

## **Feed the Flock**

The sermon this morning is about the Word of God, the importance of the Word of God, and specifically the importance of the Word of God in ministry in a local church body. We have a firm foundation for our faith in the written Word of God. What more could we ask for from God?

We do not need to ask, “Is God’s Word sufficient?”

Rather, we must ask, “Am I a faithful steward of God’s Word?”

From I Peter 5:1-4 we learn the simple yet vital truth that a church must have elders who faithfully teach and preach the Word of God.

### **I. Introduction**

The first thing we see from verse 1 is the audience. Peter writes, “The elders which are among you I exhort.” The instruction that follows in the next few verses is addressed to these elders, the spiritual leaders of the church. The first line of application from this passage will be for elders.

Elders are men of God who have been equipped and qualified by the Holy Spirit to provide spiritual leadership for the local church body. The word that is translated here as “elders” is the Greek word “press-bu-ter-os.” A careful study of how this word is used throughout the New Testament in reference to local churches

implies a plurality of elders. Not one elder over a church or one elder over a group of churches, but two or more elders in each local church body. This is the model that we, as a church, seek to emulate.

Also, don't miss this word exhort. To exhort someone is to strongly encourage or urge them to do something. There are times elders need to be exhorted: Exhorted in specific areas or exhorted on their responsibilities to the church body.

Now, you and I could never bring an exhortation to elders like the apostle Peter brings in this passage. We are not apostles. We do not speak or write under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit like Peter did when this epistle was written. But we can, and there are times that we must, on the authority of the Word of God, exhort the elders of the church.

Elders are not above being exhorted. This truth applies to all spiritual leaders. The apostle Paul gives similar instruction in I Timothy 5:20. Speaking about elders Paul wrote: "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear."

But this must be done with extreme caution. In that same chapter Paul writes, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine." and "Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses" (I Timothy 5:17 and 19). We are called to honor church elders, but they are not above being exhorted.

We must realize that the leadership of the local church body is not made up of some sort of spiritually superior Christian. There is no hierarchy of value within the church. We are under church elders in the sense of submission and honor in obedience to the pattern Christ has revealed in His Word for the church. Elders are over us in the sense of spiritual authority as servant leaders. But in Christ, we stand as equals before God.

Why is it important that we learn this? Why does this matter? There are pitfalls on both sides of this issue. Sometimes local church bodies can become so focused on their elders, or on one particular elder, that it becomes a cult of personality. The focus is drawn away from Christ and becomes about these people or this person. Paul had to deal with this in the church at Corinth. There were believers in Corinth who said: “I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas” (I Corinthians 1:12). Paul had to correct this wrong thinking. A cult of personality not the biblical pattern.

Elders are not some sort of superior Christian with a level of spirituality and spiritual value that surpasses the value of the members of their congregations. So one pitfall is the congregation become too focused on the elders or on one particular elder.

The other pitfall is with elders who believe they have the right or even the responsibility to “lord over” the church. Peter is going to talk more about this down

in verse 3. To summarize this point quickly here, elders must realize that their place is not as lords in the church, but as servant leaders.

So far from I Peter 5:1 we have looked at the audience. Peter is addressing the elders in the church. The first line application from this passage is for church elders.

Next, in verse 1 we see the authority behind this exhortation. There is a notably absent element in this statement from Peter about his identity. Peter makes no claim to be the head of the church. He does not speak of himself as being the pope, or the vicar of Christ, or the Bishop of Rome, or any other such title that has been attached to him or associated with him by the Roman Catholic church. If there ever was a clear time when the apostle Peter should have brought this up if it were true, here it is. If Peter needs to establish his authority, what better way than to introduce himself as the pope, as the head of Christ's church here on earth.

Yet, of course, he does not. Why? Because he was not the pope. *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* says this: "There is . . . no early support for (a Roman Catholic) understanding of Christ's words to Peter in Matthew 16:18, nor is there clear historical evidence that Peter was ever at Rome . . . (and) no proof that he passed on his leadership to all subsequent occupants of the Roman see."<sup>1</sup>

It is sufficient for us, as it is for all Bible-believing Christians, to understand any claim that Peter was the first pope rests, not upon Scripture, but upon human

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<sup>1</sup> Baker's Dictionary of Theology, p. 410.

tradition. Peter had no super-apostolic authority, and he doesn't claim to have any such authority.

Instead, look at what Peter says in the second part of verse 1. Peter first says, "I . . . whom am also an elder." Not *the* elder, not the bishop of Rome, but rather: "also an elder." Peter introduces himself here and states his authority as a fellow elder. Peter didn't exist somewhere off in a class of his own. This statement doesn't exalt Peter, but places him on the same level as those whom he is exhorting.

This means that the exhortations he gives, he will also be subject to as an elder. He is right there with them as elders. He is a fellow-elder, and as such, he had relevant and needful exhortations to give to these elders. Exhortations that are still just as relevant and needful for us today.

Next Peter says, "I . . . am . . . a witness to the sufferings of Christ." What does this have to do with Peter's authority? Peter is affirming his authority as an apostle. One of the requirements set by the early church to be an apostle was to be a witness to the ministry and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:21-22). That seems to be what Peter is referring to here.

On a more pastoral level, Peter could also be speaking about his unique experiences. Peter was a part of a relatively small group that witnessed the betrayal, trial, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Peter watched the good Shepherd lay down His life for His sheep. Having witnessed such love, Peter was compelled to serve faithfully as an under-shepherd.

I think we would be remiss if we failed to take notice that Peter has brought up suffering once again: “the sufferings of Christ.” So much of First Peter has dealt with Christians and suffering. We must remember, before any Christians ever suffered, Christ suffered. Peter witnessed the suffering of Christ. When we suffer, we are merely following the example set by our Lord and Savior. And here Peter says, “I stand as an eye-witness to the sufferings of Jesus Christ.”

Finally, Peter says, “I . . . am . . . a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed.” What is “the glory that shall be revealed”? The glory of Jesus Christ. The glory the Christian will enjoy and revel in at the return of Jesus Christ. Peter had already experienced a taste of this glory.

Peter, along with James and John, had the very unique experience of seeing some degree of Christ’s full glory revealed on the Mount of Transfiguration. Matthew 17:2 tells us that Jesus “was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.”

What an incredible experience this must have been for Peter. What a claim to fame this could have been for Peter. Yet Peter doesn’t try to use this experience to set him apart from these elders. Rather, Peter numbers himself among those who will partake of the glory that shall be revealed. Every believer is a “partaker of the glory that shall be revealed.”

This verse does not exist in a vacuum. In it’s context, the rest of this epistle, Peter has taught that the path to glory for the Christian is fraught with suffering.

Peter knew from first-hand experience what it meant to suffer for the sake of Christ. Peter is not focused on his suffering, but rather on the glory that shall be revealed.

Consider this complete picture from Peter about his identity. Consider all that Peter had experienced. Consider all that Peter had done. What does he draw his identity from? What does he say about himself as he exhorts these elders? He calls himself a fellow elder, a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed. Nothing about this exalts Peter. Rather, Peter humbles himself. He numbers himself among them as an elder and exalts Christ.

From verse 1 we have seen the primary audience for this passage of exhortation is church elders. Second, we looked at the authority that was behind this exhortation: Peter, a fellow elder, an apostle, and a faithful brother with an expectation and hope in the coming glory of Jesus Christ. Next, from the first part of verse 2 we will consider the primary exhortation Peter gives to church elders.

## **II. The Primary Exhortation**

The first part of verse 2 says: “Feed the flock of God which is among you.” This is the primary exhortation Peter gives to elders. This exhortation, using the same word for “feed,” is found several other places in the New Testament. In John

21:16 Jesus said to Peter, “Feed my sheep.” In Acts 20:28 Paul told the elders of the church in Ephesus, “Feed the church of God.”

What does this word, “feed,” mean? Some of your Bibles might translate this word as “shepherd.” Strong’s dictionary tells us that this word means “to tend as a shepherd, to feed cattle.”

The severity of this exhortation would not have been lost on a New Testament audience. They understood what it meant to feed a flock, what it meant to be a shepherd. Most of the people Peter wrote this epistle to were not shepherds, but they lived in a time and place where they would have been very familiar with the work of a shepherd.

Most of us do not have a deep understanding of what it means to be a shepherd. We drive down the road and see a flock of sheep out in a field and we say, “Awe, look at those cute little sheep.” And then we drive off. Right? We don’t have to live with the sheep.

When I think about feeding sheep, I think about petting zoos. How does that work? You pay a little money and you are given a handful of some sort of grain and then you walk up to the pen where the sheep are and they come running over and eat the grain out of your hand. And you think, “Wow, I’m like a shepherd. I just fed the sheep.” No you didn’t. That’s not shepherding. That’s not the analogy Peter makes in this verse.

Yet, tragically, that's how many elders treat their responsibility to feed, to shepherd the flock of God. Say what you want about the decline of the church in America, the reality is that church is still big business. Sermons, or speeches that can be passed off as sermons, are a part of church, and the reality is that sermons are difficult and time consuming to prepare. A lot of people end up taking shortcuts. Instead of treating the church like the flock of God, so many pastors, elders, church leaders, treat the church of God more like a petting zoo. That's not feeding the flock of God. That's not shepherding.

*Smith's Bible Dictionary* says this about shepherds: "The office of the . . . shepherd . . . was attended with much hardship, and even danger. He was exposed to the extremes of heat and cold, his food frequently consisted of the precarious supplies afforded by nature. . . He had to encounter the attacks of wild beasts, occasionally of the larger species, such as lions, wolves, panthers and bears . . . Nor was he free from the risk of robbery or predatory hordes . . . The routine of the shepherd's duties appears to have been as follows: In the morning he led forth his flock from the fold which he did by going before them and calling to them; [once] arrived at the pasturage he watched the flock . . . and should any sheep stray, he had to search for it until he found it . . . at evening he brought them back to the fold, and reckoned them to see that none were missing . . . and, finally, he watched the entrance of the fold throughout the night, acting as porter. . . . The shepherd's

office thus required great watchfulness, particularly by night . . . [and] tenderness to the young and feeble, particularly in driving them to and from the pasturage.”<sup>2</sup>

The shepherd lived with his sheep. He knew them and they knew him. He cared deeply for his sheep. He routinely laid his life on the line for his sheep. He did all this to see that the sheep were fed and cared for. This is the analogy that Peter uses when he exhorts elders.

Peter exhorts elders with this word, “feed, shepherd.” This is a monumental task. This is the exhortation from God’s Word to elders in the church.

What are elders to feed the flock of God with? What did Paul tell Timothy? II Timothy 4:2 begins with these three words, “Preach the word.” The Bible, the Word of God, should always be at the center of pastoral ministry. The job of an elder is not to tell you what he thinks or what any other person thinks. The job of an elder is to feed, to shepherd, the church to the best of his ability by the grace of God from the Word of God.

An elder is responsible for preparing a spiritual feast for the flock of God. The main course should always be Scripture. All the side dishes should be Scripture. The whole ought to be garnished with Scripture and served upon platters of Scripture. Those who are fed should leave stuffed to overflowing with Scripture and be provided with Scripture to take with them as they go. No illustration, no matter how powerful; no story, no matter how engaging; no words of men, no

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<sup>2</sup> Smith’s Bible Dictionary, p. 617-618.

matter how moving, can ever take the place of Scripture. Such substitutes provide no sustenance for the journey of life.

Peter and the other apostles in the early church, when they were struggling with the responsibilities of caring for the poor and ministering to the body said this in Acts 6:2: “It is not reason [it is not reasonable, it doesn't make sense] that we should *leave the Word of God* and serve tables.”

There are many good things a pastor or elder can do and even should do, but his primary responsibility is to feed the flock of God from the Word of God. If you want to gut a church and drive it into spiritual bankruptcy, all you need to do is make sure the elders are too busy to study the Word of God. Elders are responsible to feed the flock of God from the Word of God.

We've talked a lot about the “flock of God,” but let's define this. The “flock of God” are all the people around the world that are God's people. The word translated here as flock actually comes from the word translated earlier in this passage as “feed” or “shepherd.” Every single time this word is used in the New Testament it is used to refer to groups of believers. The flock of God is the church, the universal church. All Christians, all over the world, are part of the flock of God.

It is helpful to remember who this letter is addressed to. Peter is writing to the elect of God who are scattered throughout Asia minor. Christians who have been driven from their homes. Christians who are facing persecution. Christians who are suffering for the sake of the gospel.

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* makes this note: "These poor, dispersed, suffering Christians were the flock of God. The rest of the world is a brutal herd. These are an orderly flock, redeemed to God by the great Shepherd, living in holy love and communion one with another, *according to the will of God.*"

Are you a part of the flock of God? Are you covered by the blood of Jesus Christ? Have you ever turned from your sin and cried out, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" Are you trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ alone for your salvation? If you are not sure, take no rest until you have settled this issue. Nothing else matters if you are not a part of the flock of God, resting in Jesus Christ for salvation.

If you are a Christian here today, then you are a part of the flock of God. You have been bought by God, not with corruptible things, but by the precious blood of Jesus Christ (I Peter 1:18-19). You are under the care and protection of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. God has provided, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, elders to serve as under-shepherds to help feed and care for you spiritually. You are no longer out there, a part of the world. You are now in the flock of God. Friends, this is good news. This should provide us with tremendous comfort and encouragement.

Peter further narrows this description of the flock of God by adding: "Which is among you." It is not the job of church elders to feed the world. It is their job to

feed the flock of God. It is not the job of elders to feed the flock of God all over the world. It is the job of elders to feed the flock God “which is among you.”

The New Testament pattern of ministry is centered around the local church body. This is where ministry happens. This is the pattern God has given us. If we are truly seeking to follow and apply the Word of God, our ministry will be focused in, among, and through the local church body.

I read an article a while ago about how the church needs to adapt to the times in order to stay relevant in this culture. I don't remember the specifics about the article, but I do remember down at the bottom the author gave his name and some information about himself. He called himself a “social media pastor.” I looked into this because I was curious, and at the time the article was written, he was not associated with an actual church body. He was just a social media pastor. What in the world is a social media pastor? More importantly, where does anyone think they can find grounds for titles and ministry like this from the Word of God? You cannot exist as a church elder or pastor in a vacuum. Church elders exist within the framework of the local church, the “flock of God which is among you.”

For the church to be relevant, we don't need to try to keep up with the whims of secular culture. Rather, we must go back to the word of God and be firmly rooted and grounded in Scripture. As the great pioneering missionary

Hudson Taylor once said, “God’s work done God’s way will never lack God’s supply.”<sup>3</sup>

Peter’s first exhortation to elders is “Feed the flock of God which is among you.” Everything else Peter says in verses 2 and 3 build on this first exhortation. The primary work of an elder in the church is to feed the flock of God. The first line of every pastor’s, every elder’s, list of responsibilities is to feed the flock of God. It, tragically, may not be the first line on man’s list of pastoral responsibilities, but it is certainly the first line on God’s list.

The primary application here is for elders as we have already seen from verse 1, but we would do well to pause and consider what this exhortation implies about the local church body. If God requires elders to feed the church, it follows that the church must need to be fed. The Word of God, faithfully taught and preached, is necessary for the church to prosper.

To stick with the analogy of this passage: If you put sheep in a fold, and you did not feed them, what would happen? They would die. They need to be fed.

Individual Bible study and prayer is necessary for the Christian, but it is not sufficient. To grow and prosper as a Christian you must be in a church where the word of God is faithfully taught and preached.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/190685-god-s-work-done-in-god-s-way-will-never-lack-god-s>

Furthermore, if God's primary exhortation to elders is to feed the flock of God, it follows that this is a *pressing* need in the church. This has been clearly demonstrated in fairly recent church history.

An interesting thing happened in the church in 1800's and early 1900's. Liberalism swept through the church. Liberalism was a multifaceted movement that was really just the culmination of many different factors all working together to the detriment of the church. Liberalism was ultimately based upon a rejection of the Word of God. *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* says, "[Liberalism] placed unreserved trust in the new critical studies of the Scriptures which contained implicitly or explicitly a denial of the historic doctrines of revelation and inspiration."<sup>4</sup>

All the major seminaries fell under liberal influence. An entire generation of pastors and church leaders were trained to reject the Word of God as true, accurate, inspired, and authoritative. Without the vital ministry of the Word of God taught and preached, local church bodies crumbled. Without a message to share, without the gospel, the liberal church found itself to be irrelevant.

In response to liberalism, a countermovement emerged that eventually took up the name "Fundamentalism." At the beginning, this was a good and needful movement. The early fundamentalists broke ties with the liberal church and said, "We are going to hold to the Word of God." The first fundamental of the Christian

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<sup>4</sup> *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, p. 322

faith they professed was the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. All other Christian truth flows from this source. Because the fundamentalists held to Scripture they had the gospel of Jesus Christ and they had a relevant message to preach. When groups within the fundamentalist movement moved away from preaching the gospel from the Word of God, no matter what form that took, they too lost their relevance.

Another movement we might be more familiar with today is the Evangelical movement. “Evangelical” simply means “of or according to the teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” There was a time when the Evangelical church stood for the faithful teaching and preaching of the Word of God. If you went to an evangelical church it meant you were in a solid, Bible-believing church.

Listen to this excerpt from an article written 60 years ago about the evangelical movement: “The most important issue between the evangelicals and others is that of biblical authority. The evangelical insists that Scripture is the word of God written, and that it is therefore infallible.”<sup>5</sup>

Again, when the so-called “Evangelical church” held to Scripture, they had relevance. But sadly, this is no longer the position of the broader so-called “evangelical” church in America today.

The consistent drift in the church has been away from Scripture. For the liberals it was away from Scripture and into a form of naturalism, for the post-

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<sup>5</sup> *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, p. 200.

modern church it is away from Scripture and into the murky waters of an experiential based faith. The end effect will be the same: A loss of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When a church loses the gospel, they lose any true spiritual relevance. When the church abandons the Word of God, they abandon their only hope.

You might be asking, “Why the history lesson?” These fairly recent movements in church history illustrate the desperate need of the church to be faithfully fed the Word of God. With God’s Word faithfully taught and preached by the elders God has equipped to serve in a local church body, the church flourishes spiritually. When God’s Word is neglected or altogether abandoned, the church ceases to be a true church. Individual Christians, when they remove themselves from the ministry of God’s Word in a local church setting, have removed themselves from one of the primary means of grace God uses to edify His church.

The Word of God is important. The preaching of God’s Word is desperately needed. The exhortation Peter gives here to feed is tragically neglected. Neglected by church elders who fail to feed the flock of God and neglected by church members who fail to feed on the Word of God as it is taught and preached.

The church needs the Word of God fed to them. For a church to be a biblical church, for a church to have relevance in the kingdom of God, it must have the Word of God faithfully taught and faithfully preached.

God has not abandoned His church. He has not left his church adrift with no help in this area. Rather, he has appointed and equipped, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, men of God to act as elders. Their first and primary responsibility is to feed the flock of God from Scripture. They are to shepherd the church from the Word of God.

The church desperately needs the Word of God. This exhortation from the apostle Peter is just as needful today as it was nearly 2000 years ago when it was first written: “The elders which are among you I exhort . . . feed the flock of God.”

I thank the Lord for this church body where we can gather together on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, Wednesday nights, and other times throughout the week and be faithfully fed from the Word of God. I have grown so much through the ministry of the Word of God here at Southside. I have been so blessed and so well-fed here, and I’ve heard from others, many others in this congregation who have that same testimony. This is a treasure, and woe to the Christian who neglects it.