

# ***“God’s Flock”***

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***Leadership is not about getting others to do what I want.***

***1 Peter 5:1-7***

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## ***Leadership is humbling***

Some of you may not know that the “Dr.” in front of my name is Doctor of Ministry degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Charlotte, and that the specialization of my degree was “Christian Leadership.” In three years of reading, projects, and seminars, plus a 300-page thesis, the main takeaway was how little I knew and still know about leadership. In other words, it was and is a humbling experience.

I realized sometime during the process of earning the title “Doctor” that the most common underlying presupposition about leadership is almost never spoken out loud or written down: Leadership is getting other people to do what I want them to do. Leaders know where they’re going. They’re out front showing the way. Their effectiveness is measured by how many follow and how well.

For business leaders, this means hiring and managing employees to stay in their lane and do their job. For teachers, it’s about getting kids to cooperate, learn, and complete their assignments. For politicians, the question becomes how to articulate your vision in such a way that the majority of voters will vote for you. For parents, how to raise children who share your values and perpetuate them for another generation. For pastors the question is, “What are some tips to help me get these people on board with the vision God has given me?”

Much good has been done in the world and in the church by leaders who lead as if it’s all about their vision. Much evil has also been done. Leadership when so defined

is like technology – it’s a tool that can cause great harm or accomplish great things. My primary quibble with this most common assumption about leadership is that it doesn’t sound very much like Jesus. More to today’s point, it doesn’t sound like Peter either.

### ***Images of leadership***

Although almost everyone is a leader in some way, verses 1-4 of 1 Peter 5 are most relevant to those with recognized spiritual responsibility in the local church. While Peter specifically addresses “elders,” that term has evolved across time and location. These verses apply to a broad range of spiritual leaders – pastors, elders, and teachers, of course. In our context we might also include small group leaders, ministry team and mission team leaders, board chairs, mentors, paid professional staff, and others.

If it weren’t for chapter 5, we might assume that Peter’s scattered and suffering readers are all practicing what we’ve learned to call “safe at home.” Now we learn there is not only community but some level of organization and therefore leadership. Peter offers a variety of leadership images.

*Elders (1).* The word sounds like older people, for a reason. It’s a visual, a way of thinking about leadership that is rooted in the Old Testament but is found in virtually every culture and time. When Moses needed help, he appointed “elders.” In the book of Acts as the church grew and spread out, the original “apostles” needed others to come alongside and added “elders” to the leadership team.

The point is not that church leaders are automatically the oldest people in the community, or all our decisions at Corinth would be made by the eighteen church members over the age of 90. “Elder” is a metaphor that implies spiritual experience and wisdom. Elders teach and lead and model the faith. Most importantly, elders have a calling from God that is validated and recognized by the community.

At the beginning of this letter, Peter had identified himself as an “apostle,” but now he places himself on equal footing with the local church leaders in the Christian diaspora. He is a “fellow elder,” one who shares with them in both suffering and delayed gratification – the “crown of glory” when Jesus appears.

*Shepherds (2,3,4).* As common and consistent is the idea of “elder” in the Bible and beyond, there are three times as many references in Scripture to shepherds, sheep, flocks, and wool. This is probably because the experience of shepherding was common across the cultures and times of the Bible.

What Peter emphasizes in verses 2-4 is that the shepherd-leader is an undershepherd, responsible for the stewardship of a flock that belongs to Someone Else. This is “God’s flock,” and these shepherds are accountable to the Chief Shepherd. Peter surely has in mind the scene by Sea of Galilee after Jesus’ resurrection when Jesus asked him three times, painfully recalling Peter’s three denials, “Do you love me?” As

Peter's intensity rose with each affirmation, "Yes, Lord, I love you," Jesus commissioned him each time by saying, "Feed my sheep" or "Tend my lambs." For Peter, leadership would always be shepherding *God's* flock.

*Supervisors (2).* As Peter expounds this idea of shepherds, he includes three other metaphors. The NIV's "watching over them" is the verb form of "overseer," the Greek *episkopos*, sometimes translated "bishop." But don't think of a Chess piece that moves diagonally or an ecclesiastical official with a fancy robe and hat.

Our parallel is a "supervisor." Both "visor" in "supervisor" and "seer" in "overseer" imply looking – attentively, carefully. Individual workers see their step in the assembly line. Leaders "oversee" – they "see over" the larger picture. They make connections and value the health of teams and individuals.

*Role models (3).* A primary way to exercise this watchful oversight is by being an example. Leaders don't point the way; they show the way. They model integrity, character, and humility. In the context of church leadership, they model discipleship, prayer, service, justice. Those who accept the mantle of leadership accept the burden of being constantly watched to see if what they do matches what they say.

In the case of Peter's readers, this especially applies to all he has been saying about suffering and submission. Peter has set the standard high by pointing to Jesus as someone who didn't just endure passive suffering thrust on him. He embraced both suffering and loneliness, because that's what it took to save the world. Peter says if you're going to call yourself a leader in this church Jesus founded by his suffering, you will have to model self-denial. When others see you, they will know what it means in your context to be a *Christian* – a Christ-follower.

*Contenders (4).* One final image Peter wants to burn into the minds and hearts of the elders is that of a finish line. There's a "crown of glory" to be won. As with all images of the life to come – streets of gold, wedding feast, mansions over the hilltop – this is an attempt to put into familiar words and ideas the inexpressible wonder of life with God. In our day Peter might have said, "You'll be on the gold medal stand." Either one is an inadequate metaphor based on the closest thing we experience.

The point is to keep your eye on the goal – the joy of hearing Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Paul says to run as if only one runner will get the prize. In reality, thank God, the "winners" in this race will be far more than one – but run as if there's only one crown of glory available and you want it.

I've noticed both in the Bible and outside of it very few people begin well, stay the course, and finish well. Most stories of women and men of faith are stories of those who began poorly but finished well, or began well but finished poorly, or began and finished well but made some terrible choices in the middle. It is the goal of my life to begin, run, and finish well – in the eyes of my Lord.

So there you have it – five ways to think of spiritual leadership, especially in the local church. The reason we need at least five is because any one of them is inadequate by itself. Don't pick just one image for leadership or it will betray you.

Leaders are elders, but if that's your only metaphor you may think "elder" means "older." Leaders are shepherds, but if that's your only metaphor you may be inclined to think of those who follow you as dumb animals you can abuse and extort. Leaders are supervisors, but if that's your only metaphor you might forget that "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Lord Acton). Leaders are role models, but if that's your only metaphor you might become self-righteous and defensive about your behavior. Leaders are contenders, but if that's your only metaphor, you might forget the difference between a contender and a competitor and see other leaders as enemies.

This is the first of four lessons in today's text for life in the church of Jesus.

### ***Life in the church***

*First, caring for others.* None of Peter's five leadership images sounds like, "Leadership is finding ways to get you to do what I want." In any church or anywhere two or more people are gathered, some person or some group has greater responsibility for communication and decision. But as soon as it becomes for any leader a way to receive cooperation instead of giving care, it's not Peter's model for leadership.

This is so needed, right now. I'm increasingly concerned about our forced isolation. I hate the fact that for three months and counting most of us have not been able to gather together in person. Don't misunderstand me – this is not about what President Trump or Governor Cooper or anyone else says we should or shouldn't do. Can you set aside for a moment any political bias that you have and just hear me say, "I hate this virus and hate the distance it's causing"?

I hate it for those who are vulnerable and are craving community, who may even be at risk spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically. I hate that I have to go to the bedside of a dying man whom I deeply love and have to wear a mask – not because I'm concerned about passing on anything to him but because there's a room full of family and friends and Hospice workers and I've been in lots of public places on vacation and can't be sure I'm not a carrier. My pastoral instinct is to urge togetherness, meaning face-to-face, not mask-to mask. I despise this separation the longer it goes. It's harder to be about "caring for others."

The longer it continues, the more I as your pastor and we as pastors and elders and teachers need you to commit ourselves to "caring for others." That means two things. First, we can't possibly keep up with everyone. We need you to be asking, "Who needs somebody right now? Who's isolated? Who might be struggling?" Don't tire of reaching out to them. Second, we need you to let one of us know if you are feeling uncared for, overlooked, forgotten. Please, please tell us so we can care for you.

*Second, releasing control.* Peter continues with three other key lessons for life in the church. Verse 5 in the NIV begins, “In the same way, you who are younger submit yourselves to your elders.” I’m not fond of that translation, but I’ll admit to you I’m going out on a limb with a Pastor Bob translation you probably won’t find elsewhere.

The word “younger” can mean “newer” or “fresher.” In other words, it’s not necessarily about age. Also, the application can’t just be about those who are officially titled “elders.” As I said, there are many other kinds of leaders, even in the church. Peter’s “likewise” reminds us he’s just extending to everyone what he’s already said to the elders. Don’t make it about you. Thus my translation: “Likewise, you newer ones, defer to designated leaders....”

The next phrase, I think, fits with this. “...and everyone to each other.” Peter has used this idea of submission all the way through his letter. It’s a beautiful word because it’s a word that points to Jesus on the cross.

In all of your relationships, whether you are the one with the formal authority or not, what looks most like Jesus is releasing control. Let’s apply that one also to life in the church today. Our church elders and pastors are wrestling intently right now with the right timing to reopen our worship services to in-person worship. It’s an agonizingly hard, decision. Six elders, four pastors, and two elders-elect wrestled with it over Zoom for an hour this past Tuesday. We’re learning amongst ourselves the principle of mutual submission. And we know that some of you think reopening should happen last month and others don’t think we should until there’s a vaccine.

We are balancing the need for community versus the danger of spreading the virus to vulnerable people. We’re all having to learn to release control. If you think this is a “no brainer,” you’re not thinking like Peter does about leadership.

*Third, thinking low.* All of this brings Peter to another critical theme, which he mentions three times in verses 5-7: humility. You need humility before others, and you’ll only find it when you embrace your humility before God.

The verb translated “clothe yourselves” comes from a root word meaning “knot.” In ancient times, long, flowing robes indicated status and ease. But if you’re a servant, or anyone who needs to do physical labor, or if you need to run, you have to tie up your robe so you can move better. This is an active verb, in other words. Humility doesn’t come naturally – you have to choose to wrap it around you.

The word for “humility” is “lowliness of *mind*” – it’s how you think. As Paul says, it’s considering others better than yourselves. It’s reversing the natural tendency to self-importance. Why should you do that? At this point Peter could have argued as Paul does in Philippians 2, that it’s because Jesus humbled himself to the point of death. Instead, he makes a different, equally powerful argument, based on Proverbs 3:34: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”

Do you want God as your enemy or your friend? If you want him on your side, you humble yourself “under God’s mighty hand” and trust him to raise you up.

Biblically speaking, humility is a mental and spiritual game of limbo. It’s seeing how low you can go. You don’t compare yourself to others; you compare yourself to God. When you do, you find it easier to wrap yourself in humility.

This spiritual game of limbo is exactly what the church needs as we continue the conversation over racism in America. I know for some of you it’s unsettling, and I’ve heard things like, “I won’t apologize for being white,” or, “I’m not racist and shouldn’t be blamed for the sins of slave traders,” or, “Why don’t you talk about black-on-black crime?” or “There’s no excuse for these protesters breaking the law” and so on.

There may be some validity to any or all of those points, but they are rarely expressed with humility. They instead convey, “I’m better than minorities or protesters or my own ancestors.” Humility is a critical virtue if we in the church are going to attract people to Jesus during very difficult conversations. Humility requires listening and learning and submitting and waiting and persevering – “thinking low” about myself rather than judging others is something the world will never understand.

*Finally, trusting God.* It’s exhausting, isn’t it? It’s hard to persevere in caring for others more than for myself, in releasing control to elders or government leaders, in thinking low. It’s so hard. What if they take advantage? What if I wait and still nothing changes? What if those in charge make decisions that I think are terrible?

Peter ends the section with one more lesson for life in the church: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” The word “anxiety” refers to a divided heart. You know you need to be more humble, but everything inside you screams for more control. Take all those inside “distractions” and throw them on Jesus. Why? Because he cares. This is another rich word, meaning that he is paying attention.

The Amplified Bible uses too many words, like I do most of the time, but it really captures the richness of this beautiful verse. “...casting all your cares [all your anxieties, all your worries, and all your concerns, once and for all] on Him, for He cares about you [with deepest affection, and watches over you very carefully].

This is a word for our moment. There are so many reasons right now to be anxious and angry and hateful. Nobody really knows what’s going to happen with our health or the economy or school this fall or church or weddings or the election or race relations or anything else. When we don’t know, we need to be the church, thinking and speaking and acting differently those who ask, “How can I get everyone to do it my way?” Our questions are, “How can I care better?” “Where do I need to let go of control?” “What does humility look like?” And, most importantly, “Do I trust the Chief Shepherd to watch and care and guide?” Amen.