

Sermon File # 1270

Scripture Text: 1 Peter 5:1-7

Sermon Title: *Shepherding God's Flock: Leading the Church in Difficult Times*

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

For additional information regarding this manuscript, contact Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org.

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Shepherding God's Flock: Leading the Church in Difficult Times

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me, as we come today to the final chapter in the 1st Letter of Peter, the Apostle of Hope, who writes to church "scattered strangers" (1:1) throughout Asia Minor. As we noted last Sunday, the storm clouds of persecution had been gathering over God's people, and by this time in the letter, it seems that full-scale persecution, perhaps under cruel Roman Emperor Nero, had broken out. Peter gave some important words in 4:12-19 about facing and bearing up under the painful and fiery trial that is certain to come upon all who faithfully follow Jesus as Lord.

In the first verses of this fifth chapter, Peter specifically addresses the leaders of the churches, and challenges them to provide faithful leadership, which is especially vital in times of difficulty and persecution. Peter employs an image that was better known in his day than in ours, that of the role of shepherds, the elders, in taking care of the sheep, the flock, which is the people of God.

Follow as I read **1 Peter 5:1-7**.

After the close of our elders' meeting this past Monday night, I mentioned that I would be preaching about the role of elders from 1 Peter 5. One of the men, who is one of your under-shepherds, I might add, said he might decide to skip church this Sunday! Actually, I don't blame my brother elder, who in fact is present. I too would like to be absent while I preach this sermon because I know it will challenge me as well. I thought about skipping this portion of 1 Peter, but then realized it would be an obvious and I think egregious omission of an important part of God's word to us.

I need to be reminded, even in my 44th year of pastoral ministry, of the charge that I received at my ordination in 1967 and the challenge I accepted when I became your pastor in 2003. And we as God's servant leaders are dependent on you whom he has called to support and follow our leadership, even as we hold one another accountable to follow his word and will for the church.

The right kind of church leadership is essential at all times and under all conditions of church life. But especially when times become difficult and when we realize the extent of a growing spiritual warfare, it's absolutely essential that we embrace and follow God's plan for the leadership of his church.

From 4:17, we understand that judgment begins with God's people. He is testing the verity of our salvation through times of difficulty, and here Peter is reminding the leaders of the church to get their church houses in order through being faithful under-shepherds (Wiersbe, 123). In fact, as God's servant leaders, we are likely to be the first in God's house to face his judgment (Grudem, 185). So, our text today contains some heavy and challenging words for all of us—God's leaders as well as those who follow his leadership in his church.

Look with me as we consider "shepherding God's flock: leading the church in difficult times." This kind of leadership involves, first of all...

The right kind of leaders

When Peter wrote this charge to the elders there was very little organizational structure in these house churches in Asia Minor. Later, of course, there developed the offices of elder, pastor and bishop. But at this early stage, the apostles, like Peter and Paul, appointed elders to oversee the churches in their formative stages and to serve as spiritual overseers and to safeguard against heretical teaching (Jobes, 299).

Often, with possible exceptions such as young Timothy, these who were chosen were literally the older men in the churches, possibly the heads of the households where the congregations met for worship and fellowship (Blum, 249f). Although he was an apostle, having been one of Jesus' first followers and an eyewitness of his resurrection, Peter also identified himself as a fellow elder, one also entrusted with the care of the church.

With this identification, Peter indicates that he and all the elders of the churches are primarily...

Followers of Jesus

Although these elders he is addressing had not, like Peter, known Jesus in his flesh, yet they knew him personally, had grown to love him deeply, believed in him profoundly and were filled with joy inexpressibly (1:8). Just as Peter's life had been changed by his experience with Jesus, so these elders' lives were being transformed by their faith in and walk with the living Lord Jesus.

We know the story of how Peter had failed to heed Jesus' warning that he would deny his Lord. We also know that Peter repented of that failure and that the risen Lord gave him, along with the other disciples, a commission to continue his gospel work (John 20:19-23). Not only was Peter given that commission, but he received a special visit from the Lord, who reinstated him and particularly commissioned him to serve as an under-shepherd, helping take care of his sheep, following him all the way to his death (John 21:15-19).

No longer was Peter the brash, volatile and unstable follower of Jesus as he was during Jesus' earthly ministry; now he was the broken yet forgiven and Spirit-empowered preacher of the word and leader in the church. Now the suffering and death of Christ was no longer something Peter wanted Jesus to avoid (Matthew 16:22); but rather the message of the Cross and the way of faithful suffering with Christ became the pattern of his life.

Peter assumed that the elders of the churches, those whom God had placed in servant leadership, were those who also had taken up the way of the Cross to follow Jesus. They were men who had been broken to the old life of pride and self-centeredness and were now living in the freedom of dependence upon the Spirit of God and the glory of Jesus' resurrection that rested on them (4:14). They were Kingdom-of-God people who had an entirely different way of seeing reality. As leaders of a suffering church, they saw and thought with the perspective and mind of Christ, and their hearts were set on kingdom hope. In the words of Henri Nouwen, they were now "wounded healers." Pastor John Piper, citing passages like 2 Corinthians 1:6 and 1 Thessalonians 3:3, notes to his fellow ministers that we are not yet ready to minister to others unless we ourselves have suffered (Piper, 137ff).

Just as he had been called, commissioned and ordained as an elder, now Peter reminds these elders of their calling as followers of Jesus, and also as...

Willing under-shepherds

Although the imagery of sheep, shepherds and sheepfold is not as well known to us today, it nevertheless remains an effective biblical picture. In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel is compared to sheep in need of a shepherd, and those who failed to

lead and serve God's people and who exploited them were denounced as false and wicked shepherds (Ezekiel 34:1-10). And best known of all is Isaiah's image of us sinners as lost sheep, having strayed from God's fold and in desperate need of his rescue and redemption (Isaiah 53:6).

Jesus used the sheep and shepherd metaphor, describing himself as the Good Shepherd who had come to seek and to find the straying and to lay down his life for us lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7; John 10:1-18). And, when reinstating Peter and reminding him of his three-fold denial, Jesus challenged him three times about his love for him and charged him to feed and care for his sheep (John 21:15-17. Burdick, 1,895)

The word "pastor" is a translation of this verb in our text, "to shepherd" (poimaino, from poimen [Robertson, 130]). Shepherding and caring for the church is a task shared by pastor/elder, elders, ministers and all servant leaders of the church.

Peter notes that the elders needed to serve, not because they must but because they are willing, which is what God wants (2). For me, serving IBC has been a privilege and delight, even during some rather difficult times. But I remind us that most of the times must have been difficult in the churches in Asia Minor, where persecution was becoming the norm. And to serve as an elder or any kind of leader in the church was likely a risky if not costly affair. Conditions of persecution likely caused some elder candidates to demur and to reluctantly acquiesce to the assignment ("grudgingly," *NLT*). But God is pleased whenever his people are willing to serve him gladly, whatever the risks and the cost.

Peter notes that willing under-shepherds are not to be greedy for money, but eager to serve" (2). Financial greed among church leaders is evidently a problem that goes back all the way to the 1st Century. Apparently there were those in Asia Minor who sought to exploit the churches for monetary gain, a likely temptation in times that were economically difficult for a suffering church (Jobes, 305).

When Jesus sent his disciples on mission, he taught them to depend on their hosts to provide their material needs, saying that "the worker is worth his keep" (Matthew 10:9). Paul also advocated the financial support of church leaders, a right he personally was willing to deny himself (1 Corinthians 9:7-12). He notes that elders who "direct the affairs of the church well" and "especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" are "worthy of double honor," meaning financial support. To support his argument he cites Old Testament scriptures about not "muzzling the ox while treading the grain" as a principle for a worker deserving his wages (1 Timothy 5:17-20).

I'm very grateful for the support this church gives me, which enables me to focus on the ministry of teaching and preaching and to be free from concern over finances while I give attention to the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:2). I realize also my

responsibility to be a good steward of my personal finances, with my tithes and offerings and using my resources to better serve the Lord.

I know the other elders agree with me that we are all privileged to serve the great, loving and vibrant church called IBC Brussels. I rejoice in the privilege that is mine to simply belong to this community, and even more so, to be called to serve as your pastor/elder.

God has placed us here in this church, this local flock or fold of God's sheep, to serve in...

Caring for the flock

Peter challenges the elders to join him in the tasks involved in shepherding God's flock under their care as overseers (2), the tasks of protecting, leading, guiding and providing for the sheep (Blum, 250).

In describing himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus referred to his mission of rescuing the lost sheep who were without a shepherd (Luke 15:3-7). He also noted that, unlike thieves, false and hireling shepherds, he deeply cares for his sheep and never lets us out of his watchful hands (John 10:1-30).

The Apostle Paul, in his charge to the Ephesian elders, reminded them of their responsibility to "keep watch" as overseers and under-shepherds, and protect the church from "savage wolves" that would invade and destroy the flock of God's sheep (Acts 20:28f). How crucial it is that we be on guard against false teaching and also ungodly behavior that would confuse believers and divide fellowship and destroy the unity of God's flock, his church!

In the same way, as God's under shepherds and overseers of his people, we are to provide solid teaching that will help to disciple and strengthen his people, who can then enable others to become disciple-makers (2 Timothy 2:2). The risen Lord, in his restoration of Peter, charged him to express his love for his Lord by feeding his sheep (John 21:15ff). And this is my responsibility as well, to faithfully teach and proclaim God's word, primarily to encourage and to edify you, the people of God under my charge (2 Timothy 4:2).

As God's under-shepherds and overseers, we are to lead the church to employ the many gifts of the Spirit, residing in every one of you, to build up Christ's Body (Ephesians 4:11ff; 1 Corinthians 12). As we noted some weeks ago, Peter challenged the churches of Asia Minor to use the gifts God had given to everyone in order to serve one another (1 Peter 4:10f). And I realize my need to proclaim to you every Lord's Day "the very words of God" (11), that is, the very words God has spoken in his word, the Scriptures.

We are to care for you by leading and guiding, not only by teaching and preaching, but also by providing for you a worthy example to follow. One sin we as church

leaders, and particularly as the preaching pastors must avoid, is what Calvin called “the sin of the Pharisees” (314). Jesus denounced the teachers of the law who failed to practice what they preached, and who loaded the people down with the burden of laws and requirements that they themselves were unwilling to obey and to fulfill (Matthew 23:1-4). As I challenge you to be bold witnesses and share the gospel in your sphere of influence, so must I accept that challenge. As I challenge you to live holy and pure lives, so must I. As I challenge you to give faithfully and even sacrificially, so must I, else I’m guilty of the sin of the Pharisees.

All of us who serve in leadership must live in a way that you and your children can imitate, including a spirit of humility that says “follow me only as I follow Christ and only in the way that I faithfully follow him” (1 Corinthians 11:1). And if any one of us elders is accused of ungodly or unethical conduct, we must be subject to proper church discipline (1 Timothy 5:19f).

All of this is to say that we as ministers and elders are not to lead in an autocratic, power-wielding way but rather as...

Under the Chief Shepherd

Ours is a sacred trust, to be his servant leaders. We are given authority to lead, but ours is a God-given and God-shaped authority. We are to lead with gentleness and love, even as did Jesus, instead of “lording it over those entrusted to” us (3).

We’re called to be under-shepherds not cattle drivers. A cattle driver walks behind his herd with a stick, but a shepherd walks ahead of his flock and his sheep will follow him (Clowney, on the text addressing pastoral authority, 204).

We are those who are serving under the Lordship of Christ, as his representatives, and are to seek to be great in *service under* and not in *power over* people (Luke 22:24-30). I love the way Greg Boyd calls for the church to practice power under, which is leading and serving with the suffering love of Jesus rather than seeking ecclesiastical or political power and influence (Boyd, 18ff).

As elders and ministers, especially when given positions as preachers and teachers, we have a greater accountability and will be “judged more strictly” because of the influence we have on other people (James 3:1-2). Our words have a powerful influence and potential for good but also for evil. If we live and serve faithfully, Peter reminds the elders, then we can look forward to “the crown of glory that will never fade away” (4). I for one want to hear my Lord say to me, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21). But if we are unfaithful, we’ll be the first to face God’s judgment for causing his “little ones” (especially the new and weak in faith) to stumble (Mark 9:42). What damage fallen ministers and church leaders have caused because of their failure to live under the greater authority of the Good, Great and Chief Shepherd!

Citing Jesus' words about whoever would be great must become a servant (Mark 10:43), Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Jesus made authority in the fellowship dependent upon brotherly service. Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only where the ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming is carried out." He then decries the autocratic "personality cults" of "false authority," saying "The Church does not need brilliant personalities but faithful servants of Jesus and the brethren."

Bonhoeffer then rightly notes that "The Church will place its confidence only in the simple servant of the Word of Jesus Christ because it knows that then it will be guided, not according to human wisdom and human conceit, but by the Word of the Good Shepherd" (108f).

Too many pastors and other ministers and church leaders have fallen prey to the desires of the flesh and craving for success in the eyes of the world at the expense of their loss of godliness, ethical integrity and financial accountability. This was a problem already in Peter's day, and he admonishes the elders to resist these temptations for immediate gratification and earthly reward for the heavenly reward. The word he uses for this unfading crown of glory is the "maranth" flower, a blossom of brilliant red that was used in the wreath of leaves worn by the winners of athletic games (Jobes, 306). What the Chief Shepherd gives to his faithful servants will never fade or be lost, and will make all our service and sacrifice during this brief pilgrimage well worth it.

Shepherding God's flock and leading his church in difficult times, Peter says, involves also...

The right kind of followers

Although there is the possibility that Peter is speaking to a group of young men who were serving as apprentices to the elders (Moo, 2,130), it is also likely that the "young men" Peter addresses in verse 5 in principle includes all who are not elders (Davids, 184). Those who are not called to be elders are called to be followers.

Peter knows that in order to effectively shepherd God's flock and to lead the church, especially when times get difficult, there must also be the right kind of followers, who are...

Accepting authority

It's always a bit awkward for me to proclaim my authority as a pastor/elder, and I'm quick to add that spiritual authority does not reside within a special position of privilege and power over others. Rather, the authority of the pastor and all the elders and overseers is in a God-given position of servant leadership. God gifts and calls some to places of ministry leadership, in order to provide guidance and also to equip the others for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11ff). We do not rule as power-

wielding dictators but serve as loving, caring under-shepherds who desire God's best for his people and God's mission to be accomplished through his church.

Those of us who have been called into leadership realize that our leadership is null and void apart from the "followership" of those we seek to lead. As Paul says, "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other" (1 Thessalonians 5:12f).

The right kind of leadership authority inspires love, respect and trust among the congregation and enables the people of God to "accept the authority of the elders" (*NLT* translation of verse 5). As Bonhoeffer says, again in *Life Together*,

"The question of trust, which is so closely related to that of authority, is determined by the faithfulness with which a man serves Jesus Christ, never by the extraordinary talents which he possesses. Pastoral authority can be attained only by the servant of Jesus who seeks no power of his own, who himself is a brother among brothers submitted to the authority of the Word" (109).

With that kind of authority that is submissive to God's word and to the Lordship of Christ, the Chief Shepherd, we as servant leaders should be able to expect supportive followership, which is for the good of the church. This conditional followership is what is meant in this verse from Hebrews:

"Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you" (13:17). This word "obey" can also mean "follow, place confidence in." The writer of Hebrews is addressing the emotional stress and burdens upon leaders that can be caused by an unruly church, which would forfeit the benefit to be gained when leaders enjoy the following of the church (Guthrie, 2,108).

I know from experience the difficulties involved in trying to lead an unruly church in a previous pastorate. Pastors, ministers, elders and any other church leaders are severely restricted in their leadership if there is a deficiency in the spirit of followership. And Peter adds the essential point of...

Putting on Humility

Both leadership and followership work best when there's an abundance of humility. When we live and lead in the spirit and with the mind of Christ, we do so with his kind of humility, as expressed in Philippians 2:5-8. When we take on the servant spirit of the Lord Jesus and live by the way of the cross, we then are given his grace, that is his enablement and true spiritual, Kingdom-of-God power. So Peter in verse 5 quotes the Proverb (3:34) about how God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

When we live and serve with a “can do” attitude and even try to do good things in the church with a spirit of pride in our ability or even our spirituality, we will find ourselves fighting against God himself, who opposes the proud. True humility is simply the attitude of total dependence upon God and accepting the place of a servant rather than seeking positions of power and privilege.

The Apostle Paul, writing to a church filled with egomaniacs who flaunted their spiritual gifts and vied for places of power, prestige and control, challenged them to realize their weakness and depend on God’s strength. In the first chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul spoke about how God chooses for his Kingdom people the weak and powerless in the world’s eyes in order to magnify his greatness (1 Corinthians 1:26-31). And in his second letter he reminds us that God alone can make us sufficient as his servants and ministers of the New Covenant (2 Corinthians 2:16). “Our competence,” Paul says, “comes from God” (3:5). In calling elders and other spiritual leaders to live and serve in a spirit of true, Christ-like humility, Peter is actually giving the key to true power and effectiveness in leadership. God’s power comes to us through our weakness and awareness of our constant need to be filled with and led by his Spirit as we follow the way of the Cross (Jobes, 309).

When we humble ourselves under God’s mighty hand, he will lift us up in due time. He will give us the grace we need to be faithful and effective servant leaders and will give us the respect, love and trust we need from those who follow and support our leadership and ministry. This humble dependence on God’s grace to lift us up in our servant leadership is the key to this last statement in our text, where Peter speaks about...

Getting rid of anxiety

This is a precious word of encouragement: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (7). Wouldn’t life be different for some of us (myself included) if we applied this verse to our lives and to our ministries?

To cast our anxiety upon God is another way to talk about prayer. Prayer is simply our expression of need for God’s grace, forgiveness, guidance, provision, wisdom, strength, healing and simply fellowship with him day by day, moment by moment. Prayer is the antidote to anxiety and the key to the peace that transcends all understanding (Philippians 4:6f).

Remember, these were Peter’s words to the elders serving in difficult times. There were a lot of things going on and about to happen that could cause anxiety. Imagine these words of encouragement being addressed to the Church in places of suffering and intense persecution today. Some of these pastors and leaders are under threat of or have already received jail sentences for preaching the message of Jesus. Many of these believers have already had to flee their homes and others may yet face that threat. But here’s a promise that is for everyone who trusts Christ. We are never outside of his love and care.

Pastors and elders who are seeking to lead during times of oppression from without or discord, division and confusion from within can take comfort and encouragement from this verse.

Those of us in leadership also know that our greatest anxiety is often over our own weakness and failure, when our leadership can rightly be questioned or even challenged, or when we face huge and seemingly overwhelming challenges or obstacles. I know I often lie awake at night with anxiety over decisions and conflicts. At such times I need to cast my anxiety on almighty God, knowing he cares for me.

We need to remember that the one who asks us to cast our anxieties on him is also the Chief Shepherd, the one Calvin says is “really the pastor” (317). And we need to always bear in mind that this is also his church and not ours, and he holds the churches in his hand, just as John saw in his vision of Christ holding the ‘stars’ of the 7 churches in Asia Minor (Revelation 1:20-2:1).

Conclusion:

Although the Church of the risen Christ is in his hands, he nevertheless has given pastors, elders, ministers and other leaders a humanly impossible task. We absolutely depend on God’s grace for wisdom, strength and the love of Christ in order to be faithful in fulfilling our calling. And we receive that grace through the prayers of his people. Throughout his correspondence with the churches, Paul urged the people to continually keep him in their prayers.

In the passage where Paul describes our spiritual warfare against the forces of darkness, after he portrays for us the armor of God we must don for our protection, he urges us to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests...and always keep on praying for all the saints.” And realizing his own dependence on their prayers adds quickly, “Pray also for me” (Ephesians 6:18f).

God is blessing IBC in many obvious ways, but we also are aware that our enemy the devil is always on the prowl (1 Peter 5:8), a fact we will examine more closely next Sunday. His strategy continues to be to attack church leaders, whose influence is widespread and deep. Almost all of us IBC elders in recent years and months have experienced serious illnesses and difficulties in our families and with our jobs, which have added to the pressure of the workload in church ministry. We absolutely need your prayers, and are profoundly grateful for those of you who pray faithfully.

This fact of the challenges we have received may give pause to some of you potential elders regarding your willingness to become a candidate to serve with us (verse 2). Serving as an elder requires a time and spiritual energy commitment that relies upon the grace of God received through the prayers of his people. I’m calling upon you, the people of IBC, to seriously pray for us as we seek to find those among us whom God would have to serve with us as fellow elders (Matthew 9:38).

God doesn't need perfect men and women to be his elders, ministers and other leaders of his flock. He needs only the willing and those who seek God's power, filling of the Spirit, and wisdom (Acts 6:3). He also uses those who have fallen and faltered in the past, just as he restored Simon Peter from his egregious and shameful denial of his Lord. The Lord is calling to serve as his under-shepherds those who live humbly under his grace and depend absolutely on him to enable us to pass the test of his judgment as we take on this humanly impossible task. As we move closer to the end of human history as we know it and closer to the return of the Lord, we can expect the conflict to become more intense and the task of caring for the flock more difficult.

Peter himself had a motivation for his difficult task and for his life of faithful discipleship that would culminate in his martyrdom. He had been privileged to see a brief revelation of Christ's glory as a witness of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13). Even though Peter's understanding of the necessity of the Cross preceding the glory remained dim, yet he never completely forgot the glory yet to come. We too must keep in mind that the glory to be revealed (1) and the unfading crown of glory yet to be received (4) will be worth far more than any price we might have to pay in serving him.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. From our text, list the qualities and requirements Peter gives for elders (pastors, elders, ministers).
2. What are the tasks of elders that are illustrated by the image of a shepherd caring for his sheep?
3. What are some temptations that are unique to pastors, elders, ministers and other church leaders?
4. Reflect upon/discuss the kind of pastoral authority that Peter describes in our text.
5. What is the nature of the followership (verses 5-7) that is essential for effective leadership, and how can the relationship between leaders and the church be strengthened?
6. What is true humility and how should it affect our relationships in the church?
7. Reflect on verse 7, and ask yourself how you practice it in your life.

8. Spend some time praying for the pastor, elders, ministers and other church leaders at IBC, asking the Lord to show you how you can better support and encourage them and also pray for him to call forth additional elders to serve our church.

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