

First Peter No. 25 "A Christian Government"

1 Peter 5:1-5

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Text Comment

v.1 The ESV somewhat understates the “therefore” that begins v. 1. But still the “So” does indicate that what Peter now says is related in some way to the suffering that these Christians are enduring for their faith, the subject of the previous paragraphs. Since Peter returns to the theme of their troubles in v. 6, it is likely that what Peter says in the first five verses of chapter 5 is very much related to what has preceded them. Persecution puts pressure on the church, pressure which makes all the more necessary both consecrated leadership and the submission of the Christians to their leadership that produces strength in unity.

Peter’s identification of himself as a “fellow elder” is a lovely piece of condescension on his part. He was an elder, of course, in that the office of apostle took up into itself all the authority that was possessed by the ordinary officers of the church. After all, an apostle was not only *a* teacher and *a* ruler of the church, he was *the* teacher and *the* ruler. But Peter places himself with the elders of the church, not above them, and, in so doing, shows them the humility and the spirit of self-sacrifice for the church that he wants to instill in them and that he will ask of them in v. 5.

Finally a word about the term “elder.” The term is used generically in the New Testament, as it was in the Judaism of the period, for a church leader – whether a layman or a clergyman – though I suspect in most of its uses it refers specifically to the officer that nowadays we would call the pastor or the minister. In the Jewish church of the first century, the church that gave this nomenclature to the Gentile church, priests who belonged to the Sanhedrin, the ruling council, were called “elders,” as were lay rulers. But while priests could be called elders or presbyters, to be an elder was not necessarily to be a priest. There was a clear distinction between the priesthood and the lay ruler and, accordingly, Presbyterianism historically has recognized the distinction between the two offices. In fact, ordinarily in Presbyterian history they did not call ministers elders; they reserved that term for the lay rulers of the church. We too refer to the elders of the church and mean both ministers and ruling elders, but we also acknowledge that ministers are one thing and elders *per se* are another. Some Presbyterians deny that, as you may know, and believe that ministers and priests are both simply elders, they hold the same office, with only practical matters of function distinguishing the ruling elder from the teaching elder. I don’t find that latter view persuasive – I certainly don’t find it in the Bible – and I suspect that here Peter intends us to understand that the elders he is referring to were men we would nowadays call “ministers” or “pastors.” It is not clear that the term “shepherd” was ever used in the OT for lay rulers, though it was used of prophets, priests, and kings. The fact that Peter seems to assume that they receive their living from the church (which is suggested in the next verse) suggests that these were not laymen but, as we would say today, clergymen.

v.2 Peter has used the same ideas together (“shepherding” and “overseeing”) already of Christ himself in 2:25. In their leadership of the church the elders are to take their cue from Christ.

They are to do, in their own smaller way, what he did for the sake of God's people. The shepherd, as Jesus explained to Peter following his resurrection and after their breakfast picnic on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, is both to feed and tend the sheep, providing nourishment and guarding them against danger. Overseeing or exercising oversight is a way of describing the same sort of ministry as that of the shepherd but perhaps with a particular emphasis on direction or government: keeping them in the sheepfold, making sure they don't wander off.

This statement in v. 2 assumes that already at this early point some church leaders, particularly those who taught and preached, were making their living from this work, as both the Lord (Matthew 10:10) and Paul taught they should.

Note Peter's typical perspective. As it was with Christ, so it will be with us. The suffering comes first; the glory only later, at the end of history and in the next world. When Christians want their glory now, as they often have in the history of the church and as some did from the very beginning, it is because they fail to grasp this basic paradigm of the life of faith: struggle followed by glory; pilgrims here, kings only afterward.

- v.4 The fact that godly elders are not to do their work for the sake of worldly gain does not mean that there is not a reward in it for them. But it comes at the Second Coming when the Chief Shepherd rewards the stewards who have faithfully served him. This note is sounded several times in the NT. It is difficult work, but the Lord will not forget those who do it faithfully and well.

One of the great advantages of the consecutive exposition of Holy Scripture is that, sooner or later, and much sooner than would often otherwise be the case, we come to every subject, every teaching in the Bible. I fully understand that someone who is not an elder in the church may not think this passage of any great relevance to him or her. But the Holy Spirit saw fit to put this short paragraph in Peter's first letter. Therefore there must be something important for us here, for elders of course, but also for those whom Peter commands to be subject to them, as he does in v. 5. The fact is, as any thoughtful Christian knows, the individual Christian and the individual Christian family depends upon the church to which he, she, or they belong. It is essential that their church be faithful, that it fulfill the calling of a Christian congregation. Christians whose churches are weak are made themselves weaker as a result. That is not hard to understand. Think of how one's family shapes one's character for good or ill. Well the church is also a Christian's family. Growing up in healthy church, a church that is well led, that is well nourished and whose life is well directed, should be an immense blessing to a Christian and usually is.

Nor is it hard to understand why, therefore, the government of the church, the men who lead a congregation, who teach, tend, and oversee the life of that congregation, are so important to the spiritual welfare of the saints. Church government is not by any means the first thing in the Bible, or the second, third, or fourth; but clearly it is not the last thing either. If we want to live the Christian life as Christ would have us live it, we need our leaders to fulfill their callings because their calling is to help us to follow Christ, to strengthen and to guard our faith. If the church is the mother of the faithful, as the Bible says it is, and if her health is fundamental to our health individually as Christians, as the Bible says it is, then church government is hardly irrelevant. And that is not really so difficult a thing to prove. All through the Bible the point is made that *a* cause, if not *the* cause of the spiritual defection of God's people was the infidelity of her leaders, her priests and her elders,

her teachers and her governors.

And this is just as plainly the lesson of church history. The defection from loyalty to the Word of God did not arise spontaneously among the people of God. It was a poison injected into the life of untold numbers of congregations through the ages by their pastors who had been schooled in infidelity in their colleges and seminaries. The people in the pew were not demanding that the teaching of the Bible be abandoned; their pastors taught them to doubt the Word of God and to prefer the wisdom of this world. Contrarily, when the church has been reborn in faith and in the love of God and Christ, it is almost invariably the result of a spiritual renewal of the church's leadership. As we head into uncertain times for the church in the western world, nothing is going to prove more essential to Christians' perseverance in the face of the hostility and scorn of the world than devout, learned, committed, and authoritative leadership.

The vital importance of the church's leadership to her spiritual life makes it perhaps somewhat surprising that there is so little regulation, so little specific instruction, so little information about the leadership of the church in the apostolic age. We know general things but we have very few details, almost none in fact. I have been in correspondence recently with a minister of our Presbytery who has come to have doubts about being a Presbyterian. He finds himself drawn to more episcopal forms of church government, that government that has what is historically called "the three-fold office." The three offices are 1) bishop, a minister with authority over a number of other ministers; 2) presbyter – by which is meant the preacher/pastor of a congregation (call him what you will: a priest, a pastor, or a minister) – and 3) deacon, who, in this form of government is usually a lower order of the ministry. That is, the deacons of the episcopal churches (Roman Catholic, Anglican/Episcopal, Methodist, and so on), are more like our assistant pastors than they are like our deacons. In this three-fold office there is a definite hierarchy, with the bishop having authority over the presbyter and, usually, the presbyter having authority over the deacon.

Now, you probably know that an essential feature of Presbyterianism is the rejection of the office of bishop, if by that office is meant a minister over other ministers, a ruler of ministers. It was for the eradication of that higher office of the ministry that our heroes fought and suffered in the 16th and 17th centuries. Presbyterians have always argued – and with very sound evidence – that the office of "overseer," the Greek word *episkopos*, the term translated "bishop" in some English translations of the Bible, and the office of presbyter, the Greek the term translated "elder," are both used to describe *the same office*. The one term describes the qualifications of the man, "elder", the other term describes his responsibilities, "overseer". What is more, the New Testament never actually *teaches* anywhere that one minister is to exercise authority over another. Presbyterians have argued that a hierarchy in the ministry or eldership is unbiblical. But be aware that things are not as simple as they may seem, especially if you have learned Presbyterian church government from one of our typical manuals. Such manuals usually make the issue seem much simpler than it is and make the biblical evidence seem more convincing that it actually is. *And I wonder myself with respect to the 16th and 17th centuries that if those bishops had regularly been genuinely godly men who were working hard to bring the life of the church into conformity to the will of Christ, such a thing as Presbyterianism would actually exist in the world today.*

For example, it is rarely admitted in any of our manuals that while in the Presbyterian system all ministers are supposed to have the same office and the same authority, in actual fact it is hardly so. Fundamental to the Presbyterian system as I was taught it in seminary is the denial of hierarchy in church government. But it is a simple fact that we have hierarchy too; always have and probably

always will. In Presbyterian churches large enough to have more than one minister, invariably one minister, we usually call him the senior pastor, has more authority than the associate pastor or the assistant pastor. We don't call him a bishop, but we might as well so far as the structure of the congregation's leadership is concerned. In many churches his office might just as well be described as CEO! Of course when I tell Pastor Nicoletti what to do, he simply ignores me, which really hurts my feelings. But in other PCA churches the senior pastor gets more respect!

I think we can safely conclude that the materials of the New Testament provide for a church government that unifies the whole church (as we Presbyterians seek to do with our presbyteries and General Assembly). In the Presbyterian theory ideally the church of Tacoma would be one single church with all of its congregations governed by all the elders of those churches together. Secondly, it should be a government in which *pastors or priests* feed and tend the congregation by preaching the Word, leading worship, and providing pastoral care, in which *lay rulers* oversee the conduct of the congregation, and in which *deacons* manage the church's ministry of charity and care for those in want. So we too believe in a three-fold office: that of minister, elder, and deacon, though we understand the offices somewhat differently than do the Episcopalians. But beyond this is difficult to be sure precisely what the Bible actually teaches us about the organization of the church. How do the offices relate to one another? The Bible does not say. Presbyterians, for example, have given very different answers to that question because, obviously, no one can point to a place in the NT where all of this is explained. For example, can the ruling elders tell the minister how to conduct the worship service or is that his province alone? We disagree about that even in the PCA. Can a minister veto church discipline imposed by the lay ruling elders? Can the elders tell the deacons how to spend money raised to help the poor and needy? The Bible doesn't answer these or a host of other questions. There was a high priest in the Old Testament and there were apostles in the New. So the idea of one minister above others is hardly necessarily unbiblical. Indeed, here in these verses Peter identifies himself as an elder. But no one thinks that because he was an elder too all other elders had the same authority and occupied the same office that Peter had. He may have been an elder, but he was also an apostle, and there were only 12 of those! He had greater authority than the other elders. Certainly nowhere in the NT do we read that the essential thing is that all ministers be on the same level or have the same authority. That idea is very American, to be sure; whether it is biblical is less clear. In fact, if you collect all the data that the New Testament provides regarding the government of the church, you will be impressed by how little information there is.

What is more, whatever the system of church government, however the offices of the church are understood, in the New Testament and throughout church history, some men have always exercised much more authority than others simply because of their character, their learning, and their effectiveness. This was certainly so in the early history of the church after the time of the apostles. We know very little about the ordinary Christian minister in those early centuries. The men we know about are the men who rose to the top, whose learning, whose great gifts, and whose godliness invested them with greater authority than the ordinary pastor of a church. In fact the history of the early church *is* the history of these great men. Without their personal history we would know almost nothing about early Christianity. And so it has always been. John Stott was never made a bishop of the Anglican church in the second half of the 20th century, but he exercised more influence, more priests and ministers looked to him for guidance and for example, than did any man who held the office of bishop during the time of Stott's ministry. And when the history of English Christianity in that period is written much will be written about Stott – once referred to in *Time Magazine* as the pope of the evangelicals – and virtually nothing about the bishops of the English church!

Now, I mention all of this to make a point. The fact that the New Testament's teaching of church government is rather general and leaves a great many questions unanswered; the fact that our systems of church government struggle to prove themselves the clear and unmistakable teaching of the New Testament only makes the more emphatic what *is* said about church leadership. About this there is no question at all. Everywhere the same teaching is found that is found here in 1 Peter. This is what the New Testament is very definitely concerned to teach us about church government. You may have your bishops, you may have your ruling elders, you may have your ministers, but what you *must* have to have is this. What is the essential character of church leadership? It is the willing, committed, humble service of the people of God by godly and consecrated men. Call their office what you will, what matters is the heart of the man who occupies it, his faith, his love for Christ, his commitment to the Word of God, and his devotion to the people of God and the wisdom he has accumulated as a Christian man in his walk with God through the years. The Christian shepherd is and knows himself to be *Christ's servant*. He does not want to be anything else. He is concerned to follow the Lord Jesus in nurturing the faith of the saints, in protecting them from enemies without and within, and to see them safely to heaven. He is not in it for the money, of course, but neither is he in it for the prestige – limited enough as that often is in any case – or for the opportunity to order people around. He knows that not only his accurate understanding of the Word of God but the manner of his Christian life is essential to the fulfillment of his calling and that he can undo everything he preaches to the congregation by the way he treats others, by his lack of compassion or sympathy, by an arrogant tone, by his desire for praise, or sadly all too commonly nowadays, by his behavior toward women in the congregation.

Do not these facts explain why we Presbyterians have never had any difficulty looking to Episcopalian ministers *as if they were our own ministers*? Whether for the books of Bishop J.C. Ryle in the 19th century or those of the Anglican priests J.I. Packer and John Stott in the 20th, we Presbyterians revered such men as our teachers. In the 19th century Presbyterians read the sermons of Charles Spurgeon – who was a Baptist and so a Congregationalist or Independent in church government – far more often than they read the sermons of any Presbyterian preacher. The heroes of the evangelical pulpit, for conservative Presbyterians today, are the 18th century Anglicans, such as George Whitefield, and a Congregationalist, such as Jonathan Edwards or Martin Lloyd-Jones. We read the Puritans John Owen and Thomas Goodwin, both of whom were Independents, not Presbyterians. And, of course, we look to Augustine as our great authority on the grace of God, who was as much a Roman Catholic in church government as one could be in that day when the Roman system had not been fully formed. This recognition and this instinct is so natural and so strong that, once again as I said, it makes me wonder whether had the bishops of the English church been more spiritually minded men, more faithful to the Word of God, the gospel, and the welfare of Christ's people, there would even be today an English-speaking Presbyterian church.

And to the contrary there have been thousands of Presbyterian “shepherds” so called, who have through the years led the people in their churches to believe all manner of falsehood and to live in ways that are a contradiction to everything the Bible teaches us about the faithful Christian life. Just like so many priests and prophets in the OT, though ostensibly “shepherds” in fact they left the people of God as sheep without a shepherd.

What mattered to our Presbyterian ancestors and what matters to us is the consecrated learning with which such men teach the Word of God and the evident devotion of their lives. These were men who both knew the Word of God and lived the Christian life! God's people, whatever their sect, and certainly whatever their form of church government, have always looked up to such men,

acknowledged their authority, and submitted themselves to their teaching. And surely that is right. It is a holy instinct in the Christian heart to recognize the authority of such men and to submit to their leadership. And isn't this what Peter is suggesting is both what church leaders ought to be and why God's people should submit to their authority and follow their leadership.

Now here Peter here assumes that these elders will be faithful to the Word of God and the gospel of Christ. He has already laid stress on the importance of that earlier in the letter. He concentrates his attention rather on the manner of their leadership. And in that respect he says at least four things.

First, he says that these men should be men of mature and polished godliness. Don't miss the obvious. They are *elders*. The term literally means "older man." The Hebrew word for *elder* is formed from the word for "beard." But the idea is not strictly that of chronological age, as if anyone over 50 or 60 could or should be an elder. Generally, in the nature of the case, elders will be older men, at least it is hoped. But the reason for that is that it takes time to grow up into Christian manhood. The Christian life is a fruit that takes time to ripen. Nothing can give a man the sort of wisdom that is necessary to lead the people of God apart from the long experience of his own walking with God, reading and studying God's Word and putting it into practice in his own life, of observing his own heart and the lives of others, of witnessing the Lord's works of grace and judgment in the world.

A Scottish Highlands minister once asked his congregation in a sermon: "What kind of minister would you like as your minister?" The answer he gave to his own question was: "For myself I would like that minister who had been scorched by the law, melted by the Gospel, and much sifted by the temptations of Satan." [John Tallach (ed), *I Shall Arise*, 14.] Perhaps we should add, that we would like him not only to be much sifted by temptation but to have learned in that sifting how to resist temptations and master them and teach others to do the same. That is what a man who exercises leadership in the Christian church ought to be.

Second, such men, true shepherds, must be willing. That is, there should be nothing about them that suggests that they are undertaking leadership in the church in the manner of men who are stuck with a job they wished they didn't have to do. Just as God loves a cheerful giver, not one who gives grudgingly, so God loves a shepherd who is glad for the privilege of serving Christ by serving his people. Peter says as much in v. 2 and says it, no doubt, because already in those early and difficult days, there were reasons not to take up such responsibility in the church. In a day of persecution, leadership made a man simply a more visible target. Through the ages, in most persecutions, the enemy has struck at the head not at the body, much less at the feet. The leaders, ministers and elders have been attacked, jailed, or executed in hopes that once the body is without its head it will wither and die. What is more, in days of trial the work of leadership gets more demanding, more thankless, and more difficult in every way. Under pressure some Christian people will wilt, will deny the Lord in some way to escape trouble or pain themselves. What is to be done with them? Other Christians often refuse to accept their apology or extend forgiveness to those they see as traitors. Divisions form within the church as a result. This was the cause of the two principal schisms in early Christianity, the Novation in the 3rd century and the Donatist in the 4th and 5th. And the same kind of division has happened times without number in Christian history, including in our own circles in the 20th century. Such situations leave the eldership trying to hold together a flock that is ready to fly apart in every different direction. Not much fun in that. And then so much else. The troubles people have, the ordinary ways in which folk can be exasperating, financial problems for the church, and everything else. I know men who when they were in seminary thought of the ministry in terms of

their dream – preaching great sermons to huge congregations. They never imagined that their job was going to be holding a husband and a wife’s hand through 20 years to keep their marriage intact. I know men who have left the ministry because they simply got fed up with the people of God and tired of dealing with them.

And I have met already in my life too many ministers and elders who seem embittered by their work, who do not seem to love it, or to be grateful for the privilege of being Christ's stewards and helpers, or to be solemnized by the sense of great responsibility that is laid upon those who would shepherd the flock of God. Instead they are looking wistfully at selling insurance or opening a store or are complaining about their pay or the people they have to work with. No, says Peter, this is not the way of the true shepherd. He loves this work for the privilege of it – to serve Christ and his kingdom – for the importance of it; the salvation of souls and for the boundless fascination of it, the work and the life of God in the souls of men.

Third, Peter says that these men must think of themselves as servants. Once it was possible to make one’s living in the Christian ministry, it became possible to care more for the money than the people of God. And once the Christian Church became more established, it was possible to care more for the position, the reputation, than for the people of God. The Anglican Church in the 18th and 19th centuries required so little of her priests, the religious life of entire communities was so purely a formality, they were paid so acceptably, and were given an important status in the community, that men went into the ministry precisely so as to be able to devote most of their time to academic pursuits, or fishing, or sleeping in. For all I know there may have been *in toto* throughout the history of the Christian church in the world since Pentecost more time-servers than faithful shepherds. There certainly were multitudes of men who had nothing of the spirit of Richard Baxter who wrote in his classic work *The Reformed Pastor* (199): “I am afraid, nay, I have no doubt, that the day is near when unfaithful ministers will wish that they had never known the charge of souls; but that they had rather been colliers, or sweeps, or tinkers, than pastors of Christ’s flock; when, besides all the rest of their sins, they shall have the blood of so many souls to answer for.” The author of Hebrews reminds us that the ministers of the church, her elders, are men *who must give an account*. What Peter is saying here is that if a shepherd of Christ’s sheep doesn’t understand himself a servant, a man under orders, whose life work it is to serve God and others, a stewardship for which he will be held to account, he does not belong in this work.

Thankfully, there has also been a multitude of men who match Peter’s profile of a shepherd here and who by their spirit of servanthood dignified and glorified the Christian ministry. Men, like Samuel Rutherford, whose appetite for work in the service of his small congregation at Anwoth became a legend, until his people used to boast that their minister was “always at his books, always among his parishioners, always at their sick-beds and death-beds, always catechizing their children and always alone with his God!” [Whyte, *Samuel Rutherford*, 3]

You will appreciate, brothers and sisters, how hard it is for me to preach *this* this sermon, how hard it is for me and Pastor Nicoletti to hear it, and so also your elders and your deacons, for whom the law of service as shepherds in the kingdom of God is the same, if in a somewhat different way. But this too is the Word of God, and I need to hear it and you need to hear it, painful as the hearing may be. It is an impossibly high calling, but Paul was willing to say that the man who desires such an office desires a good thing. It is to the everlasting honor of the Christian church that it sets the standards for its officers so impossibly high.

Finally, Peter says that such men must be humble. A humble man is what is needed, one who looks up in dependence to the Lord, looks at the people of God as fellow sinners saved by grace like himself, and acts accordingly. I just read a new piece by one of our Covenant Seminary professors, Dan Doriani, who preached in this pulpit some years ago. It was a study of Calvin and his dependence upon some of the men who mentored him and helped him in the early days of his ministry. Some of this story I already knew but there were some details that I didn't and they served to make me appreciate in a new way the very point that Peter is making here.

John Calvin was brilliant and he was a devoted Christian. There was never any doubt about that. But he had a temper and he could be a real pill. And early on, in his first period of ministry in Geneva, his domineering way, his refusal to look for ways to make it easier for people to do the right thing, his determination never to back down, and his unwillingness to say "I'm sorry" when he had good reason to, ruined his ministry. He was told to leave. The senior figures in the Reformed ministry, men like Martin Bucer and Heinrich Bullinger, knew how gifted Calvin was and how much the church needed his mind and his leadership, but they also knew they had to corral his fiery temper. After he was expelled from Geneva for offending half the city and infuriating the city's civil leaders, Bucer invited him to join him in Strasburg. That was noteworthy in itself since Calvin had on a few occasions already written some intemperate things about Bucer. Bucer was a peacemaker; Calvin was a fighter and Calvin had taken Bucer to task for what he took to be his willingness to compromise the truth when what Bucer was actually doing was trying to keep the Reformation from coming apart.

But gradually, over the few years he spent as Bucer's understudy in Strasburg, as Bucer spoke to him, cajoled him, counseled him, even on one occasion following him after Calvin had angrily stormed out of meeting and persuading him to return, and as Calvin observed Bucer's behavior toward others with whom he disagreed, Calvin came to see the power and effect of humility in a minister's life. When Calvin eventually returned to Geneva, as he was eventually asked to do, he came with a very different attitude than he had had the first time, managed to get along with people much better than he had before – he had learned the art of compromise, he had learned to apologize – and his ministry flourished in a remarkable way. It changed the world. God opposed the proud Calvin, but gave grace to the humble Calvin.

I remember a conversation I had in the spring of 1984 with Professor Jan Veenhof at his office at the Free University of Amsterdam. At one point we fell to talking about the Bible's prohibition on women officers in the light of the fact that Veenhof's Dutch Reformed church now admitted women to the office of elder and minister. "Well," he said, "it was a necessity" for in his church it was the women who did all the work. Whether or not he intended this, he was admitting that his church did not have the sort of men Peter is here describing. Wise, godly, devout men, who love Christ and his church and consider it high privilege to serve, however demanding the service, because they are men looking to their reward. If we love Christ, if we love our own souls and those of our families, if we love the church of Christ, we will care to have such men over us so that we can follow them as they follow Christ; such men and no other. Only in that way shall we be led by the Lord Christ himself, the chief shepherd and overseer of our souls.