

The Revolution of Christian Elders

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Date: 14 May 2023

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[0 : 0 0] So on Friday an email went out to everybody that's a member, a regular attender, and here in our church and it's announcing that we're now in a season where we're electing new elders. And so if you didn't get that I'll say more about how to make sure you do get that at the end of the service. But we wanted to take a break from Mark this morning to think together about elders, about what an elder is and what they do, especially as we all have the opportunity right now for the next couple of weeks to nominate and elect new elders. So it's important that we take a Sunday to look at this together. So we break from Mark today to look at one of the famous little sections about eldership which is in 1 Peter 5 and I want to look at two things this morning with you. First the fact of elder that there is such a thing and then secondly at the revolutionary call that Peter gives here to the eldership, how Christ changes what it means to be a leader. So let's do that together first the fact of elder. Alright so first one Peter says I exhort the elders among you and if you look at chapter one Peter says that he's writing this letter to people in

Pontus, Asia, Cappadocia, Galatia, Bithnia, a lot of places that covers a lot of territory mostly what we would see today as turkey and that means Peter's talking to a ton of churches not just one this is a circular letter and the very first thing he does is when he gets to chapter five he assumes that there are elders in every one of these churches. So he says I'm talking to the elders among you meaning hundreds of churches that have been planted across Asia at this point I'm talking to all the elders meaning that everywhere the apostles went Peter knows they did the same thing every time they chose elders and that means that he's saying this is the model this is the model that the apostles carried forth into the world and he says I'm even one of these elders he says I'm both an apostle and an elder so he's saying I witnessed the resurrection of Jesus Christ I'm an apostle but he knew that the apostles were not gonna last forever that there would come a day 30 40 50 years from this moment where the apostles will be gone and so his expectation is that the churches will be governed and led by elders and that was the norm all across the apostolic witness in the in the first century the word here for elder is the word presbyter in Greek and so it's where we get our word presbyterian so we talk about a presbyterian form of church government which is what we have which is just basically ruled by elders and we see here that the model from the very beginning was to be presbyterian and if you flip over to Revelation chapter 4 verse 4 it says that when John's looking into heaven he sees this vision

Jesus is there and around Jesus there's a council 24 seats with 24 elders and that means in the Bible we see that the church is presbyterian and that heaven's presbyterian and that that's the model in both places that we just model after the picture that we see in heaven and let me let me give you two takeaways why this is important one is this simply to say again what we're doing we when we elect and nominate new elders is that we're simply trying to be biblical actually we're just trying to follow the model of Scripture the model that God's given us and you can see this when you if you flip through the Old Testament and the New Testament and look for the concept of elder you can go all the way back to Deuteronomy 21 and 22 where anytime you have God's people being established as a community God says use elders and so Moses designated elders in Deuteronomy 21 and 22 or later King David had a council of elders that helped him rule the people of God and the Old Testament or even after that in the first century every single Jewish village was ruled run by elders every single synagogue before Jesus came was run and ruled by elders you get to about ten years after probably the last Apostles death John the very earliest piece of writing we have extra biblical writing Christian piece of writing is a letter from a guy named first from Clement first Clemens the letter and in it Clement talks about how and across the the Roman Empire the Apostles went appointing approved men elders with the consent of the church and so all the way from the Old Testament all the way through the first century after the

Apostles die and through the book of Acts and everywhere else we see this happening over and over and over and over again and we see very clearly that this is the model that God's given us now the second takeaway is this it's so important to say that this is the model the biblical model because lots of people have abandoned the idea of eldership and even of the institutional church altogether in recent years especially as of late one associate there's a sociologist in the States named Ryan Burge he's also a pastor and he's done a lot of work trying to gather data on people leaving the church leaving the church in droves both in the UK and Europe earlier and then also currently the US and one of the things that he says over and over again is one of the peace reasons people are leaving churches is because of a high level of institutional suspicion that people are incredibly suspicious in the 21st century of institutions and that's the church that's the business that's banks that's everything people are institutionally suspicious and one of the reasons for that is because we're individuals we're individualists and so when you prize the individual over the community over the collective as we do and then you take the very good reason for leaving which is so much institutional corruption and you put those together and people are flocking running away from the from the old systems the old flocks and the there's good reason for that because you can turn on religious news all the time and see that in the church just like in the culture at large what you always see people abdicating leadership through great moral error or abusing their power and we have a new phrase to coin for this it's called spiritual abuse and it's very real it happens all the time and so people often are leaving the church and abandoning the eldership model the leadership model because they say it corrupts power corrupts now the important thing to see here is to come today and say it's always been that way this is nothing new and at the same time the Bible says nevertheless this is the model be biblical and so Peter's giving an incredible revolutionary call here that says the way we deal with this problem is by rethinking what an elder is which is exactly what he's doing in this passage we have text from a pastor in the fourth century James name John Chrysostom and he talks about this problem in the late 300s he says he had a view of priests and bishops a little different from us but this is what he says he says the priests are all infected with greed their power hungry they don't care for anybody and I don't think the many bishops will ever be saved he says I don't think I'll see too many of the bishops in heaven all right so we say this is such a problem in the 21st century but it's always because we're talking about humans and so whether you're in the church or outside of the church we tend to abuse institutional power and that's exactly actually what Peter's coming to deal with right here

Peter says revolutionary call on the one hand don't abdicate the office don't don't give up on the model because this is the model God's given and at the other hand on the other hand he says to the elders to you elders and you candidates listen to the revolutionary call that I'm about to give you now let me summarize it for you in just one word before we dig into it a little more if you look at Paul's list for eldership 1st Timothy 3 Titus 1 he gives you these lists of characteristics what do you have to be to qualify how should an elder live and here's some of the ones he lists in both places he says above reproach sober-minded self-controlled respectable hospitable not a drunkard not violent gentle not covetous not addicted to money well thought of by non-Christians only one category one qualifying qualification that Paul goes has to do with talent or gift only one and it's the ability to teach or the ability to communicate the Apostles teaching to other people at a 12 to 1 ratio overwhelmingly all that he talks about is character he says you know you need to be able to teach God's word to some degree but the big thing is character character character 12 times he says it versus the one time where he talks about one gift and that's it he says eldership is the model character is the aspiration it's what protects the office and keeps it from falling apart right so Peter here is going to give us a revolutionary call to eldership and let's look at it secondly it comes to us in three ways three ways three revolution revolutionary calls if you will and the first one is this he says in verse three that elders are to be examples and that's revolutionary why you see it in verse three he says elders are to be not domineering but instead examples and the reason it's revolutionary is because he's addressing something very specific very common in the first century leaders often dominated and the word domineering or to dominate here has the the sense of a master-slave type relationship so leaders often took up power and became masterlike in the midst of subordinates the young as he puts it in verse five and treated them like servants like like slaves in the midst of all kinds of forms of leadership c.s. Lewis commenting on this says of all the bad men religious bad men are the worst and that's exactly actually what what Peter's saying as well you don't have to leave the Bible to know that because Jesus

[10:12] Jesus talked about this he talked about the condition of religious leaders who dominate who oppress and he said in Matthew 23 verse 4 he said the religious leaders put heavy burdens on the people's shoulders and they won't do the stuff themselves so he says one one of the ways is that religious leaders tend to dominate by trying to put burdens on people in other words creating new forms of sin and saying that if you don't obey me if you don't follow me to the letter then you're not truly following God so in other words they create new ideas new theology different ways of sinning that aren't actually even in the scriptures and they use it to lord it over people in other words the word for dominate here is basically this whenever an elder a leader a pastor a minister a Pharisee whoever it might be in any religious community says ultimately follow me that's why this is such a revolution you see he says elders aren't called to ever say follow me they're called to be examples and that's the heart of the revolution see domineering or domination is when a leader says do like me follow me in other words do what I say or you're not truly following God so a dominating elder a dominating leader takes the focus away from Jesus Christ ultimately and puts it on him on themselves and Jesus says it that it's not only a problem in the church in the religious community but he talks about it outside too he says in Matthew 23 Gentile rulers dominate their people he says Gentile rulers lord over their people but not so with you and he's talking there to the Apostles he's saying do not look at the model of the

Pharisees do not look at the model of the common ruler he says that's not it at all in the church both tend to dominate their people but you can't do that you have to and then he says you have to be the servant of all which in the the Greek word there is slave you have to actually be the one that goes low if you want to seek a high office you've got to go and become the lowest in the midst of the people and so he's saying there's no no no reward in this life ultimately no power no prestige as you can see how he puts it in verse 2 part b he says don't do it under compulsion but willingly as God would have you nor for shameful gain but eagerly and he's saying there that there's plenty of leaders all around you that are leaders because they want shameful gain so he's talking about actual first century stuff where an elder of a synagogue an elder of a city was paid really handsomely and they were in charge of building they owned the properties ultimately it was given over to them they were in charge of the educational system the elders in the synagogue were typically over the hospitals some type of system of health care they were in charge of things like that they had access to the buildings health care education money they gathered the temple tax they gathered the synagogue tax and he's saying oh boy that is a hotbed of temptation and people pursue eldership in that context for shameful gain so he's he's addressing something very real and very direct and he's saying the church can never be like that elder can never pursue it because they want power prestige or money and I can promise you that no elder in this church ever pursues eldership for money that's one thing that we can guarantee they don't get paid and the ministers don't pursue it for money either you can't that's not how it works at all but he's saying but neither power nor prestige it can't be I've been here for 25 years therefore I should be a count it can't be biological bloodline financial none of it he's saying that that none of that can be the way and instead he says the eldership is meant for example now here's how that's such a revolution domination says follow me be like me and tries to control whereas example in says I am here to help you follow somebody else the only thing I exist for is not to ever say follow me but to say follow him follow Jesus Christ and I and I only come as a model as a as a person who stands next to somebody the elder I'm saying and says let me help you follow Jesus don't listen to me I just want to help you follow Jesus that's what he's saying that's the revolution he's saying to all the leaders in the first century you're you only exist to lead people to the green grass and that's Jesus Christ that's all you exist for ultimately the implication is this and we'll move on and this is very important if the eldership is an office of example trying to help people see what it means to follow Christ then that means that the ministry is actually just the same for everybody you see if an elder is nothing but an example if leadership is nothing but example following Jesus then that means we're all just called to the same thing following Jesus and the elder exists to do nothing else but help people ultimately do that in the end the revolution is that they're not there for power or prestige or money none of that it's it's simply the service of saying I'll get into the mess with you and walk beside you as you try to follow

Christ we'll just do it together that's the revolution here now the second revolutionary call of three is not only that the elder is called to be an example but then he tells us more specifically what that looks like and he says it in verse 2 that they're meant to be shepherds so the way they're to example is very specifically to be shepherds and that's a of course a metaphor the metaphor that Peter chooses here he says shepherd the flock of God exercising oversight now Scotland is one of the few places where this metaphor works if you preach on shepherd the image of the shepherd in most places throughout the entire world in 2023 people can't actually get a good picture of what's being said but here in Scotland of course we can and many of you know shepherding and sheep way better than I do but the reason is because you can drive through the Highlands and you know you can see a flock of sheep that have come out into the road single track road and you desperately need them to move and half the time what do they do they just sit there and it's because you realize it I'm not a shepherd but I realized very quickly driving through the Highlands sheep or dumb that's the principal message actually sheep or dumb and you know throughout the Old Testament and New Testament over and over and over again the Bible keeps using the image that God is the shepherd and we're the sheep and this is to put it a little crudely I admit but it's really to try to get across the emphasis that we are spiritually dumb a better way to say it we're helpless and you know if you're around sheep at all which haven't been that much but a little bit you realize sheep are incredibly helpless they're they're help they're they're so dependent on the shepherd and so here Peter comes and says well that's actually the image is that God has given shepherds now what he's not saying is that the elders among you are the smart spiritual people and you're the dumb spiritual people not at all actually he's saying here the elders are the first sheep so in verse 4 he says they they all understand that they have a chief shepherd that's what he says in verse 4 meaning every single elder qualifies first by being best above all and knowing how much of a sheep they really are being willing to sing to him come thou fount of every blessing and you get to the line prone to wander Lord I feel it meaning written about sheep prone to wander away sheep wander and that's what the elder sings and says first they know I'm I'm a sheep of the cheap chief shepherd and in that I'm able to be what many have called an under shepherd that's the image we're being given here think about who's writing this Peter knows that he's not smear spiritually smart he Peter abandoned

Jesus Christ Peter committed treason against Jesus Christ he rejected Jesus he told Jesus that he wouldn't let the plan go forward and it's Peter writing this he knows what he's really like and yet he's a shepherd of the sheep an under shepherd now Harold Sinkbile a writer who wrote a book called the care of souls about eldership and pastoring he is really helpful because he says that maybe an even more helpful metaphor than shepherd and under shepherds chief shepherd Jesus under shepherd is the shepherd dog so elders are like sheep dogs and if you've ever seen a sheep dog operate you know that they do they do two things they sink by alright he says they give their both ears to the master so whenever they're running around hurting and corralling the sheep both ears are attuned to the master but their eyes are on the sheep and that's the image of the elder that their ears are attuned to the master servants and their eyes are on the sheep trying to help the sheep and one writer Evelyn Underhill she wrote a book called the teacher's vocation where she observed sheep dogs in action and this is what she says about it the dog was a docile and faithful agent of another's mind he used his intelligence but he always did it in obedience to the master's will the little mountain sheep he had to deal with were exceedingly tiresome experts and going the wrong way even so the dog went steadily on with it the dog's relation to the shepherd was the center of his life and because of that he enjoyed doing his job for the sheep he was working for something not his of his own not not his own the whole of which he could understand or grasp but that was exactly the source of his delight so she's saying the dog works for the master tire tirelessly not even understanding what was happening couldn't even quite what are we actually doing with these sheep he didn't even quite understand the big picture not at all and yet that was exactly his joy the dog's joy just to shepherd the sheep as the will of the master not knowing the big picture not knowing how it would go not knowing what would happen in other words he's saying the elder's job the minister's job is to tire tirelessly care for the sheep and not really know the big picture not really know what's happening it really is one of the sheep himself and that gives us such an helpful a helpful image because it tells you the two classical things people have said century after century about what an elder does the sheepdog is a great image because the elder first we've always said this in Christian history first the elder's job is to guard and protect the image of the sheepdog or the shepherd with the staff to guard and protect you can scan your eyes down just quickly at verse 8 and Peter just a few verses later says be sober minded be watchful he's talking to the elders be watchful because your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion so he extends this image of shepherd and says Satan is prowling around God's people like a roaring lion and you're he says the first thing is you are to guard and protect you're a sheepdog and when the lion the bear the wolf whatever metaphor comes along your job is to actually protect the people and so Christian theologians have talked about it in a couple ways they've said that the job of the elder is first to guard or protect the deposit of the apostles which is the gospel itself and so the first way that they beat away the lion that the tempter is they protect the gospel and so they're first to be actually theologians they're to care about true teaching and false teaching they're to protect the people because they protect the gospel but then secondly the other aspect of this is that they then use that gospel to protect the hearts of the people the church whenever they're being tempted and so for every single one of us if you're a Christian today of the lion the lion the world the flesh and the devil comes into your life

at different times and says God is not what you thought he's not good leave the faith you know if you were to leave the faith you could be with any person you wanted to be with if you were to leave the faith you know science and faith just don't ultimately they're not compatible in the end the lion the wolf the bear comes into your life into your heart through all manner of temptation and tries to get you to walk away over and over and over and over again and God says I'm sending out the sheep dogs to try to guard and protect you with what they're guarding which is the gospel itself the gospel message itself now that's the negative side then there's a positive side and we'll move on and the positive side the positive side is this that Psalm 23 the Lord is my shepherd he takes me out of the valley of death and leads me to still waters by green grass beautiful pastures you see the positive side the pot is the positive side of the under shepherd is to then say I protect you and then I take you to the green grass and the green grass is just Jesus to say don't follow me I'm just trying to help you find the green grass again every time you're tempted to say I'm not sure science and faith are compatible I'm not sure that God is actually good I'm not sure I can get through this how could evil exist and

[23 : 46] God be good at the same time the under shepherd the sheep dog says let me show you the green grass again let me take you back to the truth over and over and over again now we've got to move on to the last thing but let me close the second revolutionary call by saying this remember the elder is an example meaning that this is actually just everybody's job he's he's just a leader among equals all called to the same exact thing all of us are called to come alongside of sheep dogs to each other to one another and mutual love and say let me take you back to the green grass to come alongside a friend a Christian friend in the congregation and say I see that you're you're you're walking away you're you're chasing after these things this is not gonna fulfill you this is not it you think it's it but this is not it let me take you back to the green grass that's the elder's job as a leader among equals but it's everybody's ministry elders called the same exact thing that everybody else is but as as a leader as a model in the midst of that ministry and that means that an elder like everybody else is a sinner a helpless sheep in desperate need of spiritual power so that they don't walk away from the green grass themselves and that that leaves us with a question and the biggest question of the passage might be this where do you find the spiritual power to be an elder elders well the answer is the exact same thing where where do you find the power to even be a sheep at all and you remember Psalm 23 the great Psalm the Lord is my shepherd that God is the good shepherd of the sheep and then you come to the

Gospels and Jesus and John chapter 10 stands up in the midst of the Apostles and says I am the good shepherd I am the God of Psalm 23 and we we learned immediately that the good shepherd the shepherd of the sheep of the Old Testament came into history and took on flesh and he's standing right there the Lord has become the good shepherd in this human Jesus Christ and there were he's so close but that that not even that is the end of the story of spiritual power where does it really come from and it's this that in the beginning of the gospel when Jesus first showed up in John chapter 1 John the Baptist opened his mouth the first time he saw Jesus the good shepherd and said what behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world you see the power to be an elder is the same as the power to be a Christian and it's to see that the good shepherd came into history but he didn't stay the shepherd he became the lamb he became the sheep the sheep are helpless the sheep are spiritually dumb Jesus Christ came to become the lamb in other words you see what he's saying he's saying that he took on everything that we are he took on what's wrong with us the spiritual power an elder needs to be a good elder is the same a Christian needs to be a Christian and that's to see that Jesus Christ was the lamb for you that went to the slaughter that's how Isaiah puts it in it's quite crude but it's true that's the heart of spiritual power it's nothing but saying oh boy in his when Jesus was slaughtered as the as the lamb of God there's my power grace was poured upon me that's the green grass it's him it's what he did for me it's what he came to do for me and that's the real secret to all of this that's the revolutionary call that Jesus changed leadership forever that it became all about the cross it became all about him and that means that elders aren't personless not even close instead what we might say as elders are meant to be true Christians and what's a true Christian a true Christian as a person who knows how desperately they need the grace of the lamb of God now let me close finally with the third revolutionary call and very briefly and in light of all that this is how Peter wraps it up he says in verse 5 likewise you who are younger which is not just young and age but you who are not an elder so anybody that's not a leader be subject to the elders and then he says this clothe yourself with humility all of you toward one another now Peter ends it in the modern world in the 20 in 2023 you might not catch it but in the first century he ends it with something that's truly revolutionary he turns to the people that are under the leadership of the elders and says yes you're subject to the elders authority and he says but to all of you elders and people be subject to one another in humility the world had never seen anything like that before when Peter writes writes this right here remember that in the first century even in the midst of Judaism in the midst of the synagogues and the Jewish leadership of the towns elders had had nearly absolute right over the people they own the buildings they ran the educational system they were in charge of the health care they were paid very well they gathered the temple tax all of this and Peter's coming and saying not anymore not after Jesus it's got to change and he says here's the revolution actually all of you are just in mutual subjection to one another that you're just you're commonly and equally humble before one another that that's the revolution now let me give you two

ways that this works out and we'll finish the first is in 1st Timothy 5 so Paul says the same thing in 1st Timothy 5 and there he says that he says this that the role of elder sometimes is to come alongside somebody and tell them that they're really concerned for them that this is the path of discipleship and elders sometimes does in the church need to come to church members and say I'm worried about where you're going I'm worried about something you're believing I'm worried about a pattern of your life a direction that you've been heading I'm worried that you may be walking away from Jesus and that's not spiritual abuse not at all not it when it's done in love that's that's actually the call the call not only of the elder but of all of us to each other sometimes that happens but 1st Timothy 5 verse 17 Paul does something he says and the elders are to be subject to the people and therefore if anybody has a complaint has a concern all they have to do is gather one other person and come and speak and say to the elder I'm worried about where you're going I'm worried about you walking away from Jesus I'm worried about the path of life you've been living I'm worried about something you've been teaching and that had never happened before you see he's saying it actually now goes both directions that elders are chosen to shepherd and model and lead people back to the green grass but sometimes the people are also called to lead the elder back to the green grass and that it works in both directions it's mutual it's mutual humility he says now the second thing and here's the important bit that that means that he's calling on the church to be a space a culture of mutual love in every direction he says so be humble all of you before one another elders deacons women pastoral women's pastoral team members regular attenders visitors he says it's comprehensive everybody just be mutually humble subjecting yourself to each other in every single direction whatever the relationship might go however it might be it doesn't matter in every direction and that means he's saying never allow for a culture of hyper criticism never allow for a culture of abuse spiritual abuse none of that in every direction instead the paradigm is this character humility truth and love so keep short accounts understand that there's always gonna be we're always gonna struggle with one another to some degree but keep a short account because the paradigm is humility character love it's a culture ultimately of trust in every single direction remembering remembering that we all we all actually share just share the same ministry and the ministry is nothing but this helping one another to get to the end of our days believing in Jesus Christ that's the mutual ministry and it's as simple as that I'll close with this one pastor was talking about this mutual humility idea that we see in Peter and he says what does this look like in other words he asked the question out where where should you look for an elder in your church according to first Peter 5 verse 5 and this is what he says he says on the one hand they're guarding the deposit of the faith you know on the one hand they're over here they're reading John Calvin they're reading people named Bob Inc. you know they're they're they're reading theology they're they're loving the Bible they're getting into the word they're trying to understand more and more of what's been given to us through the apostles all the time that's the one hand on the other hand they're taking out the trash they're in the crash they're in kids church they're cleaning up after the service they're praying with the sick they're sitting at the hospital bed they're holding the hand of the dying they're playing with the children it's both and that's mutual humility that in every direction love in every direction

humility and so the universal call is simply this our church St. Columbus will always will always by the spirit grow and grow and grow in health spiritual health in so far as in every single direction no matter what role anybody plays in the church we are putting on the clothing that Peter says here the clothing of humility towards one another the clothing that the great shepherd of the sheep put on when he became the lamb that that's the model for healthy church let's pray together father we ask Lord that you would gift us all with humility and with love and with trust and we ask for that because Lord we want we long to be guided by the Holy Spirit in the way that we shepherd one another towards the finish line so Lord you say that the reward is not in this life verse 4 that but it's an unfading crown of glory that is yet to come and so help us today especially as leaders for me for all of us who are leaders Lord I pray for them and lift them before you and ask this morning that they would be renewed in the call the call to not love anything but helping people find the green grass Jesus that's you we know that's you and so we pray Lord that you would give us grace help us to forgive one another as we of course fall short of this and give us great wisdom as we seek new elders in this coming season and we pray for this in Christ's name Amen