

5 Therefore, I have a request for the elders among you. (I ask this as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings, and as one who shares in the glory that is about to be revealed.) I urge the elders: 2 Like shepherds, tend the flock of God among you. Watch over it. Don't shepherd because you must, but do it voluntarily for God. Don't shepherd greedily, but do it eagerly. 3 Don't shepherd by ruling over those entrusted to your care, but become examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive an unfading crown of glory.

5 In the same way, I urge you who are younger: accept the authority of the elders. And everyone, clothe yourselves with humility toward each other. God stands against the proud, but he gives favor to the humble.

6 Therefore, humble yourselves under God's power so that he may raise you up in the last day. 7 Throw all your anxiety onto him, because he cares about you. 8 Be clearheaded. Keep alert. Your accuser, the devil, is on the prowl like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith. Do so in the knowledge that your fellow believers are enduring the same suffering throughout the world. 10 After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, the one who called you into his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will himself restore, empower, strengthen, and establish you. 11 To him be power forever and always. Amen.

12 I have written and sent these few lines to you by Silvanus. I consider him to be a faithful brother. In these lines I have urged and affirmed that this is the genuine grace of God. Stand firm in it. 13 The fellow-elect church in Babylon greets you, and so does my son Mark. 14 Greet each other with the kiss of love. Peace to you all who are in Christ.

### **- Common English Bible**

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We have arrived at the end of 1 Peter and providentially it provides guidance to elders on the day that we ordain a new elder, and install that new elder, Darwin, and two others, as well as three deacons to service on their boards. Now from the way this passage is written it seems like by "elder" the author means "older" members of the church community. I say this because the author also offers guidance to the younger. It was a Jewish custom to entrust leadership to those with the wisdom of age and thus when the letter says "elders" likely a specific church office was not intended. But we are Presbyterians. The word Presbyterian is derived from the Greek word presbyter, which means elder, and we are a church led by the collaborative leadership of elders. I was ordained as a ruling elder, the office into which Darwin is stepping, at the age of 18. And ordained to the office of teaching elder, or minister, at the age of 25. Darwin is one of the younger members of our fellowship. So, evidently, when we say "elder" we are not talking about age, necessarily. We are talking about those chosen by the congregation

*Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.*

due to their faith, their gifts, their skills, and their love to be the spiritual leaders of our congregation. No elder is elected to be a lone leader. No elder has all the gifts or skills necessary for the leadership of a congregation. We are are elected, ordained, and installed to work together to advance the ministry of Christ in the whole congregation.

This letter offers guidance to elders, the younger, and everyone— the whole community. I wanted to clarify, off the bat, to whom I think these different bits apply in our context. I still think a bit more clarifying is needed. In the Presbyterian church when you are ordained as an elder or a deacon you are ordained for life. You are only installed to active service for a set period of time. In our congregation, a maximum of three years per term, no more than two consecutive terms. This means that we have a healthy rotation of leadership. It also means that in our fellowship we have many elders and deacons who are not actively serving on boards. I think when this letter speaks to elders, all those who have been ordained to church office at any time ought to take these words to heart, those actively serving especially. When Darwin is ordained in a little bit, we will invite all elders present, that means anyone EVER ordained as an elder, to come forward to lay hands on them\*. I will invite elders on zoom to stretch out their hands. I suspect many hands will be outstretched. Some among us though have not been ordained before, and you can take the words to the “younger” especially to heart. And it should not be overlooked that there is some guidance addressed to everybody. A right understanding of ordination is functional. We raise up certain people to serve certain functions for the congregation. But more significant than ordination is baptism, and that is something we all share, it is that which identifies us all as equally beloved children of God.

So, what is the guidance to elders? The author identifies as a fellow elder, bound by the guidance offered. Even in the early church, elders together, that's how the church works. The metaphor is centered on shepherding. Elders are to tend the flock, watch over it. And then offers a series of contrasts: Not because you must, but voluntarily for God— not out of obligation, but freely in dedication; not greedily, but eagerly— seems like a strange contrast to me, but I think the point is not to serve for one's personal advantage or gain, but energetically for the good of the whole; not by ruling over, but by

being an example- despite the title ruling elder, the leadership to which elders are called is to live the faith in an exemplary way, not to tell others what to do. In 12 step programs people are advised to choose a sponsor by finding someone who has what you want and asking them how they are achieving it. Ideally, elders live their Christian discipleship in such a way that others are inspired to follow and grow in so doing. The author suggests this is a high calling, but it is one with a high reward— an unfading crown of glory. Also, did you note that though elders are called shepherds, all are subject to the chief shepherd, Jesus Christ? When elders meet together they are to discern the mind of Christ. They are not to advance their own agendas, but to seek to know and enact the will of God. I have watched this unfold on your Session many times. A group of people, empowered by this congregation and blessed by God, come together and have myriad different opinions about matters of controversy, yet they pray together, study scripture together, and listen to one another, and end up on the same page. It is holy and humbling work.

The one word to the younger is to accept the authority of the elders. This can be challenging in our context both when those empowered for leadership have substantially less life experience than the people we are leading and because of the way in our wider context most authority is suspect. All throughout our nation church leaders, and indeed all leaders, have been subjected to distrust and scorn, particularly in the midst of this pandemic, no decision has been pleasing to all people at any time. I heard this week of a small church that lost 10-20 people when they shut down during the worst of the pandemic. And lost another 10 or so when they reopened. Most, if not all, of you have respected the authority of your Session and abided by the decisions made with a great deal of grace. But it has been hard, I know. I know that for most of 2020 your Session met weekly. They put in more time in discernment than any other Session I have ever moderated. They have faithfully navigated a stormy sea. When you elect, ordain, and install leaders you entrust them to lead you. And I pray that you will continue to pray for the patience to abide by the decisions your chosen leaders make.

And then there is the guidance to everyone and the heart of this guidance is humility— be humble toward each other. In another letter we read that we ought not

regard ourselves as better than anyone else. I think we also ought not regard ourselves as worse than anyone else. We should humbly accept our status as beloved, and equal, children of God. A previously shared nugget I heard from a minister in the Salvation Army bears repeating: we all need to be truly humble and truly dependent— true humility is agreeing with God about who God says we are— God's beloved children. True dependence is agreeing with God about who God says God is- our creator, savior, and sustainer. This resonates with the teaching of this letter. "Humble yourselves under God's power so that God may raise you up in the last day." Further, we are called to throw all our anxiety onto the God revealed in Jesus Christ, trusting in God's mercy and care. It is often anxiety that leads to distrust, conflict, and division. Also, in anxiety we can puff ourselves up or feel totally deflated— get out of balance. When we feel anxiety rising we need to give it to God, knowing that anything that is too big for us belongs to God. We are also invited to be clearheaded (for the third time in this letter) and to keep alert- resisting the temptations of evil and standing firm in faith. This requires adequate rest, good health, moderate or non-use of mind-altering substances, devotional study, and prayer, prayer, prayer.

This is the guidance with which this letter to suffering churches concludes. And there is much in it that is highly relevant to the life of suffering churches today. When Darwin gets on their\* knees, we will have a model of the humble, God-centered leadership in which we place our trust. And when elders gather around them,\* we will see the shared character of the leadership in which we place our trust. And when all of us are fed at Christ's table we will be reminded of our shared identity and common dependence, all of us beggars for grace. Be not afraid, my friends, be of good hope in the one who called us into glory and will restore, empower, strengthen, and establish us. You have called forth gifted and faithful leaders, and the Spirit of God is upon us all, allowing us to continue in Christ's service together. To Christ be power forever and always. Amen.

*\*Darwin's preferred pronouns are they/them*