

## The role of the elder in a church

Based on 1 Peter 5:1-4

Along with two parallel readings of Scripture:

**Jeremiah 23:1-6**

**Acts 20:17-37**

### Introduction to the idea of elders

No doubt you have long-serving elders in this church. One elder has served this church since the early 1980s, another since 1988. That's well over 30 years.

No doubt, also, you have newly-serving elders. Men elected just in 2017.

And then, in the near future, after the settlement of your pastor, you may well look to a further election of elders ...

All this goes to the point that the leadership we enjoy in this congregation is not restricted to the current generation of elders, nor is eldership exercised by the dominant or the outspoken ... but by a group of qualified prayerful men, submitting to King Jesus as the chief shepherd, sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit:

- the longest serving elder reminds us of those who led this congregation in the past ... and who, together with men who have now passed from this earthly life made good and healthy decisions that we work with even today;
- the newest elected elder reminds us that they join with the others to speak into how to be best reformed church of the 2020s Australia, rather than the 1900s.

So, we're fully aware that decisions we make today regarding choosing elders affects future generations of this church as well as our own. Get this wrong ... and we affect future generations of this church because we don't have an expiry date on them ... there's no USE BY date on an elder ... better than long-life milk.

Let's look at the Bible's teaching on the subject to answer the question:

### **What's the role of an elder in the church? What's he supposed to be doing?**

Because, to the casual observer of church – what does he/she think?

- oh, they're the guys who distribute the bread and wine during the Lords' Supper; OR
- are they the ones who welcome us at the door?

Read 1 Peter 5:1-4 again

Four answers ... but we must put them together, and not isolate them.

### **1. Elders work as a team (vs. 1)**

We're reading the fifth chapter of Peter's first letter to the churches. At this point, Peter's letter is addressed to the elders. We can see how he's written the letter, he addresses different groups within the congregation:

- true, at the start he addresses everyone: all the saints in the churches (1:1), but then
- citizens of society (2:13),
- slaves in the congregations (2:18),
- wives (3:1),
- husbands (3:7),
- those who are suffering (4:12), and HERE
- elders of the church (5:1).

This is Peter, the apostle of Christ, one of the specially chosen 11, a friend of Jesus, eye-witness to magnificently glorious events that only three disciples saw, witness to the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord ... yet we notice how he calls himself a “fellow elder”: though his credentials are very impressive, he does not place himself above but NEXT to the elders of the church.

They’re not fellow-witnesses to what Peter saw, but they’re “fellow-elders” ... in terms of church governance: not above the others, but one of a team.

This is the New Testament practice: eg look up **Acts 14:21-23**

The picture is that in every church, the original church planters (apostles) left behind not one pastor in charge ... not one-man-band ... not a managing director/CEO ... but a team of elders. Given what they were appointed to do (read context for this from vs. 22) – strengthen the new believers, encourage them to stay true to the gospel, prepare them to be strong in suffering ... given that:

- unthinkable that one individual acting alone ... so flawed in himself ... could do it ... and, with solo ministry, the situation so open to abuse ... to skewed thinking and poor decision-making.

When you DO call a pastor ... he will join a team of decision-makers.

## **2. Elders do what good shepherds do (vs 2)**

The charge given is to be shepherds of the flock that God has placed under their care.

Shepherding is a common thread in today’s three Scripture readings, Consider:

- In Jeremiah 23, we should ask WHO are the “shepherds” referred to hear copping a blast from the prophet? It’s a general description of all the church leaders of his day – perhaps both church and even civic leaders ... fair to include: not only their kings, but all leaders of Judah – prophets, priests, elders of Judah
  - it’s pointed out how derelict they were in their expected duty as shepherds;
  - therefore, expect to be replaced by the perfect work of God himself as the true shepherd.
- Acts 20 – Ephesian Session meeting, noting especially vs 28

In fact, overall, there are at least 20 times in the Bible where God’s leaders = shepherds

Question to explore is: What’s so apt about this description?

We think what a good shepherd does, then make the transition immediately to leadership in the church:

- lead sheep to where good pasture is for the best feed;
- protect sheep from the danger of predators;
- bring wandering sheep back home.

### **a) Lead sheep to where good pasture is for the best feed**

Remember, after the resurrection, this is exactly what Jesus said to Peter? Read **John 21:17**.

How do elders lead us to the best feed? The best spiritual food is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus said; I am the Bread of Life, he who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”

So, the work of the elder as shepherd is to lead people to the gospel= the good news of what he has done for us. i.e. Their job is to steer the congregation towards the gospel.

### **b) protect sheep from the danger of predators**

i.e. to warn about anyone or anything or any teaching that leads the congregation away from the gospel and the purity of gospel teaching and the life-giving value of the gospel

- which is the value of that other word for elder: “overseer” ... watching over ...

c) bring wandering sheep back home, either:

- those drifting from covenant faith but still found *somewhere* within the church'
- but there are others whose drift is more decided and have wandered away from the church altogether.

As Jude reminds us all: "be merciful to those who doubt, snatch others from the fire and save them, to others show mercy mixed with fear ..."

### 3. Attitude matters (vs. 2/3)

What is striking ... after calling his fellow elders shepherds, he doesn't go to job description ... to role filling.

Yes, he uses words to describe their function, but he doesn't give a list of functions:

Words used: elders, shepherds, overseers ... but after that, what follows is attitude – i.e. elders, the way you carry out your function is everything:

3 pairs of contrast:

not this ...	but this ...
by feeling of compulsion, reluctantly	willingly, spontaneously wanting to please God; i.e. as toward God
greedy as to what I might get	eager to serve ... what I might give; i.e. there is satisfaction to be found in serving
dominating over them; abuse of power	being examples, like Paul speaks to young Timothy about being an example in speech, life, love, faith and purity

Of course, we can apply this principle to all other Christian service, not just the elder.

### 4. Elders themselves are men under authority (vs. 4)

Here, with the introduction of the title for Jesus: Chief Shepherd, it becomes clear: elders come under the authority of another ... elders serve as shepherds while obeying the chief shepherd.

Which makes sense of what's said in vs. 3 about the people being "entrusted to your care". So the sense is ... dear elder, you're answerable to the Chief Shepherd for how you've cared for the flock and remember ... He will come back for them ... i.e. the shepherds will have to give account for their shepherding.

Pastors and elders should never forget that the church belongs to King Jesus. As they love and serve the church they do so on behalf of Jesus and until Jesus returns

These four principles in understanding the role of the elder in a church:

- elders work as a team
- elders do what good shepherds do
- attitude matters
- elders themselves are men under authority

### Take home lessons:

a) It's possible that I've scared all qualified men from serving ... ever?

- yes, it's serious
- and it's a call to servanthood with high responsibility

Not my intention ... I hope, after this, when it's time ... some faithful, qualified men will be left standing.

But not unrealistic ... not unattainable ... if God has given you gifted of leadership, then of course, you'll be equipped to do the job.

But further, consider who it is you're serving? You serve Jesus Christ and what sort of "boss" is he?

- Is he not fair in what he expects, not unreasonable?
- Is he not sympathetic, understanding of your frame and personal limitations?
- Is he not patient while you think it through and generous toward you in grace, even with forgiveness of past failure?

Yes, leadership is demanding, but whatever you give up ... and however hard it is to serve, reward in the end ... the Chief Shepherd, ready and willing to give you the crown of glory.

b) Pray for those who do lead ... for the leadership we have now:

- for wisdom, for energy, for patience, for long-sightedness

To some extent, the strength of the leadership is the strength of the church. As our Australian society slides further and further into secularism, and Christianity because moves from being marginalised to persecuted, we're in need all the more of strong and faithful leadership in our churches. One of Peter's messages in his letters is that in the fires of trial purity of shepherd leadership is all the more critical.

We can all pray. C H Spurgeon: "We cannot all be leaders, but we can all be pleaders".

c) Finally, many of these marks of a good shepherd should be in us all, esp the attitudes:

As Christians, much we looked at under "attitude" is fully transferable:

3 pairs of contrast:

<b>not this ...</b>	<b>but this ...</b>
by feeling of compulsion, reluctantly	willingly, spontaneously wanting to please God; i.e. as toward God
greedy as to what I might get	eager to serve ... what I might give; i.e. there is satisfaction to be found in serving
dominating over them; abuse of power	being examples, like Paul speaks to young Timothy about being an example in speech, life, love, faith and purity

Much of this is none else but a call to Christian living.