



Priorities for Christian leadership

1 Peter 5:1–4

When we turn to this epistle of Peter, we recognise that it is written to a suffering church, a church under pressure.

- Date is probably linked to the persecution under Nero, about AD64 (Clement talks about the letter in AD96)
- Writing not only to encourage and comfort – but also to prepare the church.

The message of 1 Peter might be best summarised in practical terms by Peter himself, when he writes in 1 Peter 3:15.

1 Peter excels as a pastoral letter – it breathes a pastoral spirit and is a model of a pastoral charge. Its excellence lies not only in the content of its pastoral theology, but also the manner in which it is conveyed. I sense a humble transparency is apparent throughout the letter and it is a useful starting point for mission, leadership and ministry.

Within our congregation, we are engaging in some thinking about the future and where God might lead us, and in what ways he may equip us and challenge us.

Vital to the health of any church is the quality of its leadership – and that become even more important under difficult circumstances. Pressure upon any group of people can eventually make it come apart at the seams. The truth, which every Christian leader has to come to terms with, is that it is often Christians who come under scrutiny and criticism. Peter may well be encouraging the church to stand together as one.

When we study this passage, the theme of leadership is seen to be almost sandwiched between two sections on suffering and that would help to define the pattern of Christian leadership being expounded here. I don't want to concentrate upon who "elders" are – but I do draw your attention to two points which will feed into all we shall look at together.

- Peter counts himself as a "fellow-elder" and yet as an "apostle"
- A pastor alongside pastors, giving helpful advice.

Here is a good pattern of a Pastor, seeking to develop an effective lay leadership for the whole church.

- To be effective, we need to be in touch with Christ
- Compare what Peter is recommending with the difficulties at Corinth – 1 Corinthians 3:5–7
- In the wider context ... "offering to serve abroad" – but the pre-requisite is being called by God.

Text: 1 Peter 5:2–3

"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."



Before we look at the nature of what it means to be a leader today, let me make two points that are very important. The appointment of leaders is always linked to Shepherds who are the fulfilment of God's promises concerning leadership in the Old Testament.

- The Pastoral Care of the Shepherd is not impersonal (John 10:3)
- The Pastoral Care of the Shepherd is as God's flock – not ours!

If ever we view the congregation as “ours” or the ministry as “ours”, we are in serious trouble – and so is the church. What we have in these verses from Peter's first epistle are words which help us to put our leadership of the church into the proper perspective of the leadership of Christ.

As we open up the verses, we find three specific characteristic motivations in Christian leadership, which each in their own way are demonstrated in the servant ministry of Jesus Christ himself. We need to remind ourselves that the whole church is measured against Christ. Equally, we could draw up pointers for those who are led in the life of the church, for we all need to live in relation to Jesus Christ and his calling in our lives.

We care – Not because we must, but because we are willing – v.2

There is a danger to be found in the wrong kind of obligation. “I'm doing it because I have to!” When we are engaged in Christian mission, ministry and leadership of any kind, because we have to and not because we want to, we are in danger of missing the whole purpose of God's calling.

Very often are our sermons, teaching and writing about ministry filled with those unhelpful words like “must”, “ought” and “should”. Our ministry begins and ends in calling, which is a privilege and a joy – not in an over and above way, but from beneath and alongside.

Let us be clear that this can happen in all leadership, which is a good reason for not “press-ganging” people into taking on responsibility in the church. It must come from an open hand and heart (Refer to the rich young man in the gospel account).

- Word *hekousios* – means “willing” or what we might term “voluntarily”
- God does not “coerce” or “force” his people
- The freedom of saying Yes or No is at the heart of believing and serving.

We would be better not involved if our only motivation is that we **have** to be involved. Every generation must find its passion for Christ and its ministry. Every minister needs to discover such commitment for his or her own ministry.

I want to suggest that this comes from the renewal of our calling and I cannot help but feel that Peter, leader of the church in Jerusalem, would reflect not so much on his high place in the church, but on his own experience.

- Lakeside calling
- Denial of Christ
- Lakeside reinstatement
- Pentecost power and 3000 added to the church.

When challenges come in ministry, as they always do, what keeps us going is not that we **have** to do things, but rather our essential calling and being available to be used by God.



Leadership in the church often goes through its ups and downs. It is rare that someone feels entirely committed all the time to a particular calling – and there are particular pressures that force us to look back at our essential calling.

For me personally, there are three distinct callings – Christian, Preacher and Minister of the Church. They all operate like a mobile, each informing the other.

John Ruskin once commented on a lamplighter moving along the road of a distant hill. “That is what I mean by being a real Christian – you can trace their course by the lights they leave behind.” So it is in ministry and Christian leadership.

The things we do, which we feel called to and are a response to God, are the things that make the greatest difference in the world. We are called and willingly respond.

We care – Not because we are greedy for money, but because we are eager to serve – v.2

Paid ministry is not an invention of the modern church, but in it lay many dangers. Some leaders in New Testament times were released from their paid employment to serve the church full-time. 1 Timothy 5:17–18 (cf Luke 10:7).

- A payment is no reason for serving
- A Christ-centred vision must be the purpose for ministry
- Eagerness with which we serve is the determining feature of our ministry in Christ.

Now, let us be quite clear that we are not to see money as the only danger; greed can express itself in other ways.

- The greed for recognition
- The greed for status
- The greed for applause.

This is a difficult area, because there is a part of our dignity that comes from a healthy fulfilment, but that must not be confused with an unhealthy greed.

Some of the most significant ministry goes on without recognition and is exercised on the margins and alongside people in their need. Our eagerness to serve can feel blunted at times. However, we continue because it is not the shallow emotionally-led eagerness that drives, but a deep-seated and rooted sense of call.

My church history lecturer, John Newton, once quoted Samuel Chadwick – “I would rather pay to preach – than be paid not to.”

Not very long ago, I read of a writer who was walking past a tattoo parlour in a South-East Asian country. He stopped and looked at the various designs which were displayed in the windows. One caught his eye – “Born to lose”. Curious about this simple design, he asked the shop owner if many people wanted such a tattoo imprinted on their body. The owner said that the last customer had those very words tattooed on his chest. “Why?” he asked the owner. The reply was thought-provoking: “Before the tattoo is put on the chest, the tattoo is on the mind.”

We are “born to serve” and eager to do so; it is at the centre of all authentic ministry and leadership.



We care – Not by exercising power over others, but by being examples – v.3

There are an increasing number of books on secular leadership models – and power is a dangerous commodity. In the every-day world, some people get to what they call “the top” by dominance. Such attitudes are difficult to align with a specifically Christian take on leadership.

- Not force or manipulation on the part of Christian leaders – but by quality of lifestyle, which can impact powerfully upon a community
- People are more likely to follow the kind of leader who leads by example: “Do what I do, rather than just what I say.” But the leaders who do not say what is needed may always be popular, but not transformative
- Lifestyle is the key to so much effective ministry. There is a distinctive ministry lifestyle bound up in prayer, service and pastoral care. Those qualities are then matched to the vision which is forever calling us onwards.

I am aware that, in addition to the traditional values of ministry I am expounding, we need to add communication gifts, the ability to think strategically and not an insignificant hold on key management skills. But these need to be underpinned with an authentic Christian spirituality and a desire to serve God in his church.

Power can be exercised in all kinds of ways and I consider it to be a subject all of us in ministry ought to explore – a proper exercise of power in the service of Christ. However, the ministry and mission to which we are called is one that asks what we are about in relation to how we live.

It is rare (but not impossible) for a great leader not to possess appropriate administrative skills. It is defined as a gift of the Holy Spirit. It would be a mistake to think this is a gift that comes naturally to me, or believe it is an area which I enjoy. However, I know no great work is achieved without consideration of this aspect.

As Peter wrote these words, did he recall the servant style of ministry that Jesus demonstrated? (Matthew 20:25–28).

- Jesus demonstrated a servant style which he entrusts to us
- The word “example” is the root meaning of “die” or “stamp”
- Model, pattern or print.

The leader’s reward is going to be spiritual – and this is what v.4 refers to. The full maturity of our lives as leaders is shown in this model.

- Serve not grudgingly, but willingly
- Serve not greedily, but eagerly
- Serve not arrogantly, but as examples.

The whole area of ministry is to be understood within the orbit of accountability. We are required to give an account of our ministry and that needs to be in the context of church life, leadership structures and collegiality – but also, ultimately, to God himself.

Faithful leaders receive “a crown of glory that does not fade away”. We struggle with reward metaphors, but the “crown” or “garland” or “wreath” could be made of leaves or gold – and the unfading crown makes a great contrast to the withered parsley of the



Isthmian Games. Our reward is linked to the manifestation of the Chief and True Shepherd. This is a term that is only directly mentioned in Peter and is a moving designation for Jesus Christ, who is the model of all leadership in the community of the Christian church.

From time to time, in my now long ministry, I have discovered that some members of the church have had a disagreement with a presbyter, deacon or church leader (or vice versa). Sooner or later the issue at stake, which is often small in origin, is resolved.

However, unhealthy feelings often remain which need to be dealt with and they are nearly always resolved by referring to the ministry of Jesus. This is why we don't just move on after a challenging time, but stop to consider what God has taught us.

A number of years ago, a quite incredible incident occurred in the Midlands of England, near Birmingham. A two year old child, Joel Towey, was found floating lifeless in a pond. He was brought back to life after seven hours of heart massage. He owes his life to medical skill and cold water.

Such a story reminds me that not everything that appears lifeless is, in fact, so. In a leadership empowered by the Spirit, we can see what appeared to be dead being brought to life.

During my last ten years of ministry in the UK, I saw a whole generation of people struggling to find purpose in numerous broken churches. Lots of apparently new ways were emerging – “messy church”, “café church” and alternative styles developed, but they have not achieved the transformation so often promised. In some settings, they have made a difference, but I sense that it is only as we are renewed as a people that we will fully grasp what it is God wants to do through us.

In my early twenties, the film *Jaws* kept movie theatre lovers in cinemas and away from beaches for some time. People were held on the edge of their seats and an occasional jump to boot! Imagine if, before the dum–dum, dum–dum music, a narrator said, “You are about to witness a huge shark running amok and terrorising a coastal town called Amity; a number of people will be eaten: a naked woman, an old fisherman and Quint the shark hunter. Don't worry, before it's all over, the bad shark will be blown up by Sherriff Brody. Now sit back and enjoy the movie!”

That didn't happen, of course, because we don't want or need to know the end at the very beginning. As a Christian community we are on a journey and I think David Bosch is right when he brilliantly captures the dilemma of the church in the whole developed world by saying, “... strictly speaking, one ought to say that the church is always in a state of crisis and its greatest shortcoming is that it is only occasionally aware of it.”

If we managed to set correctly the biblical pattern of leadership in relation to character and spirituality, then what a difference it would make to the whole church.

- It would motivate us afresh in mission and ministry
- It would bring a new focus for unity
- It would, most important of all, exalt Jesus Christ.