



## EAGER ELDERS: MINISTRY FOR THE SHEER JOY OF IT! I PETER 5:1-4

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### SERMON

How many times have you heard it said: "*I like Jesus. It's the Church I can't stand!*" I wish I had time to preach an entire message in response to that ill-informed and utterly misguided statement, but I don't. On second thought, let me take just a moment to say a few things about it. I think it may prove to be a helpful introduction to what I want us to see in this passage from 1 Peter 5.

On the one hand, I completely understand the pain and disillusionment that many have suffered at the hands of abusive leadership in the local church. What many refer to as "church hurt" is very real and nothing to be casually dismissed or mocked. Many of you have endured agonizing and unjust mistreatment from those who took advantage of their positions in the local church to bully and abuse those who had been entrusted to their care.

But we must never use that pain, as badly as it may hurt, as an excuse to abandon the life and ministry of the local church. We must always remember that it was Jesus himself who said that he would build *his* Church and that the powers of death would never prevail against it.

This is the same Jesus who sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost to inaugurate the life of the local church. This Jesus, says the apostle Paul, is himself the head of the church, which is his body. This Jesus is the same Jesus who, according to Ephesians 5, "loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor."

This Jesus is the chief shepherd of the church (to use Peter's language here in v. 4), the Lord of the church, the lover of the church, the savior of the church; he is the one who has such unrelenting passion for and commitment to the church that at the consummation of history he will eventually wed the church in what the Bible calls the marriage supper of the Lamb! So, let me come straight to the point. Jesus himself will not allow us to claim that we love him but not his bride. The church is his body. The church is his bride. If you truly love him, you must love her.

That's not to say, of course, that everything about the church is perfect. Only a fool would think that it was. We all see its flaws and shortcomings. Your experience of local church life, up to this point in time, may have been painful and disillusioning. I'm not going to pretend otherwise. But let me be perfectly clear. ***There is no such thing as Churchless Christianity any more than there is such a thing as Christless Christianity!*** To believe in and receive and love and follow Jesus is to live as a member and supporter and lover of his body, the church.

My passion for the church, both the universal body of Christ and this concrete, local embodiment of it called Convergence OKC, flows from my passion for Christ. That is why I am so passionate about biblical texts like 1 Peter 5:1-4. This text is all about the church: its leaders, called Elders, and the flock whom they love and shepherd and pastor, that's you.

I know there are some people, perhaps even a few of you, who don't like to talk about the structure or government of the church, much less its leadership and their responsibilities. The temptation for you is to mentally check out. After all, if this text is primarily about the Elders who lead the church, why should anyone else here today pay attention?

The reason is because if it is about leaders, it must also be about those who are led. If Peter tells Elders how to pastor, it also has much to say about the responsibilities of those who are pastored. Twice Peter mentions the "flock", i.e., God's people in any particular local church, and once he refers to those who are in the "charge" of Elders.

Church government matters. How we structure the body of Christ matters. How you relate to the Elders of this body matters just as much as how they relate to you. And all of it matters even more because we are not talking about a civic club or a lady's guild or a fraternity or sorority or a political party: we are talking, Peter is talking, about the very body of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. ***Simply put: bad ecclesiology hurts people.***

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My approach to this passage today will be very simple. We will look first at who the Elders are and what they do. Secondly, we will look closely at what Peter says concerning how they are to do it. But first, look again with me at v. 1.

The ESV opens with the word "so" and in doing this undermines the connection between the close of chapter four and the beginning of five. The word is literally, "therefore." Peter anticipated that the Elders, who constitute the visible leadership of the local church, would likely be the first to endure persecution. The suffering and persecution that all believers face (4:12-19) also puts a special strain on the leaders. They need to understand what is required of them, especially when the sheep are being harassed.

Peter identifies himself with them as a fellow Elder in order to emphasize that he understands their fears and temptations. He is not asking them to do anything that he would not do himself.

Peter doesn't say anything here about the qualifications of an Elder. However, Paul does this twice: in 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus 1. As I count them, there are 22 characteristics. I obviously cannot address each of them, but I would like to highlight a few of them.

### *Some Important Qualifications of an Elder*

The first thing Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 3:2 is that an elder or overseer must be "**above reproach**." The life of an elder must be of such quality that he stands above and beyond the reach of *justified* accusation. This doesn't mean he won't be accused of some offense, but that such charges must prove to be baseless once a fair and objective investigation is undertaken. An elder must display a consistent and mature Christian character that gives no justifiable occasion for public reproach. This is similar to what Paul says in Titus 1 where he insists that an elder must be "**a lover of good**," "**upright**" and "**holy**," which is to say a truth-teller among other things. He must not be a liar.

Another qualification, found in both 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, is that an elder must be "**the husband of one wife**." This does not mean he must be married. Paul does not say he must be the husband of a wife but the husband of "one" wife. He must then never be entangled emotionally or physically with any woman other than his wife. The same Greek phrase is used in 1 Timothy 5:9 of a widow. To qualify for support from the church she must have "been the wife of one husband." What possible sense would it make to insist that a widow be at one time married? By definition, that is precisely what a widow is.

I won't go into the reasons why other interpretations are incorrect, such as the argument that Paul means a man cannot be an elder if he marries a second time after his first wife dies. Nor does he mean that a divorced man cannot be an elder, assuming of course that his divorce was obtained on biblical grounds.

I believe Paul is saying that an elder must be **a one-woman-man**. That is to say, he will neither be flirtatious nor adulterous, a man who is diligent to maintain emotional and sexual fidelity to one woman, the one to whom he is married.

There are other important qualifications, such as: he must manage his household well, he must not be self-willed, which is to say selfish and arrogant and always demanding his own way. He must not be quick-tempered, a hothead, a man with a short fuse, or prone to sinful anger. Similarly, Paul says he must not be violent or pugnacious or quarrelsome.

#### **(1) Who are the Elders and what do they do?**

Let me answer this question by giving you a brief overview of what the entire NT says about leadership in the local church. **All local churches in the NT were governed by a plurality of Elders.** The NT knows nothing of a local church in which there is only one Elder who alone exercises authority. Consider just a few of the texts in which the word "Elder" appears:

Acts 11:29-30 – "And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders."

Acts 14:23 – “And when they had appointed **elders** for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed.”

Acts 20:17 – “And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** of the church.”

1 Timothy 5:17 – “Let the **elders** who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

James 5:14 – “Is any among you sick? Let him call the **elders** of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”

The English word “elder” is the translation of the Greek *presbuteros*, from which we get “Presbyter” and “Presbyterian”. Our English word “bishop” comes from the Greek *episkopos*, from which we get the word “Episcopal” and “Episcopalian”. In the NT the words “Elder”, “Bishop”, and “Overseer” are three different words that describe the same office or authoritative function. “Elder” focuses on the dignity and gravity of the person who serves while “Bishop” and “Overseer” focus on the practical function of the office (literally, one who exercises oversight).

That they are interchangeable is proven by looking first at Acts 20:17. There Paul called for the **elders** of the church to come to him. But later in v. 28, in referring to these same elders, he says that God has made them **overseers** (ESV) or **bishops** in the church. Second, Paul left Titus in Crete to appoint **elders** in every town (Titus 1:5). When Paul then turns to list the qualifications for this office he says, “For an **overseer** (i.e., **bishop** or *episkopon*) . . . must be above approach,” etc. Clearly these terms refer to the same office.

Elders or Bishops or Overseers are also Pastors. The Greek word (*poimēn*) translated “pastor” is used only once in the NT in Ephesians 4:11. However, the related verb form (*poimainō*) has the meaning “to shepherd” or “to feed” with the idea of nurturing and sustaining the flock of God. It is found in Acts 20:28 and here in 1 Peter 5:2 (“shepherd the flock”). It would appear reasonable to conclude that **all elders exercise pastoral responsibilities**. Clearly, then, all Elders are Pastors, but not all Pastors will necessarily be Elders. But what precisely do they do?

Peter mentions two things: (1) shepherding the flock of God or pastoring the people of God; and (2) exercising oversight or governmental authority. They look out over the flock. God holds them accountable for seeing the big picture and acting for the good of the whole flock. But far more important to Peter than *what* they do is *how* they are to do it.

## **(2) How should the Elders pastor and govern the local church?**

Peter’s answer is clear and inescapable. They must not exercise their responsibility *for love of praise, for love of profit, or for love of power*.

***First, they are not to pastor or lead the flock of God “under compulsion, but willingly” (v. 2).***

Don’t do your work under constraint. The impulse must come gladly from within, not oppressively from without. Don’t minister under the pressure imposed by other ministers, people in the church, parents, educators, mega-church leaders, or the fear you may have of failure or the desire to merit favor with God. A man should want to be an Elder. In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul says, “if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” Don’t become an Elder/Overseer if you don’t want to.

***Why would anyone ever submit to pressure to serve as an Elder?*** What could possibly motivate a man to serve under compulsion? I think the answer is: his love or desire for the praise and approval of others. Or perhaps his desire is to avoid their disdain and rejection. He doesn’t really want to serve, but he sees it as a great opportunity to become famous and well-known and praised in public. No one should ever be pressured into serving as an Elder. God wants our ungrudging service. Cf. use of the cognate noun “under compulsion” in 2 Cor. 9:7 with regard to giving.

We must never forget the sobering reality of Hebrews 13:17 where the author states: “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.”

Peter's words, "as God would have you" (v. 2a) is literally, "**according to God.**" He probably means in contrast to the way society or the norms of the culture might suggest. We are not free to organize the church any way we see fit. We are not free to lead the church according to our preferences. It must be according to God and his revealed will.

**Second, they must not pastor God's people "for shameful gain, but eagerly" (v. 2b).**

Peter couldn't have been any clearer: Don't do it for the money! Don't do it because you think it will lead to riches. Don't do it for the reason Judas Iscariot accepted the invitation to be treasurer among the apostles, namely, so he could steal from the financial resources.

Peter doesn't mean that church leaders shouldn't be paid. Paul clearly says they should in 1 Timothy 5:17-18 and in several other texts. It isn't "gain" that Peter denounces, but "shameful" gain. Cf. Titus 1:7.

To pursue the office of an elder for "shameful gain" means thinking of ministry primarily in terms of long vacations and days off and retirement benefits and whatever other financial or material perks come with the position. It means exploiting the authority you have to get ahead in life rather than thinking primarily about the importance of the sheep in your charge and the preciousness of the truth in God's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit and the coming glory of the Chief Shepherd.

**Third, they must not "domineer" those in their charge but rather be "examples" to them (v. 3b).**

As I said, Elders are not to be driven or motivated by love of praise, love of profit, and now **love of power**. Peter here has in mind that sort of individual who exploits his position of authority to lord it over others, always exerting his power, always demanding rather than serving, always insisting on his way even when he knows he's wrong, always flaunting his position.

This sort comes in different flavors. His method or style may differ, but his aim is always the same. Sometimes he's a *boisterous bully*, intimidating others into subservience and forcing them to serve his cause. Other times he may be *quietly manipulative*, working behind the scenes to promote his agenda. Some are more akin to the *slick politician*, using smooth words and empty promises to gain position and fame.

Instead, they are to be "examples" to their flock: examples of humility, self-sacrifice, love for God, passionate in worship, generous in giving, devoted to their families, and most of all in obedience to all things biblical.

How might a pastor or elder "domineer" or bully his flock? In other words, what makes a man a pastoral bully? Here are some ways.

- A man can "domineer" or "lord it over" his flock by intimidating them into doing what he wants done by holding over their heads the prospect of loss of stature and position in the church.
- A pastor domineers or bullies whenever he threatens them with stern warnings of the discipline and judgment of God, even though there is no biblical basis for doing so.
- A pastor domineers or bullies whenever he threatens them with public exposure of their sin should they not conform to his will and knuckle under to his plans.
- A pastor domineers or bullies whenever he uses the sheer force of his personality to overwhelm others and coerce their submission.
- A pastor domineers whenever he uses slick verbiage or eloquence to humiliate people into feeling ignorant or less competent than they really are.
- A pastor domineers whenever he presents himself as super-spiritual (his views came about only as the result of extensive prayer and fasting and seeking God. How could anyone then possibly disagree with him?).

- A pastor bullies whenever he exploits the natural tendency people have to elevate their spiritual leaders above the average Christian. That is to say, many Christians mistakenly think that a pastor is closer to God and more in tune with the divine will. The pastor often takes advantage of this false belief to expand his power and influence.
- A pastor domineers whenever he gains a following and support against all dissenters by guaranteeing that those who stand with him will gain from it, either by being brought into his inner circle or by some form of promotion.
- A pastor domineers by widening the alleged gap between "clergy" and "laity." In other words, he reinforces in them the false belief that he has a degree of access to God which they don't.
- Related to the former is the way some pastors will make it appear that they hold sway or power over the extent to which average lay people can experience God's grace. He presents himself in subtle (not overt) ways as the mediator between the grace of God and the average believer. In this way he can secure their loyalty for his agenda.
- He domineers by building into people a greater loyalty to himself than to God. Or he makes it appear that not to support him is to work at cross purposes with God.
- He domineers by teaching that he has a gift that enables him to understand Scripture in a way they cannot. They are led to believe they cannot trust their own interpretive conclusions and must yield at all times to his.
- He domineers by short circuiting due process, by shutting down dialogue and discussion prematurely, by not giving all concerned an opportunity to voice their opinion.
- He domineers by establishing an inviolable barrier between himself and the sheep. He either surrounds himself with staff who insulate him from contact with the people or withdraws from the daily affairs of the church in such a way that he is unavailable and unreachable.
- Related to the above is the practice of some in creating a governmental structure in which the senior pastor is accountable to no one, or if he is accountable, it is only to a small group of very close friends and fellow elders who stand to profit personally from his tenure as pastor.
- He domineers or bullies by viewing the people as simply a means to the achieving of his own personal ends. Ministry is reduced to exploitation. The people exist to "serve his vision" rather than he and all the people together existing to serve the vision of the entire church.
- He bullies by making people feel unsafe and insecure should they desire to voice an objection to his proposals and policies.
- He domineers by convincing them, ever so subtly, that their spiritual welfare is dependent on his will. To cross him is to cross God!
- He domineers by misinterpreting and misapplying to himself the OT command: "Don't touch God's anointed."
- He domineers by building a culture of legalism rather than one of grace. People are thus motivated to embrace his authority and bow to his will based on extra biblical rules that supposedly are the criteria for true spirituality.
- He domineers by arguing or acting as if his movements and decisions are ultimately determinative of the spiritual welfare of others (cf. 2 Cor. 1:23-25).
- He domineers when he leads people to believe that their faith hinges (i.e., rises or falls) upon his life and decisions.

- He domineers when he uses people as a means to his own satisfaction rather than enabling them to experience satisfaction in Christ alone.

May God guard us from all such tendencies, enabling us by his grace to be “examples” to the flock of humility, love, and Christ-exalting service.

I should also mention the things that a church does or permits that makes it possible for a pastor or elder to domineer the flock. Perhaps the worst thing is by elevating gifting over character. In his book, *Bully Pulpit*, Michael Kruger speaks of how “churches inevitably begin to overlook a pastor’s character flaws because he’s so successful in other areas. Leadership performance becomes the shield that protects the pastor from criticism” (11). There are also instances where a pastor’s theological eloquence serves to shield his deficiencies of character. Kruger also mentions a common tactic of some abusive leaders: they claim their accusers are overly sensitive; they’re just products of a therapeutic victim culture (37).

In conclusion, consider the way the New Testament talks about the relationship of the church to her leaders.

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” ([Hebrews 13:17](#)).

“We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work” ([1 Thessalonians 5:12-13](#)).

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” ([1 Timothy 5:17](#)).

And finally, what will ultimately motivate and move and energize local church Elders and Pastors to serve in a godly, humble, self-sacrificing way? Not money. Not the praise of men. Not all the perks of power on this earth. It is the anticipation of seeing and giving an account to the Lord Jesus Christ and receiving the reward that he promises to them (v. 4).