

Elders: Shepherds of His Sheep – 1 Peter 5:1-4

Introduction – The scriptures teach that a faithful church will be led and will follow a plurality of servants known as elders. Elders are not men who have obtained some extra special level of spirituality that no one else can or will attain. But elders, as a session, are to be seen as a means of God's powerful and personal care for His people. Therefore, it is good and necessary to review the role of elders and our responsibility to respond to God's appointed shepherds of His sheep.

Some Church Government Background – The Church today is in a different place of development than it was in the first century, in the same way that the building of a house is different during the laying of foundation stones and the later building of the house upon that foundation. This is the imagery that Paul uses to describe how the church was and is being built (Eph 2:19-22). These extraordinary offices were accompanied with extraordinary signs that authenticated the offices of prophet and apostle (2 Cor 12:12, Heb 2:3-4). Through the prophets and apostles, the foundations of the church are laid, they themselves following Jesus Christ, the Chief Cornerstone. While these offices have ceased being held by individuals, the work of the foundation continues in their inspired "blueprints" – the Spirit-breathed Scriptures. Now, upon those works, the work of building up of the church continues (Eph 4:11-12). Apostles and prophets laid the foundation, evangelists bring in more "material" and the pastors and teachers build upon the foundation to construct the house, or temple, or "body of Christ." And just as the foundation followed the Chief Cornerstone, the pastor-shepherds follow and serve under the Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4) - In other words, the work of church-building is the work of Jesus Christ, the Head of the church. The ordaining of elders and their ordained service is the delegating work of Jesus for the benefit of His body to accomplish through His under-shepherds what He has commanded will occur in this Gospel Age.

Elders/Bishops/Pastors – These three terms are used to describe men who lead the church, and all three are used in this passage in 1 Peter. *Elder* comes from the Greek *presbuteros* and is the word for "old man" and came to refer to the rulers of a local assembly and not necessarily the elderly in the midst. *Bishop* is from the Greek *episkopos* and means "overseer" (v2), a guardian or superintendent making sure that things are done rightly. *Pastor* comes from the Greek *poimen*, also translated "shepherd" and is of course packed full of biblical imagery of caring, protecting, feeding, leading, and binding up - with close, personal trust. We see these three terms used interchangeably in this passage and elsewhere (Titus 1:5-7, Acts 20:17, 28).

Peter-the-Fellow-Elder – While Peter identifies himself as an apostle (1 Pet 1:1), he exhorts the elders as a fellow-elder (5:1) and exhorts the elders to shepherd the flock (v2) in much the same way he was exhorted (John 21:15). Peter denies any claim to being the head of the church, leaving that title to the Chief Shepherd (v4). We should likewise be careful when asked, "Who is your senior pastor?"

The Shepherd Motif – Elders are shepherds. Immediately we see that elders are to be like the Chief Shepherd (v4, 2:25). This motif of shepherd-leaders runs throughout the Scriptures. Moses, a near-ruler alongside Pharaoh, becomes a shepherd. Joshua is appointed as a shepherd (Num 27:12-23), and King David is a shepherd. Ezekiel laments the lack of faithful shepherds of God's people (Ezek 34) and of course Jesus comes as the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18).

Temptations and Rewards (vv2-4) – Elders must not serve under compulsion (*"For they who do it of constraint, and who have no appetite and love for it, will not properly discharge the duties of the ministry"* – Luther). They must not serve for dishonest gain, for injured sheep are an easy prey. Elders must not use their position as a place for tyranny, but teach submission by being submissive examples to their Chief Elder. There ought to be little expectation of temporal rewards in this difficult work, for even Jesus suffered in this work. And yet, God has promised a *great crown of glory that does not fade away* on the other side of eternity. Even here, the pastor/elder serves as a great example if he lives with contentment and expectancy in the midst of whatever trials he suffers as a servant of Christ.

A Faithful Response to the Gift of Elders – What are we, the congregation, to see and learn from this? Elders/Pastors are a gift from God to us and while we have a low view of church government (non-hierarchical) nevertheless we ought to hold in high esteem this gift – the session of elders in our midst.

Words to the Young Flock (1 Pet 5:5) – God always commands to our weaknesses. Temptation to disrespect the older generation or those in authority has always been an issue of the flesh. But in our post-60's culture it has been tolerated and even encouraged by the older generation. Here is the command: submit yourselves to your elders. This means that you need to know and make yourself known to them so that they might shepherd you.

Make it a Joy for Them (Heb 13:7, 17) – Follow their faith, look to the outcome of their conduct. Let them rule over the church with joy, for they have a weighty responsibility. They must give an account for your souls. From this Lord's Day service and then working out into your life, they are charged to shepherd your souls. Therefore, come hungry, ready to eat, ready to hear, ready to put into practice, ready to receive the grace that is given to you in Jesus Christ through His church.