

The Identity and the Role of Church Elders: An Exegesis of 1 Peter 5:1–5

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Abstract

This study explores the instructions given to the πρεσβύτεροι (elders) in the church through an exegetical analysis of 1 Peter 5:1-5. The passage offers vital insights into the nature, function, and responsibilities of elders within the Christian community. Through an exegesis of the text, the study investigates the apostolic exhortation directed to church leaders, emphasizing their calling to shepherd the flock with humility, vigilance, and Christ-like servant leadership. The instructions are given to the elders, exploring who the elders are and what the author says about their role. This study begins with an exploration of the entire conceptual background of elders before further focusing on the specific references to the term in verses 1 and 5 of the passage. This deep exegesis will examine the instructions given to the elders about the roles they have been entrusted with. Additionally, the study compares the Petrine leadership model with other New Testament teachings on pastoral oversight, highlighting continuity and distinct emphases. It also addresses common challenges in pastoral leadership today, including the misuse of power, the need for accountability, and the provision of holistic care to the congregation. Ultimately, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on the role of elders in the church, offering practical guidance for contemporary Christian ministry.

Keywords: Church Elders, Chief Shepherd, Pastoral Ministry, Pastoral Leadership

Introduction

In an era where Christian leaders often resemble corporate CEOs, the church would do well to revisit the entire apostolic exhortation to the elders (πρεσβύτεροι) in Peter's first epistle. Being able to listen afresh to these words further helps in recovering a biblical vision of leadership, which, though expressed differently across generations, retains an unchanging essence. This article aims first to examine the whole identity of the πρεσβύτεροι (elders) mentioned in 1



Peter 5:1-5, further exploring the term's background and contextual usage. It also considers how the young in position may illuminate the intended meaning of the term in this context.

The New Testament contains several references to the elders, including 1 Timothy 5:1-2 and Titus 1:5. Some are also found in post-apostolic writings, such as the letters to the Philippians and Ignatius. Kirk further records that the office of the elder originated from the apostolic delegation and later developed throughout the whole episcopate. The office of an elder carries a remarkable resemblance to that of an overseer.¹

The study also ventures into further exploring the role and function of the πρεσβύτεροι, particularly the shepherding of the flock. The entire imagery of shepherding the flock is deeply rooted in the biblical tradition, providing a framework for understanding the pastoral responsibilities that elders have.² The discussion here also narrows down to examine the practical directives in 1 Peter 5:2-3, which shed light on how the elders are called to lead, not under compulsion, but willingly and eagerly, as they provide an example to the flock.³ Verse 5 concludes by examining the conduct that is expected from both the elders and the younger members of the community.

Methodology

The study looks forward to employing historical-critical and literary methodologies, which will further uncover the socio-historical context of Peter's instructions and examine their theological significance for church leadership. Particular attention is then given to the themes of authority and humility, examining the role of suffering in the entire leadership and the eschatological hope promised to the faithful elders.

Literature Review

Defining a Church Elder

The word πρεσβύτεροι in 1 Peter 5:1 and verse 5 may either refer to those who are older or to “elders” serving as community leaders. In this latter aspect, πρεσβύτεροι refers to those who, having attained seniority, contribute to shaping communal decisions and, therefore, direct the community's affairs in a more informed manner. In the third century BCE, the Septuagint employed the term to refer to the leaders of ancient Israel (Exod 24:1). Examining 1

¹ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)* (Baker Academic, 2005), 302.

² Kenneth E. Kirk, *The Apostolic Ministry: Essays on the History and the Doctrine of Episcopacy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946), 8–9.

³ J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (Zondervan Academic, 2020), 279.



Maccabees 14:20 reveals that it is about religious leaders and is then used in a similar sense to the New Testament. The Qumran mebaqqer may have also influenced early Christian models of leadership.⁴ The influence encompasses communal oversight, moral purity, and a structured community life.

The word πρεσβύτεροι further refers to individuals who are older, or more formally, to “elders” functioning as recognized community leaders, that is, those in their seniority who help shape the decisions made in a community and handle various affairs taking place. In the Maccabean era (1 Macc 14:20) and also regarding the Jewish religious leaders in Mark 15:1, some scholars have suggested that the Qumran Mebaqqer may serve as the background for the Christian elders.⁵ This is due to the organization that existed among them and within the entire organization, which in turn led to similar organizations in the early church. In the Jewish synagogue, eldership was not an exclusive thing. Elders were also seen to be functioning as community authorities. This suggests that the Christian concept of eldership largely emerged from a synthesis of both Jewish and Greco-Roman models.⁶

Goppelt viewed the Christian elders as those holding an office inherited from the synagogue. Kirk adds to the point that the office further developed through the apostolic delegation and ultimately contributed to the growth of the episcopate in the early church. This given trajectory, therefore, depicts that the office of eldership evolved from Jewish and apostolic roots into a more structured form of oversight in the Christian communities. The concept of eldership was not exclusive to Jewish traditions. In the Hellenistic world, the elders were also seen serving as civic and communal authorities, which then reinforces the broader understanding of leadership roles. The early Christian *episkopos* (overseer) emerged within this framework, which represents a fusion between the Jewish synagogal governance, apostolic authority, and the Greco-Roman structures. Therefore, the office of the elder can be seen and understood as that of a Bishop, a spiritual overseer who is concerned with teaching and guiding with integrity in the community.⁷

Campbell further records that Christian eldership developed from both the Jewish and the Greco-Roman models. He looks at them as the senior men of the community who oversaw

⁴ Daniel C. Arichea and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the First Letter from Peter*, Helps for Translators (New York: United Bible Societies, 1980), 163.

⁵ R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders : Seniority within Earliest Christianity* (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1994), 248.

⁶ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 279.

⁷ John H. Elliott, *1 Peter* (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 2011), 813.



leading the families in the proper direction. This is to say that, in this sense, the elders were responsible for making decisions and guiding the church in a proper direction. While the officeholders may have also been included among the elders, the term signifies that respect and influence within the Christian community extended beyond formal roles.⁸ The contextual understanding of the word πρεσβύτεροι is best understood in the scripture with its contextual sense of being called to give guidance.

Identifying the Elders in 1 Peter 5:1

The πρεσβύτεροι depicted in 1 Peter 5:1 are understood to be the community leaders rather than people who are chronologically older in age.⁹ Although the elders were often older in years, this is an excellent case of bringing a sense of universality. As the authority of both Jewish and Hellenistic elders did not depend on age, it is clear that Christian elders were not only advanced in age but also mature in faith.

In verse 1, Peter refers to himself as a συμπρεσβύτερος “fellow elder.” It is a term that is otherwise unattested in ancient literature. Jobes further suggests that the definite article, which is combined with the compound word “συμ-”...may be understood as a possessive, “Your fellow.” Daniel J. Harrington notes that this term is not found anywhere in biblical or Greco-Roman literature to date. This given word is not immediately apparent. Still, it does link in a general way the discussion about the problems Christians face, from extra social pressure to the need for sound internal organization if the community is to survive those onslaughts. It is thus right to say that his description in 5:1 links his identity as an elder with his witnessing of Christ’s suffering and the whole sharing of the glory that is yet to be revealed. Peter does not mention the glory that was revealed, which shows his exceptional experience with Jesus. Still, he alludes to “the glory that is going to be revealed,” which is the glory shared among all believers, and this implies and demonstrates His humility throughout His entire ministry. Even if this interpretation is exaggerated, it remains clear that He indicates his solidarity with those whom He exhorts, and therefore affirms that their ministry is an extension of His own. The self-description of Peter in 1 Peter 5:1, framed by a Granville-sharp construction, associates his given identity as an elder with his role as a witness to Christ’s sufferings and a participant in the glory yet to be revealed.

⁸ Campbell, *The Elders*, 65.

⁹ Duane F. Watson, *First and Second Peter (Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament)*, 2012, 116.



The Role of the Elders

Shepherding the Flock of Jesus

The instructions were initially given to the elders in 1 Peter 5:2 to employ the shepherding imagery, ποιμάνετε τὸ ἐν ὑμῖν ποίμνιον τοῦ θεοῦ “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you.”¹⁰ The content of Peter’s exhortation is that the elders should shepherd the flock. The term “shepherd” (ποιμάνετε) is an aorist active imperative, the same as what Jesus used when he said to Peter in John 21:16. The metaphor of shepherd derives from Old Testament images of God as the shepherd of His sheep, the Israelites, and the leaders as shepherds. The leader-as-shepherd metaphor fully underlies the Gospel tradition of Jesus’ role in gathering God’s people. The elders are called to care for a portion of the larger flock of God in their entire care.

The elders are further urged to devote themselves to τὸ ἐν ὑμῖν ποίμνιον τοῦ θεοῦ, “the flock of God among you.”¹¹ The noun ποίμνιον is seen as a singular term, depicting the unity of the entire Christian church. It is in its diminutive form. The use here is to express endearment fully. The flock is described as God’s; therefore, this flock does not belong to the elders but to God as His peculiar property.¹²

The term τοῦ θεοῦ is a genitive of possession; the elders are deeply reminded that the people gathered in the name of Christ belong to God. The church needs to be fully understood as that which God wholly owns; hence, one should not claim ownership, even if they are the person who has founded a given congregation. Peter recalls the charge he was given in John 21:15-17, where he was commanded to feed the sheep. Peter’s use of this word suggests that the best way a pastor can express their entire love for the church they are leading is by shepherding it.¹³

Daniel records that the word ποιμάνετε used here conveys a great sense of compassionate care. Ngewa adds that “Peter’s use of the word ποιμάνετε brings into mind what Jesus told him during the restoration moments following his denial of Jesus.”¹⁴ This is to say that a shepherd never takes any break from checking the needs of the flock. It is an activity that consumes time and energy; therefore, Peter highlights some specific areas that the elders

¹⁰ D. Edmond Hiebert, “Counsel for Christ’s Under- Shepherds: An Exposition of 1 Peter 5:1-4,” *Dallas Theological Seminary*, 1982, 334.

¹¹ Campbell, *The Elders*, 65.

¹² ¹² Michaels, *1 Peter*, 283.

¹³ Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, 1958, 227.

¹⁴ Samuel M Ngewa, *The First Epistle of Peter: A Short Commentary* (Nairobi, Kenya, n.d.), 74.



need to watch properly.¹⁵ Consequently, it can be concluded that the whole community belongs to God but is entrusted to the care of the elders. The shepherding metaphor is seen as a foundational means by which the biblical authors convey the meaning of leadership.¹⁶ In the ancient Palestinian context, shepherding was a demanding task; it involved the entire process of finding safe resting and caring places, as well as the ability to keep the flock safe and secure. With Laniak, he identifies two major traditions underlying the entire shepherding. The first one is the Exodus wilderness complex, where YHWH is the supreme shepherd, and Moses works as the undershepherd. The second one is the Davidic tradition, where the king is portrayed as a shepherd over the entire Israel. In all these traditions, Israel is understood as God's flock and God Himself is the shepherd, with human rulers serving under His authority. The Old Testament tradition portrays Israel as the entire flock of God, a concept that continues into the synoptic Gospels.¹⁷

Examining the early church, the image of God's people as the flock is seen to have remained one of the enduring comparisons. John records that Jesus is the good shepherd (John 10), who then entrusts Peter with the mandate to go and shepherd the flock. The charge given to the elders to shepherd the flock in the epistles echoes both Old Testament prophetic critique and New Testament fulfillment.

Grammatical Considerations

The imperative ποιμάνετε is in the aorist tense. It calls for a fresh initiative rather than a continuation of the prior action that had been given. The object of the verb here is clear as it denotes: τὸ ἐν ὑμῖν ποίμνιον τοῦ θεοῦ “the flock of God that is among you.” The genitive τοῦ θεοῦ broadly underscores that the flock entirely belongs to God, not the elders who are tasked with the care. The phrase ἐν ὑμῖν (among you) qualifies the presence of the flock. This usage is distributive, alluding that the flock is spread throughout the various communities where the elders have been serving. With this understanding, Elliot records that the translation “in your charge” is not appropriate.”¹⁸ The understanding here becomes very clear that, regardless of the grammatical classification, the sense is that the elders are responsible for the portion of God's flock in their immediate context.

¹⁵ Ngewa, 74.

¹⁶ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 813.

¹⁷ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 279.

¹⁸ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 815.



In this verse, the direct object is τὸ ποίμνιον, “the flock,” with the words ἐν ὑμῖν, “in you” or “among you,” which alludes to the fact that the leaders are not far away from the flock they are shepherding but instead closer to the flock. Hibert further records that this given word is thus placed attributively between the title and the number, which then points to the whole character of the flock in the presence of the shepherds.¹⁹ They should not be absentee Lords but be shepherds who are actively working with the flock around them. The participle ἐπισκοποῦντες is to be broadly construed either as an adverbial participle of attendant circumstance, which indicates the whole activity that accompanies and also defines the shepherding, or as an adverbial participle of means, also indicating how such shepherding should be able to occur.²⁰

This illustrates the need for the flock to be adequately cared for. The participle, ἐπισκοποῦντες, is present in the majority of Greek manuscripts and all the early versions, but some essential manuscripts omit it.²¹ This writer accepts it as original. It is especially appropriate in introducing what follows and is entirely in keeping with Peter’s fondness for the participles. This participle ἐπισκοποῦντες expands on how the elders are to carry out their entire assignment of shepherding the flock. Hibert further adds that the noun is commonly rendered “Bishop” or “overseer.”²² This is to illustrate that there was no difference between the elders and the bishops when this letter was being developed. It is, therefore, seen that the New Testament uses these words interchangeably of the same men (Titus 1:5-7). The word “elder” further conveys the concept of being mature, which qualifies an individual for an office that involves spiritual oversight.

The phrase to care for “the flock of God among you” would mean that the shepherd should care for the flock to the best, or point to the idea of looking at the flock that is among them. Peter’s charge and encouragement to the elders is not a general view but is specific to local congregations. With Peter, the elders were to be present with the flock, ensuring they were actively involved with the flock.

¹⁹ Hiebert, “Counsel for Christ’s Under-Shepherds: An Exposition of 1 Peter 5:1-4,” 334.

²⁰ Kenneth E. Kirk, *The Apostolic Ministry: Essays on the History and the Doctrine of Episcopacy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946), 8–9

²¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 2006), 624.

²² Michaels, *1 Peter*, 279.



Jesus as the Chief Shepherd

In 1 Peter 2:25, Jesus is described as “the shepherd and the overseer of your souls.” Jesus is, therefore, presented in 5:4 as the model for the elders who are leading. The suffering and humility serve as a paradigm for their leadership. The elders are called to shepherd the flock in close imitation of Christ, who essentially exemplifies the very role they are to fulfill. In the same way, the elders are called to be examples to the flock, so Christ should be their supreme example.²³ Jesus is depicted and seen as the good shepherd as well (John 10:11–14)

In the verse, τοῦ ἀρχιποίμενος is the genitive subject of the participle. Daniel C. Arichea suggests that ἀρχιποίμενος should not be translated as “the chief who acts like a shepherd” or “the shepherd who is a chief,” but rather as “the chief shepherd,” which refers to the shepherd who is over all other shepherds or the shepherd whom other shepherds should obey. Therefore, the chief shepherd may be understood in some instances as “he who is the shepherd over all other shepherds.”²⁴ It is a term that appears only in the New Testament here (hapax legomenon). The word ἀρχιποίμενος portrays Christ as the chief shepherd, overseeing the shepherds in the church and being further responsible for the care of the sheep in his charge. The word “chief shepherd” also highlights and underscores the relationship between the elders and Christ, as they are both shepherds, and a task is given to them. However, the elders should always listen to what the Chief Shepherd is saying or directing them to do. Christ is the chief shepherd, overseeing the entire flock.²⁵ All the elders are under a shepherd, where their work will be evaluated and rewarded by God. This understanding then makes it clear that there is a call for responsibility in the role and the duty assigned to older people. Knowing that there is accountability for the work given, it can be said that there is an excellent sense of the elders focusing their lives and duties on faithfulness in all that they do.²⁶ The leaders are, therefore, called to ensure that Jesus becomes their source of inspiration and also the person whom they need to emulate in their leadership positions.

Exercising Oversight

An essential component of the shepherd’s role in antiquity was overseeing every aspect of the flock’s well-being properly. This then gives Peter the whole call to exhort the elders. The

²³ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 813.

²⁴ Campbell, *The Elders*, 65

²⁵ R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders : Seniority within Earliest Christianity* (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1994), 248.

²⁶ Jobes, *1 Peter (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)*, 302.



terms “elders,” “flock,” and “shepherd” appear in Acts 20:17-35, suggesting an entire parallel stage in the development of early Christian ecclesiology.²⁷ In this framework, elders (πρεσβύτεροι) function as overseers (ἐπίσκοποι) without occupying distinct hierarchical offices. It is, therefore, proper to note that in 1 Peter 5:2, ἐπισκοποῦντες had not yet acquired the technical status of a formal episcopal office. Thus, this term clearly articulates how the elders are called to fulfill their role as shepherds. It further describes an entire aspect of their pastoral responsibility rather than a separate or elevated function.²⁸ With Peter, he, therefore, gets to envision a leadership model that is primarily grounded in vigilant, humble care, modeled after Christ, who is the chief shepherd rather than one defined by rank or hierarchy.

The participle ἐπισκοποῦντες is to be understood either as an adverbial participle of attendant circumstance, which indicates the whole activity that accompanies and also defines the shepherding, or as an adverbial participle of means, also indicating how such shepherding should be able to occur.²⁹ This illustrates the need for the flock to be adequately cared for. This participle expands on how the elders are to carry out their entire assignment of shepherding the flock. Hibert further adds that the noun is commonly rendered as “Bishop” or “overseer.” This is to depict that there was no difference between the elders and the bishops when this letter was being developed. It is, therefore, seen that the New Testament uses these words interchangeably of the same men (Titus 1:5-7). The word “elder” further conveys the concept of being at a mature age, which qualifies the individual for an office that involves spiritual oversight.

The phrase to care for “the flock of God among you” would mean that the shepherd should care for the flock to the best or point to the idea of looking at the flock that is among them. Peter’s charge and encouragement to the elders is not a general view but is specific to local congregations.³⁰ With Peter, the elders were to be present with the flock, ensuring they were actively involved with the flock.

The adverbial phrase creates a contrast between ἀναγκαστῶς “by compulsion” and ἑκουσίως “willingly,” so that the elders can be exhorted to accept their responsibilities without undue coercion. This, therefore, encompasses the entire aspect of carrying out the ministry

²⁷ Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, 1958, 227.

²⁸ Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New T (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 300.

²⁹ Donald Senior and Daniel J. Harrington, *1 Peter* (Liturgical Press, 2008), 139.

³⁰ Duane F. Watson, *First and Second Peter (Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament)*, 2012, 117



from a willing heart.³¹ Even if they had wanted the job, the stress of pastoring and the added danger it posed could well make the ministry an unwanted burden for them and their families. The warning against the desire for money is a regular part of such advice because it depicts and characterizes a sense of untrustworthy teachers who teach only for cash. In this given time, it may be assumed that this time the elders were compensated for their service, and this was a practice based on the word of Jesus and supported by Paul as well; therefore, the intention is to urge the people not to seek or take the responsibility of being elders because they are looking towards the financial gain.³²

Church Elders and Leadership

1 Peter 5:5a commands the νεώτεροι “younger men” to fully submit to the πρεσβύτεροι. The verb ὑποτάγητε denotes and points to a sense of yielding voluntarily within a framework filled with love and respect.³³ Different questions arise, especially those regarding the entire submission, particularly those introduced by ὁμοίως “likewise,” which concern the responsibilities of the elders. Marshall offers some possible interpretations of the word ὁμοίως.³⁴ He suggests that these points to the fact that, just as the elders are called to act appropriately within a communal role, they also live and conduct themselves more fittingly within their given context.³⁵ Also, since the elders are warned against domineering behavior, ὁμοίως further calls for clear reciprocity of the same conduct, that is, for the elders to lead with humility and gentleness. At the same time, the younger members should respond with willingness and acceptance of what is being said.

Peter then addresses the entire church, not just the elders. The vocative πάντες depicts and refers to the whole community, which includes the elders and the rest of the congregation. Dubis alludes that “all” here could refer to those not yet addressed in verses 1-5a—namely, everyone besides the church elders and the young men—or it may refer to the entire community, composed of the elders, young men, and everyone else. Thus, the term “all”

³¹ Ngewa, *The First Epistle of Peter: A Short Commentary*, 74.

³² Hiebert, “Counsel for Christ’s Under-Shepherds: An Exposition of 1 Peter 5:1-4,” 334.

³³ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 823.

³⁴ Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 201–2.

³⁵ Timothy S. Laniak and D. A. Carson, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006), 21.



includes even the elders and young men who have received their specific instructions. The latter interpretation is appropriate in aiding the understanding of the passage here.³⁶

The call for everyone to be humble reflects the previous commandments to show love, hospitality, and service to one another, as well as to remain humble.³⁷ Achtemeier further adds that the entire community is being addressed. In addition, the younger and older pair encompass the community as a whole, reinforcing the need for humility on the part of rulers and the ruled.³⁸ The verb here is ἐγκομβόομαι in the aorist middle imperative 2nd plural. This given verb is derived from the word ἐγκομβωμα, which refers to the apron that an enslaved person ties over other garments to perform menial tasks.³⁹

This metaphor recalls Jesus putting on a towel to wash the disciples' feet and his humility. Peter used the same metaphor earlier in this epistle in the phrase "prepare your minds for action." It calls and directs individuals "to engirdle oneself for labor." All believers are called to clothe themselves with humility. The verb ἐγκομβόομαι paints a picture of an enslaved person who gets to tie his apron over his other clothing as he prepares for service, and therefore fits the metaphor for the call of Christian humility.

The word ἀλλήλοις, meaning "to one another," in 5:5b modifies the word ὑποτάγητε, "submit"; this suggests a mutual submission; however, many commentators reject this reading. ἀλλήλοις functions either as a dative of respect, further yielding to a sense of humility that is exercised towards each other. The term ταπεινοφροσύνην "humility" implies and embodies the idea of being more than just external modesty, as it reflects the mindset and behavioral pattern associated with those in society who are lowly. For the elders here, the call to humility in 5:5b serves as a critical check on how their leadership should be exercised; it should not be from a posture of superiority but rather as members of a familiar community where they depend on God's grace. Therefore, verse 5 not only addresses the "younger men," but it also informs the elders' mode of leadership, which is marked by respect and a gospel-shaped humility.

³⁶ Hiebert, "Counsel for Christ's Under-Shepherds: An Exposition of 1 Peter 5:1-4," 335.

³⁷ Watson, *First and Second Peter (Paideia)*, 119).

³⁸ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 332.

³⁹ Achtemeier Paul J, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 332–33.



Theological and Practical Reflection

Beyond the exegetical analysis already undertaken, a more profound theological exploration highlights the enduring relevance of 1 Peter 5:1–5. At the heart of Peter’s exhortation is a profoundly Christological model of leadership. Elders are not simply administrators or policy enforcers; they embody the presence of Christ among the people. Their ministry, therefore, is sacramental; it makes visible the invisible grace of God at work in the community.⁴⁰ The shepherd metaphor is not just a poetic device; it is a visual picture of God’s covenant faithfulness in the Old Testament (Ps 23, Ezek 34) and finds its ultimate expression in Christ, the Good Shepherd (John 10:11).

There is repeated stress on willingness and humility in Peter’s instructions. These virtues are countercultural; they did not align with the way people lived in the first-century Greco-Roman world, which was characterized by a focus on honor and status; they also do not align with the way we live today. The pressure to grow, gain visibility, and wield power in the church of today is immense, particularly the pressure to adopt corporate strategies. Such tendencies, however, are resisted by Peter’s text, which presents a counter vision of leadership grounded in κένωσις (self-emptying love of Christ) (Phil. 2:5–11). Elders must lead not from afar but from amidst those they lead⁴¹.

Additionally, there are significant implications of this passage for ecclesiology (theology of the church). 1 Peter 5 provides a community structure, one based on mutual responsibility, mutual submission, and diffuse spiritual authority. One is to be respectful of the other, the elders towards the younger and the younger towards the elders, but there is an obligation upon all, elder and younger alike, to clothe themselves in the manner of humility towards one another. This is reciprocity, what Paul in Ephesians 5:21 calls to ‘Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.’ The Trinitarian dynamic of love is achieved through the community; no one can dominate all. Instead, they all serve.

Furthermore, Peter’s eschatologically hope-filled perspective can be ignored. The elders’ work is based on the eternal promise (of an ‘unfading crown of glory’—5:4). Not only does this dignify their often unseen labor, but it also places pastoral ministry in that larger biblical narrative of God’s redemptive history. Leadership is not a temporally defined and

⁴⁰ Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 202.

⁴¹ Arichea and Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on the First Letter from Peter*, 163.



particular set of duties, but rather it is part of the unfolding kingdom of God. It is a vision that motivates faithfulness in the face of suffering, criticism, or discouragement.

In practice, churches are invited in 1 Peter 5 to reevaluate their approaches to leadership development. Instead of looking for leaders based on their charisma or business acumen, communities should seek leaders who are spiritually mature, theologically profound, and emotionally intelligent. The focus in our seminaries and discipleship programs should be on formation, not performance, and that means forming hearts to hear the Spirit of Christ. Part of this also includes providing structures of accountability and care for leaders themselves, who generally bear invisible burdens. In other words, they are a biblical model of eldership—pastoral and communal, founded in relationships rather than rank.

Finally, 1 Peter 5:1–5 remains powerful because it is both simple and spiritually profound. It describes leadership based on a radically different model than those of both ancient and modern cultures.⁴² It urges the church to a vision of a community in which leaders are servants, authority is wielded through example, and all members are held together in mutual humility by the Chief Shepherd. Such a church not only survives enculturation but prospers as a faith witness to the reign of Christ in the world.

Conclusion

This study has further demonstrated that the call to eldership in the church, as seen in 1 Peter 5:1-5, is both clear and compelling, presenting a foundational model for pastoral leadership and the holistic growth of the church. Peter, as a fellow elder, exhorts church leaders to embrace their calling, not only as a pursuit of one's own personal ambition or material gain but as a responsibility rooted in Christlike service. The elders are further called to shepherd the flock of God willingly, eagerly, and with integrity, always mindful that their ultimate accountability is to Christ Jesus, who is the chief shepherd.

The leadership exemplified in this passage embodies humility, love, and the sacrificial nature of Jesus. The emphasis here is not on hierarchical control but on the call to servanthood and the spiritual oversight that nourishes, protects, and guides the people of God. Elders are called to serve, not domineering figures, but as examples to the flock, modeling a lifestyle that reflects the entire character of Christ in word and deed. They are supposed to be spiritual

⁴² Joel B. Green, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 170.



teachers who nurture faithfulness in God's word within the congregation and consistency in sound doctrine among believers, helping them mature in the Lord. Elders are more than just teachers; they are called to provide exceptional pastoral care, counsel those in distress, offer wisdom during crises and walk with believers through the wilderness of life. Their leadership, therefore, includes the call to organize, manage, and further direct the affairs of the church community with wisdom and discernment.

The passage also emphasizes the need for the communal and interdependent nature of church leadership. The elders are not to function in isolation but in partnership with one another and within the context of the broader body of believers. There is a deep call for mutual submission, humility, and a shared commitment to the well-being of the flock, which then marks authentic leadership. In themselves, the younger members of the church are called and exhorted to submit to their elders. Still, the submission is to be shaped by a mutual humility that must characterize all relationships in the body of Christ, as that sort of humility fosters an atmosphere of accountability, grace, and spiritual growth in the church.

This promise of an 'unfading crown of glory' (vs. 4) is a great encouragement to continue in ministry, to the church leader that their future reward is not fame and glory on earth but a reward from God. Such a future-oriented way of thinking puts Present church leaders in perspective, demanding in no uncertain terms that all they pursue should be faithfulness and spiritual fruitfulness, though not personal ambition or any temporal success whatsoever.

Therefore, 1 Peter 5:1-5, as it stands, provides a sound and lasting framework for pastoral ministry more broadly, still expressive of the tenets of its time and culture. These principles, which Peter outlines in his exhortation, relate to humility, servanthood, accountability, and great perseverance – all of which are essential for relevance in the church today. When the church enjoys such leadership by elders, it will, therefore, also be a visible expression of the kingdom of God and testify to the hope and glory that is in Christ alone.



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