

4 The Elder's Task

In this final article on the eldership I want to concentrate on the ministry and function of the elder, focussing on the *nature* of the elder's task and then on the *manner* in which this task must be performed. To help us in this I want to think with you about a most significant passage, 1 Peter 5.1-4.

Practical Reasons for the Eldership

Let me first of all set these words in their context. These verse are linked with the previous section by the little word translated 'So' in the RSV, and strangely omitted altogether in the NIV.¹ Peter says, 'Therefore, to the elders among you I appeal....' It is a serious omission on the part of the NIV to leave out the word 'therefore' because it indicates to us that the apostle is writing his comments to elders in the light of what he has just been saying. In 4.12, Peter has been warning his readers about the fiery trial or ordeal through which Christians may have to pass. 'Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.'

God's Provision for Life's Trials

He tells them how they are to come through this fiery trial and counsels them as to how they should face such trials. He goes on to conclude this exhortation in 4.19 by saying that 'those that suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator.' Now the question at once arises, 'What will their faithful creator do to sustain them in their trials?' One aspect of the answer is provided at the beginning of chapter 5: their faithful creator will provide shepherds to care for his flock and to pastor them through days of adversity. Here, therefore, is the calling and the function of the under-shepherd. Christ, the Chief Shepherd, who will one day give us the crown of glory, in the meantime has appointed us as under-shepherds to shepherd the flock of God through the trials and pains of life in this world. Can you see what an important part this plays in our understanding of the ministry of the elder? An essential element in God's care for his people in a fallen world is that he provides elders for the church. That then is the immediate biblical context out of which Peter speaks.

Weakness and Inadequacy

But there is also in 5.1 a personal context: 'To the elders among you I appeal as a *fellow elder*, a witness *of the sufferings of Christ*.' Peter is writing both as an elder and an apostle. The implication is that he has already received that same commission from the Lord Jesus which he is now passing on to them. 'Feed (pastor) my sheep,' Christ had said to Peter by the lake side.² Surely Peter is providing great encouragement here, because the commission he is giving us is the commission he himself received when he was most conscious of his own failure, weakness and inadequacy. It was out of the ashes of his failure that God raised up Peter to a place of usefulness and service. Alongside the high demands of the eldership, therefore, we must set this truth that God takes up the weak things of the world,³ delights to use earthen vessels, and places the glorious treasure of the Gospel in them.⁴ That is the implication of Peter's calling himself a 'fellow-elder.'

Caring for God's Flock

Let us take this yet a stage further. His words, 'To the elders... I appeal as a fellow-elder,' are closely allied to the theme of oversight. 'Be shepherds of God's flock, serving as overseers.' And he develops further his commission: 'Tend the flock of God,' Peter's language in describing the eldership is pastoral and it has a biblical foundation. God has a 'flock' which is his people and he is their shepherd.⁵ God has a two-fold means of expressing his care for his flock. First, he sends Christ as the Good Shepherd *to die* for them. Secondly, he appoints elders as the under-shepherds *to live* for them. There are two emphases in what Peter has to say: the first is on the *nature* of the task - 'tend the flock' [RSV], and secondly on the *manner* in which this task is to be undertaken: 'Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care... not because you must, but because you are willing... not greedy for money, but eager to serve....' So there are these two sides: the nature of the task and the manner in which the task is to be fulfilled.

The Nature of the Task

The word that Peter uses simply means to shepherd the flock of God. The NIV translates it that way. The AV has 'Feed the flock of God.' The RSV has 'Tend the flock'. He is of course giving the very same command which he himself received from the lips of Jesus. It was to be a ministry of general care for the sheep, perfectly portrayed for us in the ministry of him who is the Chief Shepherd as Peter calls him in v 4 of this passage.

Sacrifice

The Lord's ministry as the Good Shepherd and his perfect care for the flock provide the pattern for our own ministry as elders, a pattern expressed in various ways. Jesus as the Chief Shepherd gives his life for the sheep in atoning grace.⁶ Although our giving of ourselves to the flock cannot be redemptive, it is none the less a giving of ourselves utterly to them with the same self-sacrifice which marked the giving of Jesus. Such self-giving is fundamental in the ministry of elders. They will be marked, Peter is about to say, by eagerness not reluctance, and they will serve not because they have to, but because they mirror the zeal⁷ with which the Lord Jesus gave himself utterly to the finishing of his Father's work.

Recall how when the disciples come back from Samaria where they had been buying the lunch, they said to Jesus, 'Master, eat,' and he replied: 'I have food to eat that you know nothing about.'⁸ These are some of the saddest words in all the Gospels as is seen in the disciples' reply, 'Has somebody given him something to eat? Where did he get his lunch from?' Jesus answers them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.'⁹ Contrary to our thinking that bread and butter is what we need in order to be strong enough to do work, Jesus says that doing the will of his Father is his sustenance, his life, and it is how he is nourished. This selfless caring of the Lord Jesus has to be ours also. He gave himself. We too must give ourselves in sacrificial service. 'I run to do your will, O my God!'¹⁰ People ought to be able to look at us - not because we are self-consciously displaying an attitude, but because we cannot hide it - and see an absolute consecration to the will of God in every part of our life. And it should be a reflection of Jesus' self-giving.

Getting to Know our People

You remember the Lord tells us that he knows the sheep by name and they know his voice.¹¹ Learning to know people and getting inside their lives takes time - but we must, for this is the essence of true care. For some of us remembering people's names is a great problem. But it is essential, and you will know what it means to you when somebody remembers your name! There are of course other major aspects of the Chief Shepherd's care for his sheep. They must be led to the pastures to be fed. And there are other sheep who as yet have no shepherd. Leading the sheep to be fed and searching for the sheep as yet outwith the fold - these concerns should also be ours.

Overseers

'Be shepherds then,' says Peter, and adds, 'serving as overseers.' 'Overseers' carries the meaning of 'looking over', or 'keeping an eye on'. You know how people will say of their children when they are going away, 'Keep an eye on them for me.' What they are saying is, 'Look after them. You do for them what I would do for them if I were here.' That is what God is saying to us concerning the flock: 'You keep an eye on them the way I would have done.' Because 'the eyes of the Lord run to and fro over the whole earth'¹² on behalf of his people. He has his eye upon us constantly. The oversight, you see, is not an official, but a pastoral care.

The Nature of the Ministry

Notice next *the manner* in which this task of shepherding is to be undertaken.

Not in the Wrong Spirit

'Not by constraint,' says the RSV (5.2). The NIV has 'not because you must'. Not with a grudging spirit which constantly needs to be prodded but 'because you are willing'. The NIV adds 'as God wants you to be'. The RV has, 'according to God'. Peter is saying that God has

given freely and willingly to us, so our service to him needs to be with the same absence of compulsion and the same willing freedom of spirit and enthusiasm to serve God and his people.

Let me illustrate this. One morning I spoke separately to two men both involved in ministry of some kind. The first one who came to see me told me the whole of his story. I knew something of his situation and it is true there were difficulties; but his great cry was that in his difficulties he was not being appreciated. It can be a grave problem when one is not being appreciated. Because people were not appreciating him he was in the doldrums and in great distress. When he left me, I felt a tremendous cloud over my soul coming from the attitude of this man to his ministry. Certainly he had problems but there was no awareness of the sheer privilege and joy there is in serving God.

Less than an hour later somebody else came to see me who was also involved in serving God in a situation which frankly would have made us wither if I thought I was going to be in it. His sphere of ministries was full of problems, all kinds of incredible difficulties. Into the bargain, he was deprived of nearly everything that most other people had. He sat down and said, 'I'm just here to share some of these things with you and talk them over to see if we can come to some kind of conclusion about how I should respond. 'But,' he said, 'I want to say to you first of all, over and above anything else I say, I am overwhelmed at the goodness of God in giving me the privilege of serving such a Master.'

There was an immense lesson for me in that. Being under-shepherds entrusted by God with the care of his flock is a privilege that surpasses any other in the whole world. It would be demotion to be Prime Minister of this country or President of the United States compared to this! And you and I need to grasp that there is something altogether glorious about our calling. I sometimes say to my fellow-ministers that there are occasions when I have been in my study preparing to minister the word and I have got up from my desk and walked around the study floor saying to myself, 'How amazing it is to be paid to do this!' I do believe we need that sense of the enormous privilege there is in serving the living God - however difficult our sphere of ministry.

Not for the Wrong Motives

Secondly, not for the wrong motives. 'Be shepherds of God's flock... not greedy for money, but eager to serve'. The NIV is here translating it specifically in terms of financial gain. But that may be to narrow it down too much. Peter's meaning no doubt includes the idea of financial gain and clearly such a base and despicable motive to use the service of God for such an end would be to prostitute it. However I think we must widen the meaning to include all forms of self-seeking, self-interest and self-advancement in the service of God. It is possible to abuse the service of God in such a way that we are really seeking glory for ourselves rather than his glory. By contrast, the whole basis of the eldership is that we should eschew all self-seeking so that our goal will be the glory of God and the well-being of his people.

Such aims will save us from certain kinds of discouragement, because if our concern is that we be appreciated or that we get self-fulfilment out of what we are doing then we will be bound to find ourselves submerged in despair. Whereas if the glory of God and the well-being of his people become by his grace the most dominant motivation in our lives then that will save us from discouragement.

Not in the Wrong Way

Thirdly, not in the wrong way. 'Not lording it over those entrusted to you' (5.3). 'Not domineering' is one translation. While the apostle's thought may be closely allied with the spirit in which we serve, he is dealing with the specific temptation to be domineering, overbearing, and in some cases harsh and uncaring. Paul describes the opposite attitude for us in 2 Timothy 2.24: 'The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth'. The servant of the Lord must be

gentle. That is, the manner in which we are to have the oversight over God's flock must never be one of over-bearing superiority but of humble gentleness. Peter's opposite is, of course, 'being examples to the flock.' It is *what I am* in the service of God that really matters.

Younger people and others within the church of God who have their hearts set on growing up into Christ should be able to look at those of us who are elders and say, 'That's the kind of person I want God to make me.' That is what an example is. When the salesman shows you samples he says, 'This is what you will be getting if you buy my product.' Likewise, we should be God's samples of what Christian men and women will one day become.

Submission to the Elders

'Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older' (5.5). I would suggest that here Peter is speaking about the response to the eldership in the congregation: those the elders are serving should gladly submit to those who are over them in the Lord. The way grace will be seen in a congregation and pride will be absent will be the way people respond to leadership. Compare how in Hebrews 13.17 the writer urges his readers: 'Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.' Such submission puts an end to a great deal of the murmuring that goes on in many congregations through little, irritated groups which gather to try to get their own way in certain things. The biblical pattern is the congregation is to submit to those chosen by God to rule. If the elders are not fulfilling their task well, those in the congregation must pray for them that they may be changed. In the meantime they need to submit, and it is important for us to see that, not as a suggestion, but as a biblical command.

Church Membership

Incidentally, this is one of the areas from which I press upon the necessity of the church membership. There are some who say, 'I don't need to be a member of any church. I can just attend and be part of the worship without needing to be a member of a church. I don't see church membership in Scripture.' I always say to such people, 'The Scripture says you must submit to those who have the rule over you. Here is a command which it is impossible for you to obey if you are not a member.' When we become members of a church we put ourselves under the government of the elders in that church.

The Crown of Glory

In conclusion, notice that Peter puts the whole issue in the same context as we have just seen in Hebrews 13.17. 'When the Chief Shepherd appears,' he says, 'you will receive the crown of glory'. In the light of our thinking about 'caretakers' - and that is what we are - all of Jesus's teaching in the Gospel parable about stewards¹³ implies the master is going to return and require an account of those who were appointed stewards during his absence. The caretaker or steward has to give an account to the head of the firm who returns from his business trip abroad and asks, 'I left you in charge while I was away. How have you discharged the stewardship I put in your hands?' 'Have your elders been exercising the ministry of the caretaker?' says the writer of the Hebrews. 'Obey them and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.'

The reason we need to give ourselves to a biblical view and practice of the eldership is that the Chief Shepherd is going to return in glory one day and he is going to sift through our service. As Paul tells us, God is going to be concerned with how we have been building. Have I been building gold, silver, precious stones, the costly and permanent materials? Or have I been building wood, hay and stubble, the cheap and temporary materials?¹⁴ The day will declare it, says Paul, for the Chief Shepherd will appear and we want, do we not, to receive the crown of glory from him, and to know that he will say to us, 'Well done, you have been faithful over a few things, enter into the joy of your reward.'¹⁵

¹ The same word translated *therefore* in Romans 1.12

² John 21.15ff

³ John 4.33f

⁴ Psalm 40.8; cf John 5.19,30; 6.38ff, etc.

⁵ John 10.4,14ff

⁶ John 10.11,15,18

⁷ John 2.17

⁸ John 4.32

⁹ John. 4.33f

¹⁰ Psalm 40.8; cf John 5.19,30; 6.38ff, etc.

¹¹ John 10.4,14ff

¹² Zechariah 1.11; 4.10; cf Proverbs 15.3.

¹³ Matthew 25.14ff; cf Luke 19.11ff.

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 3.12-15

¹⁵ Matthew 25.21,23