

In 1933, Hitler became chancellor of Germany, and the SA storm troopers had grown to several hundred thousand and were wreaking havoc in the streets, some of the churches were excluding Jewish-Christians.

A young pastor, saddened by the state of the church, afraid, and unsure he could help, fled to London. In October 1933, he wrote an older pastor explaining himself. The younger pastor writes:

*“If it is at all desirable, after such a decision, to find well-defined reasons for it, I think one of the strongest was that I no longer felt inwardly equal to the questions and demands that I was facing. I felt that, in some ways I don’t understand, I found myself in radical opposition to all my friends;...And so I thought it was about time to go into the wilderness for a spell, and simply work as a pastor, as unobtrusively as possible.”*

In November came the reply, addressed to “My dear colleague.” The older pastor convicts the younger pastor as a fellow laborer. In the most moving paragraph, the older pastor writes:

*Why aren’t you here all the time, where there is so much at stake that calls for a few brave souls to keep watch, whether the occasion is great or small, and try to save whatever can be saved? Why? Why? You see, as I said, I’m quite ready to assume that your going away was personally necessary for you. But I would then like to ask, what does a “personal necessity” actually mean at this moment? Reading your letter, I believe I can see that you, like the rest of us—yes, all of us!—are suffering under the enormous difficulty of “making straight paths for our feet” [Heb. 12:12-13] through the present chaotic situation. But shouldn’t it be clear to you that this is no reason to withdraw from the chaos; that perhaps we are called to man our positions in and with our uncertainty, even if we stumble and go astray ten or a hundred times over, or however well or badly we then serve our cause? I am simply not happy with you putting your own private problem at center stage at this point, in view of what is at stake for the German church today...to all the reasons and apologies that you may still have to offer I can only and shall always have the same answer: And what of the German church? And what of the German church?*

The older pastor—Karl Barth—was one of the most well respected and influential theologians of his time. He is recognized as one of the men God used to stem the tide of theological liberalism in Western Europe, and did not shy away from speaking out against the rise of the Nazi party. Students today continue to read, be sharpened by, and write dissertations on Barth’s thought. But I believe he would say that more than all the academic and theological accomplishments of his life, the most important things that Barth did were these: preach the Gospel, shepherd his church, and mentor other pastors. The Nazis exiled Barth in 1934.

Not long after Barth’s exile, the younger pastor—Dietrich Bonhoeffer—did return to his post in Germany, by the conviction of the Holy Spirit—but no doubt also in some measure due to Barth’s letter. He became a leader in the Confessing Church and the German resistance as they tried to protect Jewish Germans and Jewish-Christians. By 1936 he was declared an enemy of the state, in 1938 he was expelled from Berlin but continued to teach at an underground seminary training pastors, in 1943 he is arrested for subversion but remained in contact with the larger church strengthening them through his letters and writings. In 1945 he was moved to Buchenwald concentration camp, then Regensburg, then Flossenbürg where he was finally executed by hanging on April 9, 1945 just two weeks before Allied Troops liberated the prisoners of Flossenbürg.

Karl Barth understood that the church in its time of suffering and trial needed men to “keep watch,” to put aside “personal necessities,” and to constantly be asking “And what about the church?” Barth taught and modeled, and Bonhoeffer came to understand, the same lesson that Peter wants to teach us today:

**“Elders are God’s provision for the suffering church,  
therefore Elders must be selfless, the flock must be faithful, and all must be humble.”**

First,

### **Elders are God’s provision for the suffering church**

*v. 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: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight:*

In the preceding passage Peter exhorted the church to endure through the “fiery trial” that is coming upon them, and that God’s refining judgment begins with the church (v. 17). Our whole passage flows out of the discussion of fiery trials and judgment. That is why Peter begins “So.”<sup>1</sup> Peter is taking these truths about God’s refining judgment and basing on them exhortations, commands in fact, to the church.

Notice how he exhorts “the elders among you,” assuming that there would be Elders among the churches spread across what is today modern Turkey. It is a given that there should be Elders among them, both the Apostolic and cultural practice would lead to this conclusion. He has in mind not elders in the chronological sense, but in the sense of spiritual maturity—though often the two may go hand in hand.

Isn’t it interesting that on the heels of a section about suffering and trials, he thinks first and most prominently about the leaders of the church, the “Elders?” Where we might want something more flashy, or overtly powerful, or philosophical Peter looks at the church about to suffer and says: Elders shepherd well, flock follow the Elders, everybody be humble—that is how you get through suffering. ***Peter looks at the trials that are coming upon the churches and he identifies the Elders as a determining factor of whether and how well the church will get through suffering.***

Peter sees the Elders as God’s provision for the church, and as he unfolds the basis of his exhortation he shows us how this is the case:

#### **A. They witness to Christ, and they help keep the eternal perspective.**

First he says: *“as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ”*

In the same way Barth addressed Bonhoeffer, “My Colleague” Peter addresses the elders not as an Apostle but a “fellow elder” which models the humility required of an Elder, but also connects their

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<sup>1</sup> *If you are reading from the NIV, they have excluded the word “So” or “therefore” but it is there in the Greek. They exclude it because they think that Peter has used the word here not as a logical connector, but as a convention—that “therefore” is the type of word you use when you move from content to application. I submit that is the type of move someone with a poor grasp of the Greek language would make. It’s a bit like my twins saying “may can we have some tea” at tea-time. The twins know people use the word “may” when they are trying to be polite, but they have not grasped the language fully enough to properly use the word “may,” namely with the word “please.” The Greek of 1 Peter is considered by all to be quite good, and it seems unlikely he would use the word pointlessly here.*

authority with his. If he is a fellow Elder with them, they are also fellow elders with him. All that he is about to say to them are the types of things they must say to the flock

The word “fellow” in the Greek can govern both the word “elder” and the word “witness” which means it is not Peter’s eyewitness to Christ’s sufferings that is in view here (after all, Peter did not actually witness Christ’s sufferings, he betrayed Christ). Rather, Peter envisions the role of the Elders in the suffering, persecuted churches as witnesses—those who testify to the truth, namely the sufferings of Christ. That is to say, God provides Elders to the church not for the sake of having Elders but because they witness to the truth of Christ.

As Peter has woven into the letter constant reminders of the sufferings of Christ in two ways: 1) as revelation of God’s accomplishment and offer of salvation and 2) as the example and pattern for the Christian of suffering leading to glory. So God provides the Elders as witnesses to the salvation and hope of glory found in Christ’s sufferings

But Elder Peter, and his fellow elders, also must keep the proper perspective. Look at the last part of v. 1, Peter is a partaker with them of the glory that is going to be revealed. Because Peter, and the Elders have put their faith and trust in Christ alone for salvation—they no longer labor for the joys of this life but for the eternal. Christ will come in glory, he will glorify his people, and establish the glorious New Heavens and the New Earth—every Christian must keep that glory ever before her mind and not become so preoccupied with the now that they lose the wonder of the not yet.

Being partakers of glory frames the discussion for us in terms of our heavenly inheritance. When we fathom all that we have been given in Christ, and all that will be given us at his return—it surely changes our attitude and willingness toward suffering, service, and obedience—whether we are an Elder, leader, or member of the body. But Peter, by keeping it before the Elders, shows them just as **they witness to Christ, they must keep this eternal perspective before the church.**

It is like a coach who keeps his athletes focused beyond the practice or drills, but on the Super Bowl. Or a music instructor who looks ahead to the performance while the pupil tires of scales and exercises.

But Elders are not only witnesses and guides; they are also God’s provision for the suffering church because:

### **B. They shepherd and exercise oversight.**

The idea of the shepherd is a rich metaphor that God often uses of his leaders, indeed the prevailing metaphor for the kings of Israel is “shepherds.” We can think of many different passages that highlight one or another of the shepherd’s characteristics and responsibilities to his flock: he leads them where they should go, he feeds them, he tends to their needs, he protects them, he carries them when they are weak. Peter could mean all of these things when he says “shepherd” the flock of God that is among you.

But here may I suggest a particular meaning not to exclude the others, but one that might be particularly important in times of suffering and trials—namely, retrieving the sheep that is lost or has been taken. Like David tells Saul “I’ve kept my Father’s sheep. When a lion or bear comes and takes one, I strike it down and rescue the sheep.”

Or like Jesus's parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd leaves the 99 to find the 1 that is lost. So, in times when suffering may drag away or confuse the sheep, the elders come and retrieve those who are wayward and lost.

Likewise, "oversight" means not only *managerial* oversight, but that they see-beyond the sheep to danger.

Imagine the shepherd leading his flock through the countryside to water or pasture. He watches them, keeps a headcount. Yet, simultaneously he shields his face from the sun with his hand, and squints his eyes. He looks beyond the sheep for any danger or enemy that may be on the horizon. And he knows, whether a poacher, a lion, or bear, he will risk his life for his sheep.

The **Elders are God's provision in suffering** because they shepherd the flock and exercise oversight.

Next Peter speaks to the Elders, the flock, and the whole, and calls them to live in accordance with this provision.

First,

## **II. The Elders must be selfless.**

v. 2-3 can be summed up in that one word: "selfless." The Bible lays out many expectations and qualifications for those who desire to be Elders, but in the context of suffering Peter singles out this one characteristic above the rest, they are selfless. Let me show you how v. 2-3 revolve around that single idea:

*v. 2 not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you;*

There are two possibilities here. One is that Peter forbids an Elder doing the job only because there is a job to be done and someone has to do it, rather they should do it willingly, as God would have them. The other is that they should not have to be compelled to do their work, but should do so willingly—in the sense of deliberately or intentionally. John Calvin took it to be more the second, and so do I.

Certainly a man should not be an Elder if he does not want to be an Elder, and yet at the same time one thinks of Bonhoeffer who seeks to escape the situation in Germany, and Barth certainly and rightly compels him to return and take up his post.

Either way you take it, the Elder is not to be one who prefers ease. He gives himself literally "willingly according to God" or "in reference to God." We might say submits himself fully to God, to be used by God, quite apart from his personal preferences.

*not for shameful gain, but eagerly;*

The Elder mustn't be motivated by "shameful gain" but be "eager." The prohibition is not against being compensated—indeed the NT elsewhere speaks of some Elders being paid. The prohibition is against being motivated by the money. An Elder should not be one who sees the office as an opportunity for gain, but is eager to give. The word translated "eagerly" in the Greco-Roman world was often used of people who were benefactors to a city—they gave of their goods and of themselves for the greater good. Likewise, the Elder is called not to seek gain, but to give of himself.

<sup>3</sup> *not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*

Finally, the Elders are not to be “domineering” but examples to the flock—we could translate that word domineering “Lording it over them.” I wonder if Peter was remembering the day when the mother of James and John asked Jesus if her sons could sit at his right and left in his Kingdom. The other disciples were furious with James and John, and Jesus told them all:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them...not so with you. Whoever wants to become great among you must be a servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The example the Elders set is one of sacrificial service—being first by being last.

So the Elders are to submit themselves fully to God, give of themselves to the church, and sacrificially serve as an example to the flock. In a word, the Elders must be selfless.

Barth’s question “What about the church?” looms large for them. Like Bonhoeffer they set aside personal necessities to serve the church. This is reinforced when we look at v. 4 “*And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*”

These men work not for ease, or gain, or power—but out of love for Christ their Chief Shepherd and to receive the unfading crown of glory, the reward of those who have run and finished the race. This is not works righteousness, but works done because Christ is already their Chief Shepherd, they have already been brought under his care and Lordship—so they gladly and selflessly expend themselves for his sake. While other men may seek, or fear the loss of crowns in this life, these men work for that which is unfading, eternal.

As the Elders must be selfless,

### **III. The flock must be faithful in its conduct, and its submission.**

We have been talking a lot about the Elders, and rightly so as this passage primarily concerns the Elders. But it doesn’t *only* concern them. In v. 3 Peter says that the Elders should be examples to the flock of sacrificial service and that means the flock must be faithful in its own conduct to follow their example.

There is something in us that hears that exhortation as only applying to them. But “examples” by definition imply *someone to whom* you are modeling the proper attitude or conduct. When I commend my oldest son Daniel in front of his brothers for setting a good example, I’m also implicitly telling them that they should follow his example.

In other words, Peter’s exhortation for the Elders to be examples of sacrificial service is also an exhortation to everyone else to follow the example the Elders set! The flock must be faithful in its conduct to follow their example. In this way we see that these instructions to Elders are by extension for all leaders, for parents, for disciples, for all of us.

But not only faithful in its conduct, but also in its submission v. 5:

*“Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders.”*

We said above that when Peter refers to the Elders he has in mind the office of Elders, the leaders of the church. So, when he says “likewise, you who are younger” he has in mind those who are not

Elders, not necessarily only those who are chronologically young—in other words, he exhorts the rest of the church.

He calls the church to something that feels foreign and oppressive in our Western Democratic context. The American mythology of independence and self-sufficiency stretches far beyond believing in ourselves and working hard into rebellion against God given authority. Peter reminds us to submit to the Elders, and though they are not perfect, we are faithful to entrust ourselves to them because they have been given a high calling of selflessness under the watchful eye of Christ the Chief Shepherd. We submit to Christ through them, not based on their perfection in living up to the calling, but based on Christ's perfection as Lord of our lives. **The flock must be faithful in conduct and submission.**

Finally, Peter exhorts us all, Because Elder's are God's provision to the suffering church:

#### **IV. We must all be humble**

In a church—led by men who have not yet received the crown of life, and filled with sheep who wander or ignore correction—the key to holding it all together will be humility.

v. 5b

*“Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*

Speaking to all, both Elders and the flock, Peter exhorts us to act with humility toward one another. To not think more highly ourselves but of others. In fact, the verb he uses “Clothe yourselves” is used of literal shepherds to describe the apron they tied on when they worked with the sheep. Humility is not pristine sanitized work; it is the messy work of intentionally entering into and forgiving each other's brokenness and imperfection.

Lest we misunderstand Peter, and see these exhortations as an opportunity to display the moral fortitude of our character, or to be pursue them with an arrogant self-reliance. Peter ends this passage with a quote from Proverbs 3:34:

*For God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*

This is no mere aphorism. It is the Gospel in proverbial form. God opposes anyone who comes to him proud, or boastful, but to those who come to him in humility, admitting their need of him he gives grace. If you are convinced of your own independent goodness and ability to achieve the exhortations be warned—God opposes the proud. But if you hear, and humbly see your need for forgiveness, a standing with God not based on what you can do, but based solely on Jesus dying for your sins and being raised for your justification—there is grace upon grace.

It is what Bonhoeffer called “Costly Grace” in his book “The Cost of Discipleship”:

“Grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: 'Ye were bought at a price', and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”

It is free grace, given on no condition but repentance and faith, it is grace that provides Jesus Christ as the only payment for sins, and it is grace that provides **“Elders as God’s provision for the suffering church, but it is also grace that calls the Elders to be selfless, the flock to be faithful, and all to be humble.”**

Amen.