

5:1-5—LEADING WITH LOVE

The Text (NRSV)

^{5:1}Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you ²to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. ³Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.

⁴And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.

⁵In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

What’s going on here?

-v.1—Chapter 5 begins with a new section and a new emphasis on the role of leaders within the early churches reading this letter. There are a few connections to earlier material in the book, though. First, our author names specific groups or roles within the congregation to address, in some ways similar to the household code material in chapters two and three directed at slaves, wives, and husbands. Especially important is that again, our author commends behavior in continuity with the selfless love of Christ—but once again, he has applied that to a specific role. Also, this new section (5:1-5) follows on the heels of 4:12-19, which discussed the relationship of the Christian community with a hostile outside world. This pattern (of looking at *outside* relationships and then *internal* church relationships) happened just before in 4:1-6 and 4:7-11. Our author, then, seems to see all Christian relationships as interconnected. So if believers are called to have patient, selfless, and suffering love toward those outside the community, they need to have that same kind of love for each other—and vice versa.

This new section also begins with a rare moment of autobiography from our author, who has not really referred to himself prior to the opening of the letter (1:1). This, then, is one of those passages that touches on the authorship question. On the one hand, 5:1

makes it clear that our author is a leader in the church, and the mention of being a “witness” to Christ’s sufferings could be taken to mean that he was actually around at the crucifixion of Jesus. These would both point to the historical Simon Peter. But by the same token, it is hard to imagine a leader as well-known and as highly regarded as Simon Peter referring to himself simply as “an elder myself”—Peter’s status as a leader would have understood even unsaid. And even the reference to the “witnessing” would be unusual for the historical Simon Peter, who, at least as all the Gospels report it, was not present at Jesus’ crucifixion. It is possible, then, that our author understands himself to be a teacher of the apostolic witness of Jesus’ death and suffering, not in the sense of being an eyewitness, but as one who has been handed this central tradition and is now a witness to that faith. Again, interpreters in both camps can read this text and take it to reinforce their position.

A word on the title “elder” mentioned here and again in 5:5—this would later develop into a fixed position or title within church hierarchy, but in this letter, it seems to be still a fluid term. (See more on the development of early church leadership on Page 2). In fact, the word may still have a literal sense, in that early on, leaders were probably picked from among the older members of a believing community. For the churches to

Continued on Page 2

SEE INSIDE:

| | |
|---|-----|
| 5:1-5—WHAT’S GOING ON HERE? CONTINUED | 2 |
| SIDEBAR—EARLY CHURCH LEADERSHIP | 2 |
| CONNECTIONS—LEADING BY EXAMPLE | 3 |
| 5:6-14—FINAL ENCOURAGEMENT AND GOODBYES | 3-4 |

LOOKING FOR MORE?

Mention of the developing structures of leadership in the young church is also found in:

- *Philippians 1:1*— Paul sends greetings to the whole church at Philippi, but specially mentions “bishops” and “deacons” who served as leaders in some degree
- *1 Tim. 3:1-13*— Qualifications for a “bishop” (or overseer) and “deacons” (other leaders in the church) are given. The whole letter of 1 Timothy, along with 2 Tim. and Titus, are written to specific situations and particular leaders in congregations.
- *Titus 1:5-9*—Bishops are again mentioned, as are instructions for appointing elders in the church.

5:1-5, CONTINUED*...Continued from Page 1*

whom 1 Peter is written, there is not necessarily a fixed office of “elder” as there are in contemporary churches, or at least there was probably a changing group of people who filled that role. In any case, our author identifies with that group as a fellow leader of his own faith community.

-v.2-3—Peter now lays out what leadership in the community of Christ is to look like. And before getting into specifics, he frames the discussion in shepherding language—elders are to “tend the flock of God.” This puts a different perspective on church leadership, because it makes all leaders into temporary stewards and guides, who are simply caring for sheep who belong to another—to God. The shepherd language also hearkens back to the model of Jesus Christ himself, who is named the “shepherd and guardian” of believers’ lives in 2:25. This makes the selfless, suffering love of Jesus a necessary part of what it is to lead the followers of Jesus. So the elders our author addresses are not simply rulers who can claim the *authority* of Christ—they are leaders who must be conformed to the humble *way* of Christ.

The rest of 5:2-3 fleshes out what it means to oversee the community as stewards and shepherds modeled on Christ’s shepherding. And it comes in three pairs of antitheses, each contrasting two ways of behaving (not *this*... but *that*). Before we dismiss these statements as obvious or cliché, we need to remember the context of the suffering communities to which 1 Peter is written. In a situation where it could be increasingly dangerous to be associated with the Christian name (and certainly more so to be a leader of the group), taking on a leadership position might not have been appealing to many. And yet, as an act of selfless love, our author calls for those with leadership gifts to use them “eagerly” without compul-

sion. Similarly, they are not to be motivated by greed or personal gain, whether that gain was thought of in terms of payment for leaders (which Paul makes reference to in his own letters) or in terms of unethical management of the community’s pooled resources. Finally, they are to lead not by fiat or by playing power games, but by example. This again points to Christ as a model, which then informs the ways leaders model Christian love for the whole community. Paul uses similar ideas in his own letters, encouraging Christians to imitate him as he imitates Christ (see 1 Cor. 4:6, 11:1, and 1 Thess. 1:6, for example). This would be a rather pompous thing to say, except that what Paul and these elders are to model is humble, self-giving love. Their place as examples and role models does not make them higher or better than the rest of the community, but if anything, leads them to ‘lower’ themselves and to serve others.

-v.4-5—Shepherd language returns, here again point to Christ as the “chief shepherd” and as one who will return in glory and will commend these faithful shepherds of the churches. “Winning the crown of glory” is less about earning one’s place in heaven or in God’s Reign and seems to be more about the exaltation for those who are humbled (since leaders are especially to be characterized with Christ’s own humble love). So just as Christ was one who was humbled and then exalted, leaders who are placed in the same positions of service will be commended. While Lutherans tend to want to streamline our picture of final, heavenly life (with no “levels” of holiness, and no degrees of heaven), there is still a sense of Jesus’ words in Matthew that the Lord will say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” What exactly that will look like in glory—we’ll have to wait and see. In the meantime, the *entire community*, young and old alike, is called to mark themselves with Jesus’ own humility.

SIDEBAR—EARLY CHURCH LEADERSHIP

1 Peter is written to churches that seem to have appointed some to be “elders” as leaders within the church. But the structure of the young church was by no means the same in every place, and it clearly took time to develop. The earliest congregations founded by apostles and their companions may not have initially had other leaders. Presumably, the actual apostles did the leading and teaching when they were around. But as they died off or started new congregations far away, leadership structures became a necessity.

So in letters like Philippians, we have titles like “deacons” and “bishops” (overseers) named, but there is no clear evidence that these were fixed titles or offices. The letters of 1, 2, and 3 John also reflect being written by someone in the position of “elder,” but there is again no clear defi-

nition of what duties this entailed except broad leadership and teaching. It is quite possible that at first, these titles were virtually interchangeable.

However, by the time we get to letters like the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus), there are specific people identified as “bishops,” “deacons,” and “elders.” And there are requirements given for each position, suggesting that in these communities, fixed job descriptions were in place. Shortly after the New Testament era itself, church leaders like Ignatius of Antioch were pushing for even more structure, almost envisioning bishops as sole leaders, and the other positions as lower-ranking roles. But again, all of this developed in time as the church found itself facing the possibility that Jesus might not return immediately and tried to carry on in the faith.

CONNECTIONS—LEADING BY EXAMPLE

- ❖ Think of times when you have seen leaders in the church model Christ's character and love well. What did they do? What says to you that their actions were like Christ's? How might their example shape your own ways of living and acting?
- ❖ At the opposite end of the spectrum, think of a time when a leader in the church did not lead by example. Maybe it was using authority improperly; maybe it was an ethical scandal—whatever it was, how did it affect the church community that was involved?
- ❖ Who have been some people in your own life who have modeled the grace of Jesus Christ for you? What stands out about them in your mind? How have they shaped you who are now—at least that you know of? How do you recognize the way you have been influenced and guided by the examples of these people?
- ❖ Going one step further, who are people who you have shaped and influenced? What do you think the next generation of believers learns about the gospel by seeing your actions and hearing what you say?
- ❖ Is being a role model limited to those who are in “official” places of leadership? Should leaders be held to a higher standard of practice and action than other members of the community? Why or why not? What do you think 1 Peter would say about this?

4:7-11—FINAL ENCOURAGEMENT AND GOODBYES**The Text (NRSV)**

6Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. 7Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. 8Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. 9Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. 10And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. 11To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

12Through Silvanus, whom I consider a faithful brother, I have written this short letter to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it. 13Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark. 14Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

What's going on here?

-v.6-7—The language of “humbling” comes back in 5:6, connecting this section with the call to humility and the quotation about God's grace for the humble (from Proverbs 3:34) in the previous section. This is again the recurring theme that even when we are humbled—and even suffer—in relationship to others, we are always regarded as the precious and beloved people of God. That vindication is assured, even if it is hidden now; in many ways this is a return to the theme back in the very beginning of chapter one of the “inheritance that is im-

perishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1:4). In this light, the call to humility is less a moral command about being well-behaved and more about trusting God's claim that we are precious. By trusting that claim of God, we are freed from having to prove our worth to others (whether by our power, or our wealth, or our talent), and we are freed for the humble love of Jesus. The call to humility is grounded of 5:6 in the assurance of 5:7, that we can lay all our anxiety on our God, who cares for us. Even though that assurance comes second in the paragraph, it is really the source of our ability to live humbly—the promise that God cares for us is what enables us to entrust ourselves into God's hands.

-v.8-9—For one last time, 1 Peter reminds of a tension within the life of faith; while we are assured of God's care for us (and even that no *ultimate* harm can befall us—3:13), there is still the need for vigilance and still the reality of evil that opposes God and the people of that God. The connection of this material on resisting the devil to the previous verses is not immediately clear. It is interesting to note, though, that James makes a similar move in James 4:6-8, which also quotes the same passage from Proverbs about God opposing the proud. In fact, there are enough similarities between these two passages to make many people wonder whether 1 Peter and James are both borrowing from a tradition (written or oral) that made this connection. In any case, the tension between God's unfailing care for us and the still present threat of evil, even the evil *one*, is one throughout the New Testament. It is hard to know for certain what our author has in mind by referring to the devil's prowling around them, but the connection to the suffering of other believers around the world gives us a clue.

Continued on Page 4

5:6-14, CONTINUED*...continued from Page 3*

Quite probably, our author sees the societal rejection and ostracizing of the Christian community as the work of the Accuser, the devil. As Christians are beginning to feel pressure from the culture around them, and even as they are accused of being anti-social or subversive (including the political overtones of that accusation), 1 Peter offers the consolation to his readers that they are not alone in that situation. ‘Resisting’ the devil, then, and remaining “steadfast” in faith would mean not giving into those social pressures and instead remaining a part of the counter-cultural (and yet not withdrawn) community of Jesus.

-v.10-11—As a final word of hope, our author comes back full circle and says that even though their present suffering is real, it will last—in the big scheme of things—only “for a little while.” And beyond suffering is the hope of finally taking hold of the “inheritance” which is already theirs. Their “living hope” (1:3) will at last come to fruition and fulfillment, and they can trust in that hope because, after all, God *has called them* into eternal glory already.

These last verses are really a consummation of all the hope language in the whole letter. This is almost like the end of the final movement of a symphony, where all the themes from the whole work are brought together one last time, tied together, and then brought to a triumphant (and usually loud) end. Well, 1 Peter is pulling out all the stops here, allowing the various themes of the letter to speak again here. The theme of the “living hope” is back, as is the idea of God’s calling. This calling has been the ground for Christian hope—and action—all along. Believers can face hostility and rejection because they know God’s call on them is more real and names them as the people of God. Believers can turn from self-centered action and the power games of the world because God’s call has given them a new identity. That call, a past reality, already accomplished, is what leads them through the

present, and into the future, when their hope will become reality and their faith will become sight. This passage also gives a great glimpse at the already-not-yet reality of Christian hope and promise, a theme that pervades the whole New Testament. Just as at the beginning of chapter one, the “living hope” of the people of God is given as a present reality, which we already possess, but is also described as an “inheritance” being kept for us until the return of Jesus at the consummation of all things. That tension is not resolved or explained away for 1 Peter’s readers, but it is presented again as a source of consolation.

A final image of hope here in 5:10-11 comes in the emphasis that *God* will act on behalf of these beloved ones. The very God who has called them, that same God “will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish” them. The emphasis is worth mentioning, because in its own way, this passage echoes the promise of Rev. 21 that at the last “God himself will be with them” and will wipe away our tears. In the midst of a triumphant and glorious picture of God’s final reign is this intimate image of God bending down and wiping away tears. It is not just that the forces of evil will be stopped—although they will. It is not just that Christ and his way of selfless love will be vindicated as God’s own way—although it will. Those can become impersonal ideas. But 1 Peter keeps the intimacy by emphasizing that “God himself” will be the one to restore and uphold the whole people of God.

-v.12-14—Flashing back from the cosmic future of glory, our author returns to the real life, concrete people who are brothers and sisters in the faith to his readers. Presumably, Silvanus and Mark are people these readers would know, and even if we don’t know them, these greetings end the letter with a grounding in the real life and people of the church. The amazing hope and promise they have been given is real and really does hold them as God’s beloved *always*.

CONNECTIONS—LIVING IN THE TENSION

- ◆ Maybe we’re not used to labeling things as “demonic,” at least to the extent that 1 Peter is. Maybe there are other Christian traditions that are more at ease with supernatural language, too. But what do you think it might look like to “resist the devil” in your own life? Is that language helpful for you or not? Why might it be important for 1 Peter to name the demonic in his own circumstances?
- ◆ What are ways that we can support our own brothers and sisters in faith who are suffering today? Is our call as Christians *limited only* to stand with those who are fellow believers? What does the example of Christ, given as one who suffers for the *ungodly*, say about the scope of our call to suffer with others?
- ◆ What images of life in glory, from 1 Peter, from other books, or from your life experience, are most powerful for you and give you a sense of hope?