

Counsel for the Elders

1 Peter 5:1-4 (12/11/16)

Ernie Godshall
Faith Bible Church
Evansville, Indiana

"I exhort the elders among you." Peter has given counsel to believers as citizens, workers, wives, and husbands. Now he focuses on the leaders in the church. There is no higher privilege and greater responsibility than being a leader among God's people. In a sense, every Christian is a leader. Every father is a leader for his family as he nurtures and guides his wife and children in the things of God. Every believer is a leader for Christ to both fellow believers and to lost people around him or her. But in the church, God has ordained leadership – men called elders, shepherds, and overseers who are to feed and lead the flock.

The Bible always speaks of elders in the churches in the plural, so Faith Bible Church holds to the plurality of elders. That's one of the things that drew me to this local church back in 1992. I had listened to John MacArthur's messages on Acts 20, as well as his series on the Anatomy of the Church. Both emphasize how God uses a plurality of godly, mature men called elders to provide leadership for His people.

That's exactly what we have here at Faith Bible Church and I have been blessed to serve with godly men who love Christ, His Word, and His people. Each of our elders has unique gifting and perspectives, but we are all submitted to the Word of God. We meet monthly to discuss matters we are dealing with and then spend time praying for you. I'm sure there are men here this morning whom God will call to this ministry down the road. 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 give us the qualifications for those who desire to be elders. Acts 20, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 5 give us the responsibilities of elders.

Let me just say, when you think about leading God's people and then giving account to Him of how you led, you will confess with Paul, who is worthy of these things? We have this treasure in clay pots, not glorious vessels, just clay pots, so that all the glory goes to God. There is simply no place for strutting, pride, arrogance, or self-importance in this ministry.

Notice, Peter is speaking to the church, "the elders among you." So God wants you to be very aware of your leaders and what we do and what we face, so you will pray for us; and we deeply appreciate your encouragements, suggestions, and concerns for our church. Elders are brothers in Christ. We aren't on a high horse, above making mistakes, unapproachable. We are elders "among you," not over you or apart from you. Do you know and pray for your elders? And your deacons! We love our deacons; they are essential to the effective ministry of our church. This morning God is giving us insights into how the eldership functions and some of the dangers and corrections involved.

First, all leadership in the church must be driven by the gospel – the sufferings of Christ and glory to follow – v. 1 *Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,*

Who was Peter? He was an apostle, but notice how he doesn't pull his apostle card here? He identifies with the elders. Peter was not the first pope in Rome. He did not have the primacy. He may have been crucified in Rome, and maybe upside down according to tradition, but here he identifies himself as a fellow elder and witness of Christ's sufferings.

We love Peter! He's so...human, so much like most of us! Christ called him from the fishing nets, probably as a teen, to make him a fisher of men. He spent three years in life training, watching, learning, and doing right there with Jesus. He's the disciple with the foot-shaped mouth, the first and only one out of the boat onto the water, the one who boldly confessed, "You're the Christ!" He commanded Jesus, "Not my feet, oh no, never will you wash my feet! OK, then my whole body." The same night in the upper room Peter assured Jesus, "I'll die for you!" Then Jesus warned, "No, you're about to deny Me three times." Peter slices the ear off that dude in the garden and then a few hours later, while Jesus is being

tortured, Peter caves three times, "I don't know the man!" Jesus shot that glance at Peter right after his third denial and Peter ran out and wept bitterly. With news of the resurrection He beat John to the tomb and barged right in. On the seashore Jesus asked him, "Do you love Me?" three times. "You know I love you!" Three times! Jesus said, "Feed My sheep, shepherd My lambs, feed My sheep?"

Then, filled with the Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2, he fearlessly declared to the religious rulers, "This Jesus whom you murdered, God raised from the dead and exalted Him to His right hand!" He preached the gospel to Cornelius and his family and many were saved. He writes two epistles and guides Mark in writing the second Gospel. Yet Paul has to rebuke him for compromising the gospel of pure grace. Peter was an apostle called by God, and in real life he was simply a fellow elder and witness of Christ's suffering who looked forward to Christ's return, just like other elders.

So Peter is coming alongside as a fellow elder exhorting us to faithfulness to our calling, to provide strong and godly leadership for God's people. And that leadership must be identified with Jesus Christ at the center, His sufferings and victory! Once the church loses the gospel of Christ, it is no longer a church. The ministry of leadership is all about feeding the people the Word with the gospel at the very heart.

Second, God places elders in His churches to do one thing – shepherd His flock – vs. 2 *Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight...*

There are three words in the New Testament that refer to church leaders: elders (presbuteroi) speaks of character – mature godly men; overseers or bishops (episkopoi) speaks of responsibility; shepherding or pastoring speaks of feeding and leading. So the elders are to care for and oversee the flock which belongs to God. We are to feed the flock of God! Paul taught the same thing in this great verse in Acts 20.

Acts 20:28 Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

Putting these two verses together, first notice the church is God's flock! No man owns the church. You are God's sheep, chosen by God in eternity past, redeemed by God through the blood of His Son, and adopted by God into His family. You belong to God and now elders are responsible to care for you as God's flock! That should sober up any elder! Shepherding means feeding the sheep and overseeing means making sure they stay healthy and keep growing. Here are five key responsibilities of a shepherd.

Feed them – this is primary. Whether it's from the pulpit, in a classroom, small group, counseling, or casual conversation, shepherds must love Jesus and His Word, and know it enough to teach and apply it to life. That's what we at Faith Bible Church do! That's what we consider to be of utmost importance! That's what Sunday mornings are about – feeding time! Shepherds must lead the sheep into green pastures. John Milton wrote a poem containing this line, "The sheep look up and are not fed." The worst indictment of a local church is when people say, "We just weren't being fed!" That's a tragedy and the elders and leaders of this local church must always continue working hard to be sure you are fed, whether with sermons, small groups, counseling, discipleship, reading good books with several others, or classes on various topics. Right now there are classes available on heart idolatry and the attributes of God. At times we have classes on marriage, family, relationships, evangelism, and various studies to help you grow and change. This is called progressive sanctification. This is all part of feeding the flock.

Guard them - Acts 20:28 says be on guard for yourselves and all the flock. There are tons of false teachings out there. In Acts 28:9 Paul warned that savage wolves would come in, not sparing the sheep. The elders are to be watchmen and guard the flock. If you see a wolf closing in, be like David and keep a biblical slingshot handy to whack them!

Care for them – Sheep get sick, discouraged, and often need a word of encouragement. When tragedy strikes, the elders come along side and provide prayerful support.

Correct them – Sheep sometimes need a little reproof when it is known they are feeding on the wrong stuff and getting caught in worldly brambles and dirt. Shepherds need to pick the thistles and burrs out of the sheep's wool even though it may hurt at the time.

Restore them – Sometimes it is required that we have to go after wandering sheep and seek to bring them back. Galatians 6:1-2, "If someone is caught in a trespass, you who are spiritual, restore that person." Sometimes they refuse to repent and church discipline is required.

Elders don't do all this on their own authority or based on their own opinions. Shepherds have one tool – their rod and staff. Elders have one tool – the Word of God. God rules His church using leaders who lead with the Word of God. God's flock must be fed with God's Word, guarded with God's Word, cared for with God's word, corrected or counseled with God's Word, and restored with God's Word.

Third, God warns leaders of three ministry dangers. – v. 2b, 3 *exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.*

This is the heart of the passage. God pinpoints for us three wrong and even sinful motives that plague church leaders. They are often true of others who aren't elders in the church. We're going to identify these dangers and give the corrections, just like God does here in these verses.

#1 DANGER: losing your passion. *"not under compulsion."* This can happen to any believer. You fall into a routine, a ritual, a heartlessness about your Christian life. You can function out of a sense of mere obligation or duty without the sense of the greatness and glory of it all! Pastors can just clock time and lose their first love, like anyone else. They can get lazy and just go through the motions. One mother woke her son up and told him to get ready for church. He replied, "I'm not going to church anymore. The sermons are boring and everyone hates me anyway." "Now son, everyone doesn't hate you, the sermons help a lot of people, you have lots of friends there, and finally, you have to go. You're the pastor!"

CORRECTION: "But voluntarily, according to the will of God." For every preacher, if the best day of the week isn't Sunday and the best morning Sunday morning when you are heading out there to preach the Word, excited, fired up, and passionate about it – you've got a problem. You may have become a time-server, just a people pleaser, a hireling. Paul told Timothy, "Stir up the gift in you." Fan the flames! Get before God in prayer and cry out that He would fire you up! These sheep belong to God and He wants you to be fired up about caring for them, delighting in ministering to them, passionate about it. Every elder needs to remember, "God has called me to this, and I am privileged to care for these sheep, visit them, feed them, pull those thistles and dirt out of their wool, and chase after them." Someone recently asked me how I keep the gospel fresh in my own life. Always needed are prayer, time in the Word, and reading good books on leadership. Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students* is so good. J. Oswald Sanders' *Spiritual Leadership*, Paul Tripp's *Dangerous Calling*, Martyn Lloyd-Jones *Preachers and Preaching* are all good fuel to fire up a pastor. And then there are biographies! The two volumes on George Whitfield, the Memoirs of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, the lives of Edwards and Spurgeon are all so helpful. And look for someone to talk to about their need for Christ. That always warms a believer's heart.

Peter says, "Willingly, according to God's will," or just how God would want you to care for His sheep. He owns them, paid the ultimate price for each one, and He expects nothing less than top notch care and handling of His flock! Fire us up, Lord! Make us all alive and passionate. We don't need dead preachers preaching dead sermons to bore people to death.

#2 DANGER: loving money. *"and not for sordid gain."* KJV puts it "filthy lucre!" Shameful gain. Nothing has corrupted the church like greed and "filthy lucre." Using religion for your own gain! Pope Leo X sent John Tetzel out to hawk indulgences so Leo could fund St. Peter's Basilica and leave a great legacy. Tetzel was slick about it. His entourage paraded into German villages to superstitious, spiritually ignorant people with no Bible and bamboozled them out of their money, all in the name of the Church. If only they would buy indulgences guaranteed by the pope, they could save their loved ones from the torment of purgatory. Don't you hear your poor mother, child, grandmother in the flames of purgatory crying out?

“As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, another soul from purgatory springs.” Not only that, but they could buy an indulgence that guaranteed forgiveness for future sins. Pay to sin. This is really what sparked off the Reformation. As Luther learned of this, he got fired up and wrote those 95 theses!

But similar stuff happens today as religious hucksters prey off the ignorance and superstition of the masses. Oral Roberts claimed Jesus told him He would end his life if his supporters didn't send in nine million dollars by a certain deadline. That's being held hostage by Jesus. It's also nonsense. Others hawk promises of miracles if you will only send in your seed money. Over the last several decades, evil people have lured greedy Christians into all kinds of ponzi schemes.

Some sales techniques use friendships to makes sales. While in college, someone came to our mobile home to sell us a vacuum cleaner. We caved and bought it. Then they asked for names of friends who might be interested, giving us a cut off the price – maybe \$30 or \$50 dollars. We gave the salesman the name of friends, but then quickly called them under no circumstances should they buy the piece of equipment. They bought it. We felt so bad because they could afford it even less than we could.

Peter warns church leaders, beware of filthy lucre! Money has a way of dousing a heart on fire for God. Remember this warning:

1 Timothy 6:10-11 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. 11 But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.

CORRECTION: “*but with eagerness.*” A forward passion, a ready heart, shepherding God's people with eager and inward delight! You can't buy true preachers. They don't go where the money is...they go where God wants them and they find their motivation not in money but in the heart of Christ and the gospel!

#3 DANGER: Lording it over others. *“nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge.”* Pride and power are twin brothers. The position of leadership can easily puff up a man's head. There are some who just want to be the greatest, in the highest seat and position, and well known. When James and John's mom came and asked Jesus if her sons could have the highest seats in the kingdom, Jesus soundly rebuked the whole lot. They were continually arguing about who's the greatest. The world fights to get to the top. Who gets to sit in the most important seats is a problem today. It's all about power and prestige when it should be to take the seat in the back! Jesus calls us to go to the bottom, to be slaves, servants. Also not lording over others means a difference between being authoritative and authoritarian. The elders' authority extends only as far as the Scriptures. We aren't writing Scripture anymore. We can't rule God's people with our opinions. Teaching with authority is not getting people to follow your notions and opinions. It is helping people come under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of His Word.

CORRECTION: “*but proving to be examples to the flock.*” Godly leadership is all about the power of example. Alexander Strauch wrote, “If the elders are examples of absolute fidelity to Scripture, then the congregation will be loyal to Scripture. If the elders trust in God, the people will trust God. If the elders love God and His people, the people will love. If the elders are peaceful, gentle, loving, and prayerful, the church (for the most part) will emulate their pattern of life. Finally, if the elders are humble, the people will be humble, avoiding much contention.”

There's a tremendous burden on spiritual leadership. Paul told Timothy to be an example of the believer in five areas: your speech, your behavior, your love and care for others, your confidence in God, and your commitment to purity in every area of your life! (1 Timothy 4:12)

Fourth, God promises a rich reward for faithful shepherding – v. 4 *And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*

Jesus is our Chief Shepherd, our Senior Pastor! The sheep are His! “Shepherd my sheep, guard my sheep, care for my sheep.” And the greatest motivation is to hear from our Shepherd, “Well done, you good and faithful elder. You fed my sheep, you cared for them. You stuck with them through joy and pain,

through sin and godliness, through attacks from the world, the flesh, the devil. You didn't flee when the wolves came. You warned them, encouraged them, corrected them, and restored them." And, like Paul said, we are all clay pots so that Christ may get all the glory (2 Cor. 4:7). We just need to be faithful to our calling (1 Cor. 4:2).

What is our goal every day, in every Bible study, every message, and every lesson with those children? To please Him and make Him known! Whether it's as an elder/shepherd/overseer in the church or living for Christ in your home or workplace or on the street, be an example, be fired up about loving Christ, and live in expectation of His soon return!