of the verse in Hebrews 13:17 on this topic.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you.

We let our leaders lead, and do so without sighing (that is joyfully, willingly and eagerly) if we, as the body of Christ, are easy to lead. This doesn't mean that our leaders are always right, but giving them the benefit of the doubt, and submitting humbly to them, makes their life a joy, and their leadership so much better.

I was assembling a new door handle, and the bolt wouldn't go into the nut smoothly. I added a drop of oil and it worked like a charm. One writer said, humility is the oil that allows relationships to run smoothly in the church.

In my role, I hear too often the power struggles in local churches, where congregation members want to "stick it to the man", and wrestle power and leadership from their elders. This is the way of the world, not of godly submission.

Our cares, Peter says in verse 7, are to be cast onto the Lord. Literally they are to be thrown, to be hurled onto the Lord, as an expression of our submission under "his mighty hand". Worry is a sign of pride, because it says we can solve every problem. But humility casts its care into the hands of an almighty and all-caring God. This is the life of humble followers

3. Watchful Disciples vv 8-9

Listen to verse 8: *Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.* ⁹ *Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.*

Say you believe in the devil at a dinner party or at the watercooler at work, and you are likely to be thought of as someone who also believes in fairies and green men from mars. And this is exactly how the devil likes it. Make no mistake, we have an adversary in the spiritual realm, the devil, who is trying all the time to trip us up. He is depicted here as the lion, prowling around the edges of God's flock, stealthily picking off the weak and wandering ones.

The text here suggests that the suffering they are undergoing, the persecution, is his work designed to derail our faith, and a chance for him to consume us. And the best strategy he has, is for us to discount him, pretend he doesn't exist, or just be indifferent to the threat. But Peter says, be alert, be watchful, mount the resistance against him, so that he doesn't undo your faith.

He is at work in many ways. I see traces of his presence all the time in the discouragement of church members. In constant proud behaviour. In the lie that you will find satisfaction in pleasure alone. In the promise of materialism. In the temptation to act on our sinful desires. In luring us with the bright lights of money, sex and power. He accuses us of guilt. He tempts us to give up on the faith when it is tough.

Be alert, resist him, Peter says, be steadfast in your faith in God and satisfaction in him alone. This is Peter's advice for the watchful disciple.

So here is the exhortation for the church, for how we are to live with one another in these days of trial, as we await the appearing of the Chief Shepherd. Shepherding leaders – willingly, eagerly, setting an example for the flock. Humble followers – joyfully submitting to their leaders – and humbling themselves before the Lord. And Watchful disciples – being alert and resisting the devil, being steadfast in faith.

It seems to me that the Lord is speaking these encouragements. I want you to think for a moment, which word, is his word for you this day? Apart from the final greeting in verses 12-14, the first letter of Peter helpfully ends with a summary of the whole letter, in verses 10-11

Summary vv 10-11

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

This is Peter's message: We have been called by our gracious God – the God of all grace, to eternal life and glory in the Lord Jesus Christ. While we wait for that fulfillment, we suffer now in all kinds of trials and persecutions and difficulties. But the God who called us, will fortify us for endurance, as he restores, supports, strengthens and establishes us.

JC Ryle – Bishop of Liverpool in the late 1880's said:

“Let us remember this as we look forward to the days yet to come: we know not what our days may be – bright or dark, many or few – but we know we are in the hands of him who does all things well. He will not err in any of his dealings with us. He will take away and give – He will move and he will settle – with perfect wisdom, at the right time, in the right way. The great shepherd of the sheep makes no mistakes. He leads every lamb of his flock by the right way to the city of habitation.”

To him, be the power forever and ever. Amen.