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PRESCRIPTION FOR A HEALTHY CHURCH

1 Peter 5:1-5

by

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1 Peter Lesson 22

Prescription For A Healthy Church 1 Peter 5:1-5

Good churches are hard to find! I often hear from people, as I did this week, who were in the church I pastored in California, who have moved away, who say how much trouble they've had finding a healthy church. Sometimes the church lacks vital worship. Often, they could not find a pastor who faithfully preaches God's Word. Sometimes the church is racked by dissention over petty issues or is shot through with legalism. This is not to say that our church was trouble-free, but by comparison to many other churches, they felt that it was the healthiest church they had ever been in.

What makes for a healthy church? Many scriptural elements could be listed. Especially important is a strong commitment to God's Word, our only authority for faith and practice. But what makes a commitment to God's Word happen? The answer is, strong leadership. Most churches rise and fall with the quality of leadership. But, of course, leaders can't lead without supportive followers. And, even with strong leaders and supportive followers, that ubiquitous sin, human pride, often gets in the way and causes problems. With those factors in mind, Peter here gives us a prescription for a healthy church:

In a healthy church, the elders will shepherd and the flock will submit, all in a spirit of mutual humility.

The churches to which Peter wrote were facing intense persecution ("fiery ordeal," 4:12). Such trials test the cohesiveness and strength of a church. To survive, they needed a prescription for spiritual health. Sandwiched between two sections dealing with trials (4:12-19 & 5:6-11), Peter gives this Rx ("Therefore" [5:1], in light of the trials). It focuses primarily on the elders, since strong pastoral leadership is essential. But there is also a word to the rest of the flock. And, the whole process must be wrapped in what is arguably the chief Christian virtue, humility.

1. In a healthy church, the elders will shepherd the flock (5:1-4).

In the New Testament there are three terms used to describe the same office of leadership in the church, each from a slightly different perspective. Elder focuses on the character qualities of the man, that he is a mature man of God. As 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 make clear, the main qualification for elders is not that they have impressive spiritual gifts. Rather, it is that they be godly men. Overseer (or, "Bishop"; Greek, "episkopos") is used interchangeably with elder (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7) and looks at the primary function of the office, to superintend matters in the local church. The third term, Pastor (which means "Shepherd") looks at the function of the elder/overseer from the metaphor of the church as God's flock. It focuses on the tasks of providing leadership, care, feeding, and protection for God's people.

In the New Testament, there is always a plurality of elders (overseers, pastors) over the church in a given location. Acts 14:23 reports how Paul and Barnabas appointed elders (plural) in every church (singular). Acts 20:17 tells how Paul called to him "the elders of the church" in Ephesus. In Titus 1:5, Paul reminds Titus how he left him to appoint elders (plural) in every city. In the New Testament, the church in a city was viewed as a unit. Thus you have the church in Jerusalem, Ephesus, Antioch, etc. Each church may have been broken down into house churches that met all over the city on any given Lord's Day. But over each church there was a plurality of elders or pastors.

Paul says that "the elders who rule well [should] be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). "Honor" (in Greek) meant both "respect" and "price." As 1 Timothy 5:18 makes clear, elders who labor at preaching and teaching should not only be respected, they also should be paid. By virtue of their full-time commitment to the work, such elders usually take on the role of leader among leaders in a local church. But they share the task of pastoring or oversight with other qualified men.

It is beyond the scope of this sermon, but I believe Scripture is clear that the position of elder in the local church is reserved for men. Many are arguing that women can serve in any capacity, even as the teaching pastor of a church. In passing I will just say that such an interpretation of the New Testament never occurred to Christians until the women's movement became prominent in

the world. To me, the arguments for feminism are reading the world into the Word.

Peter points out the requirement, the responsibility and the reward of shepherding God's flock:

- A. The requirement for shepherding is a close personal experience with Christ (5:1).

Peter models what he is exhorting: He does not lord it over these men, although as an apostle, he could have asserted his authority. "Apostle" referred to men entrusted with authority from Christ to establish churches. As an apostle (1:1), Peter had authority over these churches. "Elder" relates to a local church. But here he doesn't flex his apostolic muscle, but exhorts them humbly as a fellow elder.

Peter begins by relating his own experiences with Christ as the basis for his exhortation. He had been a witness of Christ's sufferings and he also was a partaker of the glory that is to be revealed. Some say that Peter did not witness the crucifixion, since he denied Christ and fled. But it is quite possible that Peter crept to the outskirts of the crowd and saw Jesus hanging on the cross. Even if he did not, Peter had witnessed the sufferings of Christ throughout His earthly ministry, including His agony in the Garden, His arrest and mistreatment at His trial. He had seen the scars in the risen Savior's hands and side. He had personally witnessed the sufferings of Christ.

Also, Peter had seen a glimpse of the Savior's future glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. Warren Wiersbe (*Be Hopeful* [Victor Books], pp. 124-125) points out the parallels between Peter's experiences with Christ and what he writes in chapter 5. Verse 1 takes us to the cross and the transfiguration, as noted. Verse 2 recalls Jesus' teaching on being the Good Shepherd (John 10), as well as His charge to the restored Peter to shepherd His sheep (John 21:15-17).

"Lording it over" the flock (5:3) recalls the silly debates the twelve had about who was the greatest, and the Lord's teaching about the greatest being the servant of all. "Be clothed with humility" recalls Jesus taking a towel and girding Himself as He washed the disciples' feet (John 13:1-17). The word about Satan (5:8) recalls

Jesus' warning that Satan would "sift" Peter like wheat (Luke 22:31). The verb, "to perfect" (5:10) is the same word translated "mending their nets" (Matt. 4:21) when the Lord called Peter to follow Him.

So Peter wrote out of his own experiences with Jesus Christ. He was a witness (5:1). A witness doesn't speculate about religion. A witness relates what he has seen and heard. We have the apostolic witness recorded in the New Testament under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. An elder who wants to shepherd the flock conscientiously must be a student of the apostolic witness in Scripture, especially as it relates to the cross ("the sufferings of Christ") and the coming kingdom of Christ ("the glory that is to be revealed").

The cross is at the center of the Christian life and an elder must live by the cross daily and be able to help others to do so. Focusing on the suffering of Christ is the motivation for dealing with sin and for loving Christ more. Focusing on the glory that is to be revealed in Christ's coming kingdom makes an elder live in holiness and hope in light of Christ's coming. It is out of an overflowing personal experience of the cross of Christ and His coming kingdom that a man can minister Christ to His flock, the church. An elder must be a man who walks closely with the crucified, risen, and coming Savior.

- B. The responsibility of shepherding is to exercise oversight with the right attitude (5:2-3).

The command, "Shepherd the flock of God," calls to mind a familiar biblical picture, that God is the Shepherd and His people are His flock (Ps. 23; Ps. 100:3; Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34:1-24). He has appointed undershepherds to tend His flock. For us, it is unusual to see a flock of sheep, let alone to know what is involved in caring for them. But shepherding was a familiar, everyday illustration in the biblical world.

The shepherd knew his sheep. Jesus, in talking of Himself as the Good Shepherd, said that He called His own sheep by name and they followed Him because they knew His voice (John 10:3-4, 14). At the very least, the task of shepherding involves getting to know people by name, and letting them get to know you. The larger a church, the less likely it is that one pastor can know all the

people by name. But, as I said, there should always be a plurality of pastors (elders) per church. Between them, they should know every person. You cannot give adequate pastoral care to a person you do not know.

Jesus also said that He led His sheep out to pasture (John 10:3, 9). Shepherding means leading God's people in the ways of God. Sheep cannot be driven like cattle. They must be led by example (3:3). Shepherding means taking the sheep to the rich pastures of God's Word, where they can feed and be nourished. The shepherd binds up the wounded and corrects the sheep who cause trouble. He goes after strays and brings them back into the fold. The shepherd is always alert for and guards and defends the flock from enemies that prey upon them. Often such work involves great personal sacrifice and effort. The supreme example is Jesus, who laid down His own life for His sheep.

Peter here sums up the shepherding task with the term, "exercising oversight" (5:2; some manuscripts omit this phrase, but there is good evidence for retaining it as original). Oversight does not mean being overlords. The fact that it is "the flock of God" reminds shepherds that they are not the owners and that they must give an account to the Owner. But they must give oversight to the flock under God. The key to giving proper oversight is having the right attitude. Peter here describes this attitude with a series of three contrasts:

- (1) "Not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God" (5:2)

A man should not be in leadership out of duty, but out of delight. Paul says that an overseer should "aspire to the office" (1 Tim. 3:1). Yet serving as an overseer is not a matter of self-willed ambition, but rather of the calling of God, as seen in the phrase, "according to God," which probably means, "according to God's will." During times of persecution, an elder and his family would be the first targets. The rest of the time, pastoral leadership is more often the grind of mucking out the stalls rather than the glory of recognition. So an overseer must serve gladly because God has called him to the task, not grudgingly because he was forced into it.

- (2) "Not for sordid gain, but with eagerness" (5:2)

The opposite of serving under compulsion is serving eagerly. But some serve eagerly for the wrong reasons, either financial gain (here) or power (next phrase). As I mentioned, Paul taught that it is proper for some elders to be supported financially for their work, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching, which takes a lot of time (1 Tim. 5:17-18). But a man's motive must not be to make money through the ministry, but rather to serve God with eagerness.

- (3) "Nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock" (5:3)

Some go into ministry because they like the power or status of leadership. I heard a well-known pastor say that he thought that most men in pastoral ministry were insecure and that they were after the affirmation they received from their people. I thought, "If he's right, we're in big trouble!" A man who goes into the pastorate or who serves as an elder because he wants power or strokes is not qualified to serve.

The word translated "allotted to your charge" meant "apportioned by lot," and thus came to refer to anything portioned out. It underscores the fact that the flock belongs to God and is entrusted to overseers as those who will answer to God. Rather than leading by lording, they are to lead by example. This does not mean that elders can never exercise authority (Titus 1:11; 2:15). There are times when they must take a stand and say, "We are not going to allow this practice or this false teaching to go on in this church." Sometimes they must enforce church discipline or confront spiritual bullies. But their normal mode of leadership should be their example of godly living.

We need to remember that leadership is more a responsibility than a privilege. If a man is into leadership for the perks, whether status, money, or power, he is abusing a sacred trust. Leadership, whether in the church, the home, or the government, means that you're the one whom God holds accountable for the direction of things under your care. If that thought doesn't cause you to break out in a cold sweat, then you've got wrong ideas about leadership!

Thus, the requirement for shepherding is a close personal experience with Christ. The responsibility of shepherding is to exercise oversight with the right attitude.

- C. The reward for shepherding is the unfading crown of glory (5:4).

The rewards for the work don't come until the Chief Shepherd returns. That Christ is the "Chief Shepherd" again reminds us that we are only undershepherds, accountable to the Chief. The word "appears" is literally, "made visible." We presently do not see the Chief Shepherd, although He is present. But soon He will be made visible, when He comes again in power and glory, to shepherd the nations with a rod of iron (Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15). Thus our motivation for serving as pastors must never be to receive the praise of men, but only the desire to hear on that great day, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Then we will share in His glory! Unlike earthly rewards which fade, that crown will last forever.

Much more could be said. But, in a healthy church, the elders will actively shepherd the flock, which is an awesome responsibility! But the flock must willingly follow:

- 2. In a healthy church, the flock will submit to the elders (5:5a).

There is some debate over why Peter singles out "young men." My understanding is that he assumed that the women would be in submission to the elders; but young men are more prone to resent their authority. Younger men are often more impatient and idealistic than the more mature men in leadership. They may not understand why the elders don't move more quickly. So he singles them out as representing all in the church who are not elders and tells them to submit.

Submission does not mean mute acceptance of decisions. There is a place for expressing disagreement and voicing concerns. But submission is primarily an attitude of respect and a recognition of rank. If the elders go against a clear principle of Scripture, then the flock is responsible to appeal to them based upon the Word. If an elder is violating Scripture, he should be removed from office, since no human authority transcends God's authority. But nor-

mally, the flock needs to submit to and cooperate with the elders as they seek to follow the Lord's will for His church (Heb. 13:17). I fear that we, in democratic America, have gotten away from this important biblical principle of proper authority and submission in the local church.

3. In a healthy church, everyone will relate to one another in a spirit of humility (5:5b).

"Clothe" is a unique word that referred to an apron which a servant would put on before doing his tasks. No doubt Peter was recalling Jesus taking the towel and girding Himself as He washed the disciples' feet. Humility (lit., "lowliness of mind") is the robe with which we all must gird ourselves. So far as I know, the Bible never exhorts us to think more highly of ourselves than we do or to improve our self-esteem, as we're being told to do by many Christian writers. But it often tells us that we need to humble ourselves.

I disagree with the comment often made that humility is elusive because, just when you think you're humble, you've lost it. Both Jesus and Paul called themselves humble (Matt. 11:29; Acts 20:19). The best biblical definition of humility is 2 Cor. 3:5: "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God." Humility is being aware of our own insufficiency, but trusting in Christ's all-sufficiency.

I suppose that Moses had "low self-esteem" when he told the Lord that he couldn't speak well enough to lead Israel out of Egypt (Exod. 4:10-12). God didn't say, "Moses, you need to work on your self-esteem. You're really terrific! You can do it!" Instead, God confronted Moses with his lack of trust in God's ability. God didn't correct Moses' low view of himself; He challenged Moses' inadequate view of God. People with so-called "low self-esteem" are too self-focused. They need to focus on God's adequacy.

Christian leaders have always recognized this. Chrysostom called humility "the foundation of our philosophy." Augustine said, "If you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, Humility." Calvin, who regarded pride as the chief vice and humility as the preeminent virtue, said, "But I require only that, laying aside the disease of self-

love and ambition, by which he is blinded and thinks more highly of himself than he ought [cf. Gal. 6:3], he rightly recognize himself in the faithful mirror of Scripture [cf. James 1:22-25]" (the above quotes are in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 11:11:11; see also, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* [Baker], p. 537). Jonathan Edwards says that the whole gospel and all of God's dealings with us are calculated to bring about in us a lowly attitude toward ourselves and that those who lack this attitude are destitute of true religion, whatever profession they may make (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 1:294).

If you think these men too strong, go back to 1 Peter 5:5b: He quotes Proverbs 3:34 which (bringing out the nuance of the Greek text) says that "God sets Himself in battle against those who lift themselves up, but He gives grace to those who see themselves as lowly." Nothing could be worse than to have God set Himself against you! Nothing is more essential than receiving His grace! The way to be the object of His grace is to humble yourself before Him and before others. It also is the chief virtue for harmonious relationships in the church.

Conclusion

Thus I exhort myself and my fellow elders: Shepherd God's flock! I exhort the church: Be subject to your elders! I exhort us all: Put on the servant's apron of humility! That's the prescription for a healthy church.

Discussion Questions

1. When does shepherding cross the line into authoritarianism? Is this a danger?
2. Agree/disagree: American Christians do not understand the concept of submitting to spiritual authority.
3. Do some people need to "improve their self-esteem"? Cite biblical evidence. What does true humility involve?

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