

1 Peter 5:1-5
Hope in the storm

An Apostolic Word to Church Leaders



I was looking through a picture book of the old west. It was called “The Townsmen”. It was full of pictures of western towns and villages and the people in them – very interesting. There were many pictures where everyone in town turned up to have their picture taken. One of the most interesting things I noticed about those pictures of all those townspeople is that I could not find one person that looked more than maybe 40. I studied those grainy old pictures. I took a magnifying glass to them. There was no grey hair on anyone! I thought that was very strange. And then I began to think about how hard life was for those people. Their lives were filled with back-breaking labor, with risk-taking, and with poor nutrition, and really bad hygiene. There was also rampant abuse of alcohol. Well, using my amazing powers of observation and deduction, I am thinking that that is a perfect formula for a short life! I’m thinking that there were few people, percentage-wise, in that day and in those places that lived much past their 40s or 50s. If there were people with grey hair, they uniformly did not show up for those town pictures!



The whole world has been a treacherous place, fraught with obvious and hidden dangers! It has been a very tough place to grow up and stay alive on into old age. What we see now in our day and age and place, where old people are as common as young people, is in no way representative of the ages past! I read that the common person in the Roman empire lived to an average age of 35! Of course that number was made much lower by the fact that the infant mortality rate has been so terribly high throughout human history. Plus people died like flies from disease. They had no concept of bacteria, of cleanliness, of proper nutrition, of clean drinking water. Plus there was the conscription of a high percentage of young males as fodder for the perpetual wars where, of course, a high percentage of them died young. And there was the terrible justice systems the world over that invoked unbearable floggings and often the death penalty for even the slightest of offenses! So, aside from the the rich, not many poor lived to a ripe old age. Having said that, I think that the lifespans of the people that lived in Judea were substantially longer. Those that followed the rituals of the Mosaic Law were cleaner, and their meals and meal preparation was a better process than most places in the world.

Most people have a wrong impression about the title of “elder”. They think that the title means that the leaders of the early church were old. The truth is that they generally were *not* old. The disciple of Jesus themselves were likely in their 20s, some of them in their early to mid-twenties when they were called by Jesus to come and follow Him. Of course, over the years, they aged as we all do. When I first became a full-time pastor and elder in a church, in Mondovi, Wisconsin, I was 25. When I first became the pastor/elder of this church I was 36. Many of the elders I was serving with here were my age or a few years younger. But in the early church, people had to grow up fast. We can safely assume that if they had the right temperament and had the right mind-set of single-minded devotion to Christ and to serving Christ in His church, that there were many 20-somethings that were appointed to eldership in the many fledgling churches that were springing up in Europe and Asia in those days. If you remember, Paul’s prodigy, Timothy, was one of them. Paul admonishes him, “*let no one despise (or disrespect) your youth*”. In other words, Timothy fit the qualifications of an elder, without being old. So we can safely assume that in the early church this was a title, not a description of an age bracket. The title carried with it a place of honor, of respect. These men were chosen to lead the church together because by their conduct they had proven themselves to be devoted Christ-followers. These were men that had shown a special interest to learn everything they could about Jesus, who had demonstrated a special sensitivity to the Holy Spirit within, and who had shown the blessed qualities of the fruits of the Spirit. They also had to be solid men, where even in their enthusiasm for Jesus, they were not given to pursuing rumors or trends as many people are prone to do. They had to have demonstrated that they could stand strong on the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, and not every presume that they had the power to change ANY of it! Yet, it is not that they could never change – that they were rigid with no ability for flexibility at all. But any nuance of change was to be a very careful and measured thing – especially given the importance of the subject matter!



*My father was an elder in the church I grew up in. I remember, even as a young child, his stanch and passionate defense of the church’s doctrinal positions stands out in my mind! I was in awe of how he knew and handled the scriptures skillfully to counter others who wanted to add or subtract from the church’s position. I wanted to be like that! But my father was a very serious Christ-follower. His all-out passion for Christ provided a surety for our lives – a solid basis for living lives that centered around the leadership of Jesus! I’m not saying I always followed his lead, but generally I did. His conduct in the church also was exemplary for the other families in the church to observe. Because they knew my dad, his presence on the board meant that the church leadership was a power structure they could trust! That gave a great many people in the church, confidence!

In vs. 1, Peter calls himself an elder, identifying himself with the elders of the various churches that his letter would reach. But Peter was not just an elder. He was an apostle, so he also adds his apostleship to his chosen title of elder. He was an eyewitness of Jesus. He had the privilege of seeing and listening to Jesus from a front row seat. He saw how Jesus was relentlessly persecuted by the religious authorities who felt threatened by the popularity of Jesus. He was there in the boat when Jesus calmed the storm with a word. At another time there was another storm on the Sea of Galilee and he was with the other 11 disciples when they saw Jesus walking on the water. Peter tried to duplicate Jesus' feat and almost succeeded. He saw Jesus heal the blind, the lame, the paralyzed, the diseased! He saw Him multiply bread, and raise the dead!



AND, he witnessed the suffering of Jesus upon the cross as he took upon Himself the sins of all His followers. It was probably from a distance, as the disciples knew they were being hunted by the authorities. But there is no way they didn't find an observation post where they could watch from afar and grieve! The apostles of the early church were eyewitness of Jesus. Paul, too, was an apostle because it was known by the apostles that he was an eyewitness to Jesus when Jesus appeared to Paul in a most powerful way on the road to Damascus. That encounter evidently qualified Paul for apostleship. The church required that kind of powerful leadership in its early years to guide and protect it. But it was honest leadership from men devoted to Jesus! When the mantle of "apostleship" has been claimed since that first generation of the church, it has usually been misused, and its wearers have done much damage to the purposes of God as they looked to their own interests instead.

These days I hear of people taking on the mantle of apostleship and I think it is a very presumptuous thing to do. Were they at the cross? Could they write scripture? Can they heal? They might say "yes" to that last, and I would say "I'm really skeptical"! My warning bells go off when I hear of such a thing. At any rate, the title is being assumed falsely, to my way of thinking, and immediately disqualifies such a person as someone I should listen to. At the very least I would proceed with great caution! People who accept or assume the power that such a title would bring are almost inevitably people enamored of power. People who love power are people I cannot trust. They will misuse it if given the chance! If power is accepted, it should be accepted with genuine reluctance. I like reluctant leaders – people who feel unqualified. God can possess such a person and use them powerfully. But in a person full of themselves there is no room left for God! Instead of godly leadership you get showmanship or despotism or cultic leadership! I truly despise people that run on pride, and I am in good company because God obviously hates pride too!

5:2,3 - “Be shepherd of God’s flock - care,.. serving,.. willing,.. eager,.. examples!” When I said earlier that a leader should be reluctant, I did not mean reluctance in the sense of thinking the mantle of leadership would be a pain, a bother, an obstacle to our own plans. No,.. the person that thinks it is a bother must NOT in that capacity! What I was referring to was someone who does not think themselves *worthy* of a position of leadership in the church! Yet when called, is willing and honored to accept such a place of service to Christ and is committed to fulfilling their leadership role with diligence and perseverance.

[1 Tim. 3:1-11]

The term Elder always refers to a male in the Old and/or New Testament, but there are certainly female leaders in the church. They are just not “elder/overseers”, but they do lead in their area of responsibility. Female leaders are crucial to the health of the church and the carrying out of its mission. The church would be greatly weakened without good and godly female leadership! So all of the principles here apply to female leaders also. Men and women leaders should “shepherd” that part of the church that they are in charge of, with care, with humility, with a true and undivided desire for service to Christ! Every organization of people require leadership. But good leadership is an absolute necessity in the church. Church leaders are to have the same attitude as Christ. They are to be obvious lovers of God. They should be eager to learn and willing to teach! People in the church should be able to look at a church leader and say, *“I want to be like them, because they speak with grace, and they love people, and they know and love Jesus and revere His word!”* Church leaders lead best simply by acting like their Supreme Leader Jesus – by being a good example of what it looks like when someone is following Jesus. They don’t **“Lord it over”** anyone because their leader, Jesus, has obligated them to consider others as better than themselves. But they also take their responsibility as a church leader and overseer as a solemn duty to make decisions, even hard ones, to confront evil and error in the church, to represent the whole body and not just themselves, to promote and preserve unity in the church, to be just and equitable in their judgments showing favoritism to no one but only upon what can be discerned as the truth! Leadership can be a lonely place to be when things are in upheaval - when it gets really hard to lead – really burdensome – when you lose your peace and then you lose a lot of sleep! Things can get really complicated. You feel like you are trying to do the right thing to help the church get through it, but it is like trying to swim with a heavy weight tied to your belt! I’m telling you, you should never desire church leadership. But you should also never shrink from it if called upon. It is so worth it!



Church leaders who lead well, who love people and are always led by the Holy Spirit to promote not only peace, but *harmony* in the church body. This is a great blessing to a local church body! They will lead the people of their local church into the loving arms of the “*Chief Shepherd*”! And they will teach them to bring others into the arms of Jesus! The reward for such a leader is a crown – a “*crown of glory*” – an eternal mantle of honor in heaven!



Then Peter goes to the young men – evidently the *really* young men - and asks them to show the proper respect that is due to the leaders of the church who may be older than they are. If heaven respects and honors good church leaders, then everyone in the church should show them respect, recognize their ongoing contributions and value to the Kingdom of God! When leadership is disrespected, factions can occur. This happens all the time in churches when someone disagrees with an elder board decision! They start talking, and the more they talk and the more people they talk to, the more their ego is invested, and the more important their cause appears to be to them! But usually that is pride-based movement. It is rarely a Holy Spirit led movement and the fruit of the Spirit certainly disappears somewhere around the time the shouting and finger-pointing begins! So, for young men, Peter is reminding them that the trick is to remain humble, supportive of the existing leadership.

There is an exception clause, of course. If that leadership proves to be egotistical, totally incompetent, in egregious error, or involve in some form of immorality - theft, a pattern of lying, sexual sin, verbal or physical abuse - then they *should be* opposed! That is extreme, but it does happen more than we care to imagine. But generally Peter’s instructions stand. We all are to follow Jesus in always endeavoring to do the right thing, *always* – to *not* be overly opinionated, or uncompromising in the things that don’t really matter, or hot-headed, headstrong, impulsive. Peter’s great desire is to see young people let the Spirit of God help them exercise self-discipline on their emotions and reactions that they might conform to the steady and wise character of Jesus. If a young person will do this, their turn to serve Christ in a leadership role will surely come – and probably sooner than later! Pray for your church leaders – both men and women. May your heartfelt prayers be a continual offering to God on His heavenly alter.