

Almost every day when I leave for work, I gather up my three small kids and have a family moment. I tell them all that I love them and give big hugs and kisses. Then I tell them priorities I want them to focus on: honor your mother, love one another, be good for your teachers, be kind to your friends. Hudson, I want you to be a good leader today. Addie, I want you to keep a joyful attitude throughout the day. Luke, I want you to flush the toilet after you go to the bathroom. Baby steps. Whatever it is they each need to work on. Keren has told me that my daily family culture-setting speeches, even though they are only one to two minutes, really shape the kids' behavior and the quality of their day. In many ways, as Peter nears the end of his letter to these churches, that's the sort of conversation he begins to have. If you have your Bible, turn to 1 Peter 5, and we'll see what Peter has to say. We are going to see how Peter speaks to the leaders of the churches and reminds them of the high and holy calling of leadership. He exhorts them to lead faithfully, and lead like Jesus.

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 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. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." (1 Peter 5:1-5)

As Peter addresses the leaders of the church, did you notice what word he used to describe them? "To the *elders* among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed" (1 Peter 5:1, emphasis added). The Greek word translated "elder" here is "presbyteros," which literally means "older man." In our culture, we associate "older man" with things like "early bird specials" at Denny's and knowing how to operate a fax machine. But in the Bible, it's less about the age of your joints and more about the age of your soul. An "elder" refers to a mature man. The leaders of the church were mature men, and their maturity exhibited itself in three primary ways:

- **Mature in life.** You don't have to have a minimum of four surgeries under your belt and use a walker with the tennis balls on it, but you can't be a teenager, either. You must have lived enough life to have gained wisdom and experience.
- **Mature in character.** There is a long list of character requirements listed out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and the main idea is that the overall quality of your life lends credibility to the gospel. When someone in your community finds out you are a

leader of the church down the street, they ought to think, “Maybe I should try that church out,” not, “That church needs to start doing criminal background checks.”

- **Mature in faith.** These are people who have been following the Lord long enough that they are able to help be a guide for others.

Peter writes to the elders who are leading the church, and how does he refer to himself? As an apostle, one of the twelve original disciples? No. Does he refer to himself as the Pope, the one who has the keys to the kingdom and whom others must obey? No, he refers to himself as a fellow elder because God’s long-term desire for the church around the world is not that it would be led by the twelve apostles, or led by a singular pope, but that every local church should be led by local elders.

Some churches have chosen an episcopal model, meaning major decisions (such as who your pastor is going to be, how you are going to reach your local community) are made by outside leaders. Sometimes the future of your spiritual family is decided by someone who couldn’t find your church on a map. Others have chosen a congregational model, in which major decisions are voted on by everyone. This sounds pretty good at first, until you have three consecutive meetings to determine wallpaper color and whether we are going with one- or two- ply toilet paper. There are pros and cons to different models, but neither of these are consistent with what we see in the Bible! What we see throughout Scripture, including in this passage, is the elder model, in which major decisions are made by biblically-qualified leaders within the church. This is the type of leadership that existed within the early church, and this is the leadership model we have embraced at The Creek. We have nine godly, mature men who have been granted the sacred task of making the major decisions that affect the long term health, vitality, and direction of the church.

But they are not just the major decision makers! When Peter addresses the elders, he uses a very important word and metaphor to talk to them. He says, “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them” (1 Peter 5:2). This is a very different leadership model and paradigm than is common in our world. Often, when we think about leadership, we have certain images coming to our minds.

- **CEO / board room.** This is leadership at an organizational level, the highly-compensated people who sit atop the org chart, in the metaphorical smoke-filled room, making executive decisions. That’s a kind of leadership, but it’s not pastoral leadership.
- **Foreman.** This is the person on a busy job site, barking all the orders, directing all the traffic, and checking in on everyone’s work. That’s a kind of leadership, but it’s not pastoral leadership.

- **Cruise ship director.** This is the person who is always up front, with the microphone, speaking, informing, entertaining, and ensuring you always have a great time and get exactly what you want. That's a kind of leadership, but it's not pastoral leadership.
- **Nanny.** This is the person who takes care of infants. The baby cries, it gets a bottle. The baby smells, it gets a diaper change. Constant caring for an infant's needs. That's a kind of leadership, but it's not pastoral leadership.

Look one more time at the passage: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them” (1 Peter 5:2). Shepherds are not locked up in a boardroom making executive decisions from far away; they are up close and personal; they are relational. Shepherds call their sheep by name, and sheep recognize their shepherds and know their voice. Shepherds aren't trying to entertain their sheep; they ensure their sheep are safe and protected, well-fed and nourished, staying unified together as a flock.

Peter wants to make sure these elders, these shepherds, know the right way to serve, following the example of Jesus, who is called the chief shepherd. Jesus is the ultimate example of leadership in the kingdom. So Peter goes on to add, “Serve as shepherds—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” (1 Peter 5:2-3). That’s the heart of leadership as a shepherd. When you look at this passage, as well as other church leadership passages in the Bible, you see that elders and shepherds in the church have five main responsibilities, which our elders give time and attention to every time we meet.

The works of elders / shepherds

Protection

A good shepherd protects the flock from threats and danger. When Paul spoke to the elders in the Ephesian church he said: “After I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!” (Acts 20:29-31). Elders protect the flock. What does protection look like? It’s not like those frenzied moms at the grocery store who have their kids on leashes attached at the hip so they can’t run off. (No judgment! Just observation.) Think of elder protection more like when you are driving on the highway, there are lines painted for you to stay within. When you move outside the lines, there is a rumble strip, a gentle warning saying, “Hey, you are moving outside the lines. You are in danger. Veer back in.” If there is a steep drop off or cross traffic, rather than only a rumble strip, there is a guardrail or barrier. When you are driving at 70 miles an hour, drift can be deadly. The Bible says that theological drift can be deadly. Moral and ethical drift can

be deadly. So elders are like the roadcrew to keep people on the road as faithful followers of Jesus.

Preaching

Like a shepherd ensures his flock is well fed and nourished, elders are the ones chiefly responsible for the edification of the body through the teaching and preaching of God's Word. When the organizational responsibilities and daily demands of the first church got intense for the apostles, this is what they said. "The Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables'" (Acts 6:2). The leaders were certainly willing to wait on tables; they had humble hearts, but rather than overseeing the distribution of physical food, they knew their *chief priority* was ensuring the quality of their spiritual food; they had to focus on the ministry of the word. When churches grow strong, it's usually because of faithful, impassioned, Christ-centered preaching of the Word. When churches veer off course, it's often because, in one way or another, they compromise on the Word. Our elders review all our preaching and teaching on a regular basis. Occasionally, someone will send me an email offering a critique about something I've preached. Usually it's very graciously worded and kind. On rare occasions, it's in all caps. I always thank them for their email and tell them I will forward it on to the chairman of our elders, and it will be reviewed by our leadership team—because they are the ones responsible for our preaching and guarding the doctrinal purity and clarity of our church.

Two years ago, we introduced our team of elders to the church at our congregational meeting, so everyone could know who they were. The next week, a woman in our church went up to one of the new elders who had only been on the team for a week or so. She asked, "You're one of our elders now, aren't you?" He said, "Yes, I am." He was expecting a question about the Bible or a request for prayer. She said, "One of the toilets in the women's room is clogged!" He was ready to give sage advice, and she was like, "The red sea is rising Moses; come and deliver your people!"

Policy

The elders of the church are the ones responsible for setting guidelines and guardrails. In the early church, as Gentiles became Christian and entered into a faith that was predominantly Jewish, no one knew if the Gentiles had to start acting like Jews, if they had to start keeping a kosher diet, if they needed to start circumcising their children. These were practical questions. Of course, the elders decided no, Gentiles don't have to keep the Old Testament law. There wasn't a specific Bible verse for them to go to, to know for sure what God wanted, so they had to make a Spirit-led policy decision! In Acts 15 we see the letter they wrote:

From the apostles and elders...it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.” Acts (15:23-29)

That’s the work of elders. At The Creek, elders have said, “We love when children are baptized, but baptism is such a huge and life changing decision, we want to make sure they truly understand the scope of the gospel and the nature of the commitment they are making.” There is not a Bible verse that tells us how old someone must be to be baptized, so the elders have put a policy in place to try our best to help people make wise decisions. We’ve decided that if someone under the age of eleven wants to be baptized, even if their parents are supportive of it, we have the child, along with a parent, meet together with a few of our staff members or elders, to ensure they are truly ready for that monumental decision.

The elders have set policies for staff members. They ensure that our compensation is appropriate, not so meager that our pastors are starving and unable to provide for their families, but not so high that it’s self-enriching. They ensure it’s fair and appropriate. We use gold-standard, nation-wide data for objective evaluation. Our elders set policy for a sabbatical. Our elder team believes that for pastors to serve at their best over the course of many years, they should take a sabbatical roughly every decade. After roughly 10 years of service, our staff take a couple months off, during which instead of constant output, constant serving, constant writing, constant evenings away from family, constant caring for others, they have an extended time to rest and let God tend to their soul and fill it up, so they have something fresh to give when they return. Next month will be the beginning of ten years for me at The Creek. About a year ago, the elders said it was time for my sabbatical.” My first thought wasn’t, “Great, a long vacation!” I love my job, I love being here. I’m going to miss you. I actually asked to take the sabbatical later. But our elders know the importance of rest, retreat, and renewal. It’s a lot easier to be proactive with soul care than reactive after a crisis. That’s the kind of wise men who lead our church.

Our staff participates in a survey every one to two years that evaluates the quality of working here at The Creek. Over a thousand churches participate in this survey. The good news is, we got an A on our report card. This company that studies church health actually advertises The Creek on its website as one of the best Christian workplaces in America. Last time we took this survey, they sent my plaque and a congratulations letter. (I’m not kidding.) The health of our church and the health of our staff flows out of the healthy and wise policy decisions of our elders.

Prayer

Prayer is one of the most important tasks God gives to elders. James 5:14 says, “Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.” Our elders are always available for prayer. We are at the Connecting Place after every service, every Sunday. Once a month we have extended time to pray over anyone who might be sick and would like focused prayer specifically for their ailment. There have been times when we’ve prayed with bold faith, and we didn’t see any change in the physical circumstance, but there was an increased sense of God’s love, goodness, and presence. There have been other times when we witnessed miraculous healings. Elders are not responsible for the outcome of prayer—that’s up to the Lord—but we are given the sacred task of faithfully praying for the needs of God’s people.

Pastoral care

Elders are called to walk alongside people and help them grow in their faith. Look at the intimate, relational way the work is described in 1 Thessalonians 2

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, 11-12)

Elders are called to care for people like their own family. This isn’t theoretical for us. We sit in hospital rooms. We stand at gravesides. We attend weddings. We pray over newborn babies. We confront people in sin and chart a path for restoration.

How the people should follow

This is what elders are called to do to care for the people in the church. After taking the majority of time talking to elders about how to lead, Peter wraps up by talking to the people in the church about how to follow. “In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble’” (1 Peter 5:5). There are four times as many verses given to leaders, so we won’t spend nearly the amount of time on this, but I do want to highlight the two key verbs given to the people in the church, especially the younger. “Submit yourself” to your elders, and “clothe yourself with humility” toward one another. God opposes the proud, so we aren’t arrogant or stubborn, we are humble and submissive! Submission and humility are the hallmarks of how God’s people interact with one another.

This is one of those areas where, as your pastor, I want to commend you and honor you. Often pastors I know talk about their jobs being so hard, and so stressful, and their people being so contentious and combative that every task is like pulling teeth, every new direction is like herding cats. That is not The Creek. You are so wonderful! There have been times in the past where I said, "Would you consider giving a little more, not because I want a raise, but because we want to reach new people." And you didn't huff and puff and say, "Our church is so greedy, always asking for money." Instead, you said, "We'd be so happy to give more to help more people grow in their relationship with Jesus." We've asked people to consider changing the service they come to, to open seats for guests and newcomers. You didn't get all proud and say, "We're doing what works best for our family; they can stand in the back." You've said, "Of course, we'll gladly make some changes and do whatever is best for the mission of the church." I've gone to life groups at this church and said, "Would you be willing to add this new family?" And they've said, "We're kinda full now; our group is in a great spot. So that may not be a decision we would make on our own, but we are so happy to defer to your guidance, and if this could help others grow as disciples, then sign us up."

I could go on and on and on. Thank you for being such a humble, submissive, loving church. The Bible says to honor your leaders in such a way that it makes their work a joy. On behalf of our elders, I say you have done that, and we are so thankful!

I began the message today by talking about what I do with my kids when I leave the house. When I come home, my kids all circle up and we talk about how everyone did. Sometimes, when they have exceptional report cards, there is a special treat. Peter says the same thing will happen for all of us when Jesus returns. He says, "And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (1 Peter 5:4). We are the family of God. He's told shepherds to serve, love and lead, and he's told all of us to lay down our pride and exchange it for humility. If we follow his word, there will be a crown of glory that will never fade for all of us.