

“Like a Roaring Lion”

The Eleventh in a Series on 1 Peter

Texts: 1 Peter 5:1-14; Jeremiah 51:34-40

There is one thing American Christians do not like—to submit to authority of the church officers. In a recent survey, 90% of American Christians opined that the church has no authority to declare whether or not someone is a Christian. Yet, all the Evangelical theologians asked to comment on the poll results found themselves numbered among the 10% who rightly noted that Jesus himself gave to the church the keys of kingdom, as well as explaining the precise steps for the church to take when someone’s doctrine and conduct do not match that required of those who name the name of Jesus.¹ There is also one thing about which American Christians are thoroughly confused—the power and tactics of the devil between the time Jesus defeated Satan while suffering upon the cross, and our Lord’s second advent at the end of the age. Ironically, Peter discusses both the role of elders in governing Christ’s church, as well as Satan’s opposition to Christ’s rule through his appointed church officers, in our text, verses 1-14, of 1 Peter chapter 5.

We return to our series on 1 Peter, and we will spend our time in this sermon and the next wrapping up in the 5th and final chapter of this remarkable epistle, bringing our study of this epistle to an end. Although the final chapter of 1 Peter contains only 14 verses, there is enough significant material here, I felt it best not to rush through this section and only touch briefly on the matters which Peter addresses. In wrapping up this epistle, the Apostle Peter gives us wise counsel about the purpose of suffering, as well as introducing us to a proper understanding of church government (the importance of elders in ruling Christ’s church). Yet, Peter does so in the context of the devil’s efforts to attack the people of God. So, this week, we will discuss the office of elder, and how a proper understanding of the church and its officers is the bulwark against the schemes and attacks of the devil. Next week, Lord willing, we will conclude our time in 1 Peter by addressing how we as Christians ought humble ourselves before God, while casting all of our cares upon him.

In light of the reality that the chapter on ecclesiology is the least read section in any good systematic theology (because people tend not to be interested in the doctrine of the church), I begin by pointing out that the doctrine of the church is a major theme throughout the New Testament. Jesus called disciples and then commissioned them to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, in the process making disciples and establishing churches, which, in many ways, are modeled upon the synagogues of Israel. These new churches are to be ruled by elders who ensure the gospel is preached, the sacraments are administered according to the word of God, and that all things are done decently and in good order.

In order to understand the practical importance of a biblical ecclesiology, we only need look at the recent news regarding evangelical mega-star Mark Driscoll and the total collapse of his church brand, Mars Hill. This is yet another sad case where the name of Christ is besmirched by Christians claiming to love Jesus, all the while inventing a church structure centered around a charismatic leader, and which exists essentially to promote that leader’s personal vision to those who share it—and this with little if any

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/november/does-my-local-church-have-authority-to-declare-that-i-am-no.html>

consideration of what the New Testament actually teaches about how a church is to organize and conduct its ministry. Of course, it does not take long for people reading their Bibles to figure out how the church envisioned by its celebrity leader differs radically from the nature of the church of the New Testament, which does not allow for celebrity pastors to promote their own personal interests and gain fame and fortune for themselves. Mars Hill and Mark Driscoll were frequently identified with the *Young, Restless, and Reformed*, those millennials who discovered the glories of Reformed theology. Yet, in Driscoll's case, Mars Hill managed to ignore the fact that any movement which is truly Reformed will also strive for a church governed by elders, not ruled by a celebrity tyrant who fires anyone who dares stand up to him, or who disagrees with his personal agenda.

Many of us here have also seen the bitter fruit of the so-called "Moses model" of church government in which God reveals his will to the pastor, who, in turn, expects his hand-picked "board" to implement that which, supposedly, the Lord revealed to the pastor. This too is another human invention, ignoring the fact that Christ's church is everywhere said to be ruled by a group of under-shepherds, called elders and ministers, who together rule the church in the name of Christ according to Christ's command, and for Christ's glory. The biblical form of church government is Presbyterian (the Greek word for elder is *presbuteros*), wherein the church is ruled by elders who watch the doctrine and life of the pastor(s), the members of the church, as well as each other. Such a system of government is designed to check human sin, and ensure that the church fulfills its mission, not the whims of its pastor or influential members.

Nor should we ignore the obvious and rather embarrassing irony of having the Roman Catholic Church's favorite apostle and supposed founder—Simon Peter—tell us in his first epistle that the apostolic church is ruled by elders—not by Popes, Cardinals, or an infallible Magisterium. Although, Peter was the chief apostle, chosen by Jesus himself, here the Apostle identifies himself as a "fellow" elder, along with the other elders serving in the churches receiving his letter. The office of elder is not one of power, nor even of prestige (although elders are to be respected because of the nature of their office). Rather, this is an office of faithful service, devoted to bearing witness to glories of Jesus, who is the chief Shepherd of his church. If the elders are doing their jobs as under-shepherds according to the word of God, then Christ's church will withstand whatever trials and tribulations God allows—including the schemes of the devil. But if the elders do not fulfill their calling, or if a church is not ruled by elders but by a charismatic visionary, then the likelihood of failure is all but ensured—and God's people get hurt in the process.

As we turn to our text (the fourteen verses of chapter 5), we take note of Peter's opening exhortation in verses 1-2. "*So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you . . .*" The office is elder is used throughout the New Testament of those called by God to rule (lead) Christ's Church. At the very least, Peter's exhortation to elders implies that the churches of Asia Minor were already presbyterian (elder-ruled), making this the apostolic form of church government.

Furthermore, we know from Acts 15 that the Jerusalem church (the home base of the apostolic church) had both apostles and elders. Paul speaks of those leading the church in Ephesus as "elders" (Acts 20:17), while James instructs those who are sick to request the elders to come and pray with them (James 5:14). In his pastoral letters, Paul speaks of the qualifications and duties of elders (i.e., 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1), and they are present in every city where there is a church. The term elder (*presbuteros*), is always used in the plural, indicating that a group of elders—including the church's minister(s)—governed the church, while deacons concentrated on ministering mercy to the poor, widows, and orphans.

Even from this brief summary, it is clear that the New Testament church had apostles, elders, ministers, and deacons. The apostles do not ordain new apostles, and when they died off, they left behind elders and ministers (who hold the rank of elder, but who are devoted full time to the ministry of the word and the sacraments), as well as deacons, who care for the poor. No mention of “boards” or the “Moses model” anywhere. No mention of Popes and Cardinals either. And even though the word “bishop” (*episcopus*) is used in the New Testament, it is roughly equivalent of “elder.”² There is no question that the preaching of the gospel created the church. There is no question that the church is to organize and govern itself in a particular way in order to insure that the gospel continues to be preached, that the sacraments are properly administered, that erring and rebellious members are disciplined, and that the poor, widows, and orphans receive compassionate care.

It is quite remarkable, then, that Peter (an apostle) exhorts the elders of the Asia Minor churches even as he identifies himself with them and their office. Although Peter identified himself in the opening verse as an Apostle, and he could have pulled apostolic rank here, he does not. What gives Peter’s apostolic credentials their weight is his declaration that he is a witness to the sufferings of Christ. Peter was there, with Jesus, throughout our Lord’s public ministry. It was Peter who denied knowing Jesus, but was later fully restored by Jesus after our Lord’s resurrection. It is the fact of being a witness to Christ’s messianic mission, and being chosen by Jesus from the beginning which distinguishes elders from apostles.

The reason why Peter addresses the elders of the churches of the Diaspora and identifies himself with them is likely because of one of two reasons. Perhaps the elders of these churches have themselves borne the brunt of persecution in light of the previous chapter’s mention of fiery trials (v. 12) associated with the fact that judgment begins in the house of God (v. 17). In fact, in Old Testament passages such as Ezekiel 9:6, God’s judgment upon his people begins with the elders. It also may be the case that Peter exhorts the elders so strongly because they the ones are charged with shepherding Christ’s flock during the difficult time the churches receiving this letter were then experiencing. If the elect exiles who made up the churches receiving this letter were to persevere during this difficult time, it was imperative that the elders in these churches were tending to the flock as Christ’s under-shepherds.

Yet, it is important that we do not understand the judgment of God in the sense of retributive judgment—i.e. that these Christians were being punished by God for some particular sin, or for a lack of faithfulness—but in the sense that God is allowing his people to endure fiery trials as a means of strengthening their faith as warning to those outside the church. Peter’s point is that if God allows his people to suffer for their good, how much more will he punish those who do evil. Peter has already written in verses 16-19 of chapter 4, “*Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?*” Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.” This is, no doubt, is in Peter’s mind when giving his exhortation to the elders in the opening verses of chapter 5.

Under such difficult circumstances, it is imperative that the elders of Christ’s church do what God has called them to do—to shepherd Christ’s flock, to do so for the right reasons, and so that in doing so, they will help protect the congregation from the attacks of Satan upon them. Since, in the preceding chapters,

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), imported from Logos on 5:2.

Peter has repeatedly addressed the importance of submission by Christians of low social standing to those in authority over them, so now the apostle exhorts all Christians to submit to their elders, because these are men whom God has placed in authority over them. 90% of American Christians may have a problem with this, but Peter commands it. Furthermore, the things these Christians have been forced to endure, have made things very difficult within the church. The elders must lead and shepherd the flock, and the members of the churches must submit to their elders in order to avoid the judgment which is to come upon all those who persecute the people of God.³

The way in which elders are to exercise their rule is spelled out by Peter. Their rule is to reflect the way in which Jesus shepherds his flock (as the good-shepherd), not the way in which the Greco-Romans understand the exercise of authority (as a demonstration of power). The elders of Christ's church are not to be tyrants like the governors, masters, and cruel spouses to whom Peter has referred earlier. The Apostle is clear that elders serve, "*not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*" Peter's words here, no doubt, echo the words Jesus spoke to him at the end of his messianic mission and recounted in the Gospel of John. Jesus said to Peter, "'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Tend my sheep.'" Elders are to follow the example of Jesus, unlike the cruel shepherds who ruled Israel with brutality as recounted in Ezekiel 34. As Martin Luther wisely said, the elders shepherd Christ's flock by making sure the sheep are comforted by the promises of the gospel.⁴

It is difficult to imagine the degree of troubles facing the original audience of this letter—persecution, mocking, cursing and reviling from the pagans who did not understand why Christians do not indulge every lust of the flesh as they did. It would be a terrible thing to submit to a cruel master, and then come to faith in Christ, only to find yourself ruled by another cruel master in the form of abusive elders and ministers—and this in the name of Jesus. This is certainly why Peter reminds the elders in verse 5, that "*when the chief Shepherd appears [Jesus], you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*" As Calvin points out, "it ought also to be observed, that [Peter] calls Christ the *chief Pastor*; for we are to rule the Church under him and in his name, in no other way but that he should be still really the Pastor. So the word *chief* here does not only mean the principal, but him whose power all others ought to submit to, as they do not represent him except according to his command and authority."⁵ Ministers and elders need to keep Christ's rule of his church in mind, as the best way to protect against either pride (in the authority of the office), or despair (humanly speaking, how can anyone do this job?). Peter's promise to those who rule in the name of Jesus, and strive to rule as he did (courageously, yet gently), will participate in Jesus' eschatological glory when the Lord returns on the last day.

If the elders are to imitate Jesus in how they shepherd the flock, then Peter also must exhort the members of the church to realize the necessity of submission to those whom God has placed in positions of authority within the church. In verse 5, Peter writes, "*likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'*" If servants are to obey their masters, if citizens are to obey those who rule

³ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, vol. 37, imported from Logos on 5:1

⁴ Cited in, Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, vol. 37, imported from Logos on 5:2

⁵ John Calvin, Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), imported from Logos Bible Software, on 5:2.

over them, if wives and children submit to their husbands and fathers, then the principle holds true that younger Christians should submit to the elders (because they are older). If Peter means this in a strict chronological sense, then his meaning is that those who are young in age, should be willing to listen to those older and wiser than they. Bald heads and grey hairs are reminders of a long life filled with experiences and hard-knocks which make elders wiser—not smarter, but wiser—than those who do not have the benefit of a lifetime of experience (good and bad). This implies that church elders are older men, yet this seems to go against Paul’s instructions to Timothy, not to be ashamed of his youth.

If, on the other hand, Peter is using the image metaphorically—that the elders have been Christians for a longer period of time, and have had their faith tested and refined by fiery trial, and that those who are younger, would therefore be a reference to new Christians—then Peter’s point is that new Christians should be willing to submit to and learn from those who have been Christians for a longer period of time.

In verses 6-10, Peter gives a number of final exhortations to his readers/hearers, before extending final greetings to the churches, as well as to two individuals, Mark and Silvanus. These are matters we will take up next time when we conclude our study of 1 Peter. But before we wrap up I do want to address in some detail, Peter’s warning in verses 8-9 about the whiles and schemes of the devil, when the Apostle writes, “*your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith.*” If Peter had been speaking previously in rather general terms to the elect exiles of the Diaspora about the fiery trials they were experiencing, Peter now addresses the specific source of many of their troubles—the work of Satan.

In verse 6, Peter calls his readers to vigilance because the devil is on the prowl, looking for weak and struggling Christians, so as to devour them. We tend to think of this in terms of the occult (spells, black magic, demon possession, etc.). But in this epistle the focus is upon something far less secretive and much more obvious and effective. Peter speaks of the devil as the adversary (*antidikos*), which is a Greek word with virtually the same meaning as the Hebrew word *sātān*—the source of the personal name often given the devil, Satan. There are three matters worthy of discussion here given the general confusion which exists in the church about who the devil is and what he does. Safe to say, most Christians develop their views about the devil from film (i.e., the “Exorcist”), and from Stephen King novels. These, in turn, draw largely upon medieval superstition and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and tend to be very deficient when it comes to conformity to biblical teaching.

First, Peter is clear that some how and in some way, the devil’s work in devouring Christians, is a result, or perhaps even the cause, of the opposition Christians were facing from the pagans around them. In fact, the language of a lion seeking to devour was used by Israel’s prophets such as Jeremiah to describe the way in which Israel’s enemies attacked and devoured her in conquering Israel militarily. In our Old Testament lesson (Jeremiah 51), Jeremiah describes how the Babylonian empire and king Nebuchadnezzar devoured the people of God, all the while roaring like lions. No doubt, that image from Jeremiah is in Peter’s mind here when he speaks of Satan as a roaring lion.

In Peter’s day, we have a clear example of how pagan religion reflects the knowledge of God which is sinfully suppressed, and which then inevitably bubbles up in the form of false religion. The Romans possessed a well-known household code, grounded in natural law. Yet, because of sin, and because the Romans did not have Scripture to interpret and explain natural law, the household code included pagan distortions which Peter is writing, in part, to correct. Calvin was absolutely correct when he spoke of the minds of Adam’s fallen race as idol factories, churning out all kinds of false things to worship. In the Greco-Roman world, these were the gods of war, of home and hearth, of fertility and health, and even

their emperor. In our age, the false gods our culture conjures up are often celebrities (famous only for being famous), athletes (much as the Romans venerated gladiators), as well as a whole host of false religions which exalt human greatness, spirituality, and good works.

Yet, one of the ways in which the devil has brought greatest harm to the people of God is through the point of the sword, or through the power of the purse—in this case through the political power of the Roman empire, which had the military power to cast Christians from their homes, separate them from their families, disrupt their livelihoods, and in extreme cases, arrest and even put Christians to death. Behind Greco-Roman paganism and a divine emperor is the smell of suffer. Satan’s usual line of attack is through lies—heresy and false teaching within the church. But if that does not work, then Satan’s default setting is to use the power of the state (should God allow it in his mysterious providence) to wage economic and military war upon the people of God. This is one the major themes of the Book of Revelation, especially chapters 13 and 16.

Second, Peter’s comments here seem, at first hearing, to conflict with John’s comment in Revelation 20:1-7, where Satan is said to be bound for a thousand years—which is the time between Jesus’ triumph over Satan on the cross, and the time when Satan is released from the abyss shortly before the time of the end, when our Lord returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new. My view is that nothing Peter says here conflicts with John who tells us what exactly he means when he says that Satan is bound—Satan can no longer deceive the nations, so as to organize a world-wide revolt against Christ’s church. After the cross, Satan’s power to deceive is limited. He was thoroughly defeated when Jesus crushed his head, even as Satan bruised his heel (Jesus’ death upon the cross in light of the first promise of redemption in Genesis 3:15). Satan’s doom is sure. One little word shall fell him.

But even though bound and defeated, Satan is a more fierce and determined foe now, because as John puts it in Revelation 12:12, “*therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!*” Would you rather deal with a lion who just ate, or a lion which is mortally wounded? There is no real conflict between Peter’s comments here, and John’s comments about the binding of Satan. Because Satan is currently bound to the abyss, his reach is limited. But anyone who gets within his limited reach will find themselves quickly devoured, just as if someone fell into the lion cage at the zoo.

Third, Peter tells us not to flee from the devil but to resist him by remaining strong in the faith. Christians often confuse resisting the devil with resisting temptation. When it comes to temptation, the Bible does not tell us to resist, but to flee. In 1 Corinthians 6:18, Paul writes, “*flee from sexual immorality.*” In 2 Timothy 2:22, he adds, “*flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace.*” In 1 Corinthians 10:13, Paul speaks of how the Lord will provide us with a way of escape, and will not let us be tempted beyond our capacity to endure. In the Lord’s Prayer, we even pray to be delivered from temptation. The reason why we flee from temptation is that any Christian (given the reality of indwelling sin) who tries to resist temptation, will sooner or later likely give in. But if we are to flee from temptation, not so with the devil. We are called to resist him by standing firm in the faith (i.e., the truth of the gospel).

In exhorting the elders to shepherd Christ’s flock and exercise oversight, Peter connects the work of the elders and ministers to the call to resist the devil. Shepherds are seen in our culture as meek and mild—even effeminate. But in the first century, a shepherd was a rugged, tough, figure who was willing and able to drive away predators such as wolves and lions from their flocks. In shepherding the flock, it falls to the elders to serve as the primary line of defense against the schemes of the devil, who would love

nothing more than to devour any lost, sick, or wounded sheep who wander from the safety of the flock. The ministers and elders of the churches are charged with protecting the flock from Satan's usual line of attack—false doctrine. Usually this is a false gospel, but, as we have seen, Satan can also use a faulty and unbiblical view of the church to disperse and then devour the people of God.

Peter's point then, and the application we must take with us from our text, is that the elders of Christ's church are to shepherd the church of Jesus Christ gladly and willingly, not for shameful gain or out of a dominating spirit. The members of Christ's church are to be subject to the elders, for this is the will of God even if 90% of American Christians think otherwise. For it is here, within the safety of Christ's flock, that our faith is strengthened so that we might resist the devil, our great adversary, who like a roaring lion, seeks to devour us.

Finally, beloved, let us do as Peter exhorts us to do: *“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”*