

This Exiled Life – Part 5

Elders, Shepherd the Flock of God

1 Peter 5:1-4

Mark Vroegop

¹ 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:² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. 1 Peter 5:1–4 (ESV)

As I look back on my life, I think that the biggest factors that shaped my life were not necessarily the education I received, the books I read, or the sermons that I heard. Don't get me wrong. All of those influences were very helpful and formative at a particular level.

But what influenced me the most were relationships with godly leaders. Each of them shaped my understanding of the world, marriage, theology, and ministry in ways that are hard to quantify. They have left an indelible mark on my life. A few examples:

- My dad shaped my understanding of being a Christian husband, father, and servant-leader
- My home church pastor taught me ministry through loving people and faithfully teaching the Word
- Our pre-marital counselor opened my eyes to the application of the Scriptures in all areas of my life
- A mentor in prayer gave me a model for leading others in prayer
- My seminary advisor, Jim Grier, gave me new theological categories of thought and is the reason that I'm serving at College Park today

In God's providence, each of these men's lives intersected with mine at just the right moment. As I look back, it is as if there was a puzzle that God was putting together and in which each man played a part.

And when I ran into a crisis or trouble, these men were the ones who got the call. Or I'd find myself in the middle of a challenging scenario, and I'd think, "What would _____ do or say in this moment?" More than any book, article, or class, these men helped to direct my life.

I'm sure that most of you have the same sort of story. God uses people to shape us, and He also uses people to guide us in the midst of various crises. There are few things more important and more formative than the people that God places in positions of influence and leadership.

If having the right people in the right positions is that important, then it would make sense why Peter would talk specifically about the role of elders in the church. I'm sure that Peter knew the strategic impact of having the right people in the right positions to make the right decisions.

But I'm also sure that the pressure of being an exile was creating challenges for the church. And moments of crisis or increasing hostility require the right kind of leaders to lead in the right kind of way.

Three Goals of this Message

I've been looking forward to this text for some time because I want to accomplish three things with this passage today.

First, I want you to have a biblical understanding of the role of an Elder in the church. Second, I want you to understand some of the ways that our Elders are trying to live out this text at our church. Third, I want you to consider some implications of what you'll see and of what I'm saying.

For the last 18 months, our Elders have been trying to make a concerted effort to put some of the words in this passage into practice. You may have noticed a few things that we've tried, and I now want to help you understand our strategy and the application of 1 Peter 5.

Now to get to the heart of this text, let's look at three critical questions:

- Who leads the church?
- What do church leaders do?
- How do church leaders lead?

Who Leads the Church?

Chapter five continues with the theme regarding the internal issues that the church would face in the external pressure of exiled living. The church needs strong leadership at all times but especially during seasons of opposition. Moments of crisis require leadership clarity.

Our text begins with an exhortation from Peter to the Elders. So, the answer to our first question is easy to answer. Elders lead the church. Now, this is not a concept that is unique to Peter's letter. There is a consistency throughout the New Testament regarding essential positions of leadership in the church. God's system of leadership in the church involves godly men serving as Elders who are helped by the ministry of Deacons. But the primary responsibility and authority rests on the Elders.

The word Elder is the Greek word *presbyteroi*, and its meaning comes from the Old Testament model of heads of families or older leaders who would provide leadership to God's people. In Exodus 3, the elders are assembled to meet with Moses where he tells them about the coming exodus. In Exodus 19:7, it is the elders who first hear the instruction that Moses received on Mt. Sinai. During the time of judges and the monarchy, it is the elders who meet, often at the gate of the city, to make decisions or to speak for the people. And during exile, the elders were those who gave leadership and direction to

the synagogues. This becomes the beginning of what will later become the Sanhedrin, the assembly of religious and political leaders during the time of Jesus.

As the early church develops, an eldership develops to provide leadership to the church. A few notable examples of this appear elsewhere in the New Testament:

- The book of Acts records that the early church, especially the Jerusalem church, had elders (Acts 11:30; 15:2)
- As new churches were established, the appointment of elders was emphasized (Titus 1:5)
- Qualifications for elders are specified in the 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 to provide guidance as to what kind of men should serve in this role
- It appears that the elders function in plurality, which means that they work together with a shared authority (Acts 14:23)
- Along with elders, deacons emerge to assist in the practical leadership of the church (1 Tim. 3:8-11)
- The elders have a unique level of divinely given authority and responsibility (James 5:14, 1 Tim. 5:17)

It is clear that the church is to be led by a group of men who are called elders. Now, this does not mean that they possess all authority. Our model of church governance includes a recognition that God has entrusted His authority to the entire church. Matthew 16 and 18 tell us that God has given “the keys” of authority to the church. That means that we would characterize our church as congregational, not presbyterian. We believe that the ultimate authority for the church rests with the church, the gathering of its members.

Therefore, we would use language that says we are an Elder-led, congregationally-ruled church. That is why church membership is important and why our members meeting in May is something you should attend. It is the venue for our church to live out its view of authority and governance.

Back to the main question: Who leads the church? The answer clearly is the elders. Notice how Peter not only addresses the elders because he needs them to lead in a particular way, but he also identifies himself as one of them. Peter is also an elder.

In verse one, he identifies himself as a fellow elder. This says more about these elders than it does about Peter. These elders need to see their role as part of the authoritative mechanism designed by God. Peter is a fellow elder. And Peter is also part of the “suffering-to-glorification” model that we have seen throughout this letter. He knows about suffering. He witnessed the suffering of Christ, and he anticipates that he too will share in the future glory.

The point of all this is simply that when Peter seeks to provide an exhortation for how the church is to be led in challenging and difficult times, he speaks directly to the elders. As these churches faced increasing pressure, there was a need for godly leaders.

Do you know that we need godly leaders? I am so thankful for the men with whom I get to serve as a fellow Elder of our church. And I hope that you realize that as valuable as a good constitution is, and as

valuable as good policies are, the greatest protection for the church is the right men in the right seats making the right decisions. The church needs godly men who are leading the church, especially as the pressure of culture begins to press upon the church. Elders lead the church.

What Do Church Leaders Do?

The second question that we need to ask is critically important. Elders are to lead, but what does that leadership look like? What do church leaders do? Verse 2 gives us two key words that are related to one another: *shepherd* and *exercise oversight*.

Before I unpack these words and help you understand how we are trying to live this out at College Park, take note of the phrase “. . . the flock of God which is among you . . .” This is an important statement for two reasons.

First, it indicates that the congregation belongs to God. It is His flock. In verse 4 we’ll see Jesus called “the chief Shepherd.” The point is simply that church leaders need to be sure that they know that their role of leadership is the stewardship of something that doesn’t belong to them. As they lead, they need to always remember that this is God’s flock.

Second, the flock is “among you,” which means that there is a requirement that elders are closely connected to the flock. Church leadership cannot be effectively accomplished when it is distant from the congregation. Keep this in mind because it informs certain aspects of our strategy for Elder leadership that I’ll talk about in a moment.

With that phrase highlighted, let’s turn to the central function of elders as it relates to shepherding and oversight.

Peter uses the word “shepherd” in verse two to highlight the particular kind of leadership that elders are to provide. The word suggests not only leadership, guidance, and authority, but also caring for the sheep. It is the kind of language that Jesus used with Peter in John 21 after the resurrection. After asking Peter if he loved Him, Jesus said “tend my sheep,” which could be translated as “shepherd my sheep.” In Acts 20:28, the apostle Paul gives instructions to the Ephesian elders, telling them to “care for the church of God.” It is the same word that we have in 1 Peter 5.

The word “shepherd” means to provide all-encompassing leadership with a particular level of care. Perhaps the best example of what this *doesn’t* mean is what we find in Ezekiel 34.

⁴ The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd . . . Ezekiel 34:4–5 (ESV)

Elders are to lead by shepherding, which means caring for the sheep. In particular, this requires caring for the souls of the people entrusted to their care. Hebrews 13:17 helps us understand this particular nuance:

¹⁷ *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)*

But there's another word that compliments and overlaps the word shepherd. It is the phrase "exercising oversight." This is a different Greek word (*episkopoi*), and it describes a role of responsibility and authority. This is the word used in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 for the role of elders, so we can conclude that the roles of elder and overseer are the same.

So, what do we find here? We learn that the church is to be led by elders who are responsible for the care of God's people.

Now you need to know that over the last two years, our Elders have been studying these texts and asking ourselves how we can effectively fulfill the heart of these passages, especially in light of the number of people under our care. One of the "Achilles heels" of large churches is that the size and scale of the ministry make caring for God's people more complicated and more challenging. Shepherding is less complex in a small church because elders have a better chance of knowing people and the state of their soul by virtue of the scale. Some large churches have simply given up trying to work at this, and these churches inevitably end up being a place where people "come" but where shepherding is lacking.

We set out on a mission to try and change that. Here are a few things that we've been doing behind the scenes:

1. Our Elders determined that our primary responsibility is to care for and shepherd our members. We certainly believe that we have some general responsibility to anyone who attends College Park Church, but we believe that we are called to specifically watch over the souls of those who have covenanted together with us in membership.
2. Since membership is the primary focus, we set out to a) raise the level of awareness and importance of membership and our covenant and b) be sure that we knew who our members are. That led to Covenant Member Update or Renewal which has helped us really know our 2,422 members at North Indy.
3. Our Elders began operating with a definition of shepherding that included four key words that we gleaned from a book by Timothy Witmer called *The Shepherd Leader*. That definition involves: a) leading, b) feeding, c) protecting, and d) knowing the sheep at both a macro level and a micro level. This recognizes that Elders are to lead at a governance level and a personal level.
4. At the beginning of the year we shifted our Elder meetings to feature this macro/micro structure. The effect is that every Elder meeting not only involves the important aspects of governance and big picture decisions that are necessarily for a large church, but we also take half our time to pray for the flock and to discuss how to help our church spiritually and what is happening in the lives of our church members.

5. Given the scale of the ministry, we've divided the congregation into various regions or parishes. This is simply our attempt to know which Elders are responsible for which members and to make the scale of ministry more manageable. Additionally, our Elders see Small Groups as a vital part of watching over the souls of our people, so they provide leadership to our Small Group Coaches and our Small Group Leaders.

This system that we've developed is still a work in progress. We have a blend or hybrid that involves parishes and Small Groups. It is the best that we can do until we add more Elders to help us and until we can build out our Deacon ministry even further.

We've made a lot of progress in the last two years, and I hope that you are encouraged that you have some really faithful Elders who are trying to figure out how to fulfill their calling to shepherd the flock of God.

You need to know that our Elder Council is more than just a board of directors. In fact, that is one reason why I resist even using the word "board." You have godly and faithful men who are really trying to care for the flock through effective governance and through effective spiritual guidance. I am privileged to serve with some wonderful men whose heart for the gospel and whose love for the church is just amazing.

Our Elders understand that our biblical mandate and model is to shepherd the flock by exercising oversight. And by God's grace we are seeing that happen in new ways in our church.

How Do Church Leaders Lead?

The third and final questions relate to the way church leaders are to provide spiritual leadership. This is particularly important because caring for the people of the church necessitates a particular posture of leadership. In other words, elder leadership is unique by virtue of how church leaders lead.

Verses 2-4 provide a number of key statements about how the elders are to lead the church. Allow me to summarize these statements with three adjectives.

Whole-heartedly – Elders are to serve with a sense of divine calling and purpose. They are to be "all-in" as it relates to their ministry. Verse 2 says "not under compulsion, but willingly . . ." The idea is that elders serve because of their love for the gospel, their love for the church, and their joy in seeing people become like Jesus. This is necessary because elders will have to make sacrifices, and they will face some level of opposition. Therefore, they need to feel a compelling call of God to serve the church in this way. Reluctant elders do not stay in the battle when it becomes challenging.

Another angle on this is found in the statement "not for shameful gain, eagerly." Elders are not to serve because of what they get out serving as an elder, but because of their love for the church. Leadership positions in the church should not be used as a platform for pride or greed. Elders are to be motivated by their love for Jesus and the church, not for what they gain from their position.

Humbly – Elders are to serve in a manner that fits with the example of Jesus. They are not to use their authority in a domineering manner. Elders are not to oppress people or use their authority in a

manner that fits more with a worldly manner of leading than the way of serving others. An elder is to be an example in how he conducts himself as he deals with difficult problems and troubled people. He is to do his very best to emulate the words of Jesus when He said, “. . . the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25). Elders are to be marked by a gospel-centered selflessness.

Accountably – the final manner in which elders are to lead relates to their view of the future. Verse 4 identifies that there is a Chief Shepherd and that He will reward those who faithfully serve. The point here relates to a basic accountability. Elders are under-shepherds, not the Chief Shepherd, and their manner of service now is connected to a future day of honor and, by implication, accountability. Godly elders understand that all the authority, honor, and opportunity that they are given comes as a derivative authority from Jesus Himself, and they are to lead with this reality in mind.

Are you at all overwhelmed by this list? At one level, I hope that you are because it gives us a very helpful perspective on the sober calling that elders have on their lives. Nearly every year, typically at the first meeting with our new Elders present, I remind our Elders that at the end of the day God has entrusted the care, protection, and guidance of our church to the men in the room at that moment. I’ve said, “Brothers, look around you. There is no one other than us to help us lead the most important entity on the face of the earth. God has entrusted this expression of His church to us. What we decide and how we lead really matters.”

Applications

The church is shaped by its leaders, and each of our lives are shaped by the spiritual leaders that God puts into our lives. Being an exile and an exile community requires godly leaders who provide the necessary spiritual care for believers. Hopefully you have been able to see that more clearly in our text today.

In light of this, can I offer some specific applications of this text?

1) Pray for your Elders

Can I encourage you to take some time this week and specifically pray for our Elders? We list them all by name and picture on our website, and we need your prayers. We need wisdom. We need strength. We need God’s help to be godly. Would you take some time to thank God for the Elders? They carry unusual burdens, and they need your prayers.

2) Follow your Elders

The second request that I would offer fits with what we read in Hebrews 13. Elders are not perfect, but the Bible calls us to a normative posture of obedience /following as it relates to their leadership. That means that if you have become a member of our church, you do what you can to support the ministry of shepherding. Follow the pace that they set. Engage in ministry. Help them make our church a place where spiritual maturity is happening.

3) Aspire to be an Elder

1 Timothy 3 says that if someone aspires to the office of an elder, he aspires to a noble task. In other words, it is good to want to be an elder. We are going to need more Elders in the future. I hope that young men will aspire to this wonderful responsibility. I pray that God will raise up a generation of godly men who will pursue Jesus with such vigor and passion that their godliness would be obvious. And then they will be given the opportunity to serve the church as Elder. I will tell you that one of the great joys of my life is spending time with godly men who love the gospel, love the church, and want to see her built up into the image and likeness of Jesus.

I'm so grateful for the men who have shaped my life. The imprint of each of them has been dramatic and life-altering. But do you know what I'm also thankful for?

I'm deeply grateful for the men who help our church navigate our exile culture. And I hope that you are thankful today for Elders at College Park Church who take seriously the call to "shepherd the flock of God."

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