

# Elders as leaders in 1 Peter and the early Church

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## Abstract

*Addressing a hostile situation that called for courageous and exemplary leaders, the letter of 1 Peter employed in 5:1-5 a cluster of vocabulary and images (elders, overseers/exercise oversight, shepherds, flock) representing a growing coalescence of terms for leaders and their functions in the early Jesus movement. As one of the earliest witnesses to this constellation and its symbolization of community leaders as elders-pastors-overseers, the text of 1 Peter 5:1-5a deserves more attention than it has hitherto been accorded in the study of early Christian ministry and church order.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In studies on ministry, leadership and order in the early church, 1 Peter often is given less attention than it deserves. Even when the content of the letter is examined for its bearing on this theme, relevant statements of the text (e.g. 1 Pt 5:1-5a) are sometimes misconstrued or, in other instances, passages irrelevant to the topic of ecclesial leadership, such as 1 Peter 2:4-10 and 1 Peter 4:7-11, are used to develop theories unsupported by the evidence and inconsistent with the content of the letter as a whole. Examples of such exegetical *Abwege* (errors) will be mentioned in due course. Our main focus of attention in this essay, however, will be the instruction of elders in 1 Peter 5:1-4, its unique blend of traditions and motifs, and its significance for a general understanding of the role and responsibilities of elders as leaders in the New Testament period. Most of the exegetical underpinning of what follows is presented in various sections of my recently published commentary on 1 Peter in the Anchor Bible series (Elliott 2000). Given the space limits of

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this essay, I shall regularly refer the reader to the commentary for exegetical support of the points presented here in summary form.

## **2. PASSAGES OF 1 PETER IRRELEVANT TO THE TOPIC OF LEADERSHIP**

### **2.1 1 Peter 4:7-11**

At the outset it is important to be clear that 1 Peter 5:1-4(5a) is the only passage of this letter in which the issue of leadership is addressed. Every reader of 1 Peter knows, of course, that significant mention of *charismata* is made in 1 Peter 4:7-11. This passage, however, has no relevance to the issue of leadership or to charismatic forms of authority, however much this has been assumed in earlier scholarship. 1 Peter 4:7-11, a unit of the letter addressed to the entire community, encourages of all members actions that will strengthen the solidarity of the community in its struggle with a hostile society (Elliott 2000:743-56). This includes “exercising sound judgment and being alert” (v 7b), maintaining constant love toward one another” (v 8a), “being hospitable to one another” (v 9), “speaking” (v 11a) and “rendering service” (v 11b). All these various activities are interpreted theologically as “charisms,” exercises of gifts of grace conferred by God: “Inasmuch as each has received a gift of grace (*charisma*), serve one another with it as honourable household stewards of God’s varied grace” (v 10). The several references here to “each,” “anyone,” and “one another” and the fact that “each” is said to be a beneficiary of God’s grace make it clear that *all* members of the community are in view, with no distinction between some who are charismatically endowed for leadership and others who are not. The concern is not with leadership by some, but mutual service by all. Thus the charisms of which 1 Peter 4:7-11 speaks have no bearing on the issue of leadership and authority (cf also Elliott 1966:192-196).

Accordingly, the theory that 1 Peter 4:10-11 and 1 Peter 5:1-5 derive from different letters of different authors envisioning contrasting forms of leadership and that leadership by elders was intended to supplant leadership by charismatics (Schröger 1976) is sheer speculation with nothing to commend it.

### **2.2 1 Peter 2:4-10**

A second passage of 1 Peter that often is claimed to bear on the issue of authority and leadership, is 1 Peter 2:4-10. But again the case is otherwise. This ingeniously constructed passage constitutes a powerful conclusion to the first major section of the letter (1: 3-2:10), which emphasises the divinely

conferred dignity of the reborn people of God. Beginning at 1 Peter 1:3, the course of Christian conversion and growth is traced from the believers' rebirth through the mercy of God (1:3-12) to the hope and holiness of God's reborn children, who are redeemed by the holy Christ (1:13-21), the mutual familial love required of those reborn through the word of the Gospel (1:22-25), their nourishment on and continued growth through the word (2:1-3), to their consolidation as the "household of God", which embraces now the elect and holy people of God of the end time. In this depiction of the rebirth, growth, and consolidation of the reborn as the household or family of God, diverse traditions and images are merged to affirm the family's divine regeneration, sanctification, and election, its union with God and Jesus Christ, and its distinction from all nonbelievers (Elliott 2000:406-449). In 1 Peter 2:9-10, several honorary epithets of ancient Israel, all *corporate* in nature, are used to affirm the believing *community* as God's elect and holy people: "elect stock" (*genos eklekton*), "royal residence" (*basileion*), "priestly community" (*hierateuma*), "holy people" (*ethnos hagion*), "people for [God's] possession" (*laos eis peripoiêsen*), "God's people" (*laos Theou*). All these epithets are *corporate* in nature and express not the qualities of individuals but rather the privileged character of the *community* as God's elect and holy people. Drawn mainly from Israel's exodus and covenant traditions (Ex 19:3-6; Is 43:20-21; but also Hs 1-2), these communal epithets identify the believing community as the eschatological covenant people of God, elected and sanctified by God from among all the peoples. Like the expression "elect stock" derived from Isaiah 43:20-21, the terms *basileion* (royal residence), *hierateuma* (priestly community) and *ethnos hagion* (holy people) deriving from the LXX version of the covenant formula of Exodus 19:6, all emphasize the elect and holy character of community.

This emphasis on election pervades the entire unit of 1 Peter 2:4-10, as its structure as well as its terminology make clear. In verse 4 Jesus the Lord (cf 2:3) is declared, in terms derived from Isaiah 28:16 (quoted in 2:6), to be the "living stone" that was rejected by humans but who is "*elect (eklekton)*, honoured in God's sight." In verse 5 where the focus shifts from Jesus to the community, the election and covenant terms *hierateuma* and *hagios* (deriving from Ex 19:6, cited in verse 9) supply the terms of verse 5e ("holy priestly community"). Similarly, the associated election and covenant term *basileion* (Ex 19:6, cited in verse 9) is interpreted in verse 5d as "house(hold) of the Spirit." In verse 6 the citation of Isaiah 28:16 speaks of a stone set by God in Zion that is "a cornerstone, *elect (eklekton)*, honoured." Finally in verse 9 those who believe in Jesus Christ as the "elect stone" and who are honoured as he was honoured (vv 4d, 7a) are themselves declared to be an "elect

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stock” and God’s elect and holy people with terms deriving from Israel’s election and covenant tradition (“royal residence,” “priestly community,” “holy people”). This emphasis on the divine election of the household of God relates this passage to both the opening and close of the letter, where both addressees and the brotherhood at Rome are described as the “elect” or “co-elect” of God (1:1; 5:13). Thus the theme of election weaves through this letter from beginning to end and in 2:4-10 receives its fullest explication.

This passage was read in quite a different light by Martin Luther who was interested less in the meaning of 1 Peter 2:4-10 as a whole than in the term *hierateuma* (2:5, 9) and the theological use to which this term could be put in the formulation of a new, more biblically based doctrine: *das Priestertum aller Gläubigen*, the priesthood of all believers. In criticism of the cleavage between the clergy and laity of his day and a monopolization by the former of the means of grace, the great Reformer insisted on the equality before God of all the baptized. Through baptism, he asserted, all believers are consecrated as priests (WA 6.407.22-25; cf also 6.564.6-7), pointing to 1 Peter 2:9 (and Rv 5:10) as the biblical basis for this thought. This priesthood of all believers complements the priesthood of the officially ordained, he maintained, and both general and specific priesthoods participate, each in its own fashion, in the priesthood of Christ. (For relevant texts and for a fuller discussion of this doctrine in relation to 1 Pt 2 see Elliott 1966:2-5; Elliott 2000:449-455).

In general it must be acknowledged that Luther’s thoughts on this subject were prompted more by theological than exegetical concerns. Detailed, exegetical investigations of 1 Peter 2:4-10 in modern time (e.g. Cerfaux 1939:5-39; Blinzler 1949:49-56; Elliott 2000:406-449 among others) have shown that this passage has little if anything to do with the notion of a priesthood of all believers as expounded by Luther and those following his lead. (For the numerous treatments of this doctrine see Elliott 2000:455, n 73). The focus of 1 Peter 2:4-10 is not on individuals but on the believing community as a whole, as all the collective terms of verses 5, 9 and 10 make clear. The term employed in verses 5 and 9 is not *hierais* (“priests”) but *hierateuma*, a *collective* term (“body, community of priests”), as are most *nomina actionis* ending in the suffix *-euma*; e.g. *strateuma* (“army”, “body of soldiers”), *techniteuma* (“guild of artisans”) (Elliott 1966:64-70). Luther’s choice of *Priestertum* as a rendition of *hierateuma* is, like the English “priesthood”, an abstract noun that fails to convey the collective force of the original. Moreover, it is not priesthood, but rather election that is the central and unifying concept of this passage. And whereas nothing is said of priestly community or priesthood elsewhere in 1 Peter, election constitutes a major

theme from start to close. The term *hierateuma* derives from the ancient covenantal formula of Exodus 19:3-6, whose focus is the divine election and sanctification of the household of Jacob (Ex 19:3). In this covenantal formula *hierateuma* expresses the *sanctity* of the covenant people and its immediate proximity to God, not the individual status of individual priests or kings. No mention is made in 1 Peter 2:4-10 of baptism or any baptismal consecration to priesthood. Nor is any mention made here of believers participating in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, another element of Luther's doctrine drawn from an entirely different writing, namely the Epistle to the Hebrews.

In sum, the claim that 1 Peter 2:5 and 9 constitute the *locus classicus* for the notion of a "priesthood of all believers" is exegetically unwarranted. That the doctrine of a priesthood of all believers may have other biblical moorings is a possibility worthy of consideration. That it reflects the sense of 1 Peter 2:4-10, on the other hand, is out of the question. Since 1 Peter 2:4-10 is focused exclusively on the community and not its individual members or leaders, it must be concluded that the passage contains no information relevant to the issue of leadership. 1 Peter 5:1-5a, on the other hand, is the one and only passage that deals directly with this issue and so it is this pericope to which we now turn.

### 2.3 1 Peter 5:1-5a and context

1 Peter 5:1-5a, containing an address to elders (*presbyteroi*, 5:1-4) and younger persons (*neôteroi*, 5:5a) forms part of the concluding section of the letter (4:12-5:11), which speaks of honour and joy in suffering (4:12-19), responsible elders and subordinate younger persons (5:1-5a) and the mutual humility of all, resisting the Devil, and trusting in God (5:5b-11) (Elliott 2000:809-844). In 1 Peter 5:1-4, the author addresses the elders (*presbyteroi*, 5:1) in his capacity as a "co-elder" (*sympresbyteros*, 5:1a), "and witness to the sufferings of the Christ" (5:1b), "and sharer in the glory about to be revealed" (5:1c). These characterizations relate to important themes developed throughout the letter; for the second designation see 1:11; 2:21b; 23; 3:18a; 4:13; for the third, 1:5, 7-8, 11, 13; 4:13, 14. The use and perhaps coinage of "co-elder" (attested nowhere else in Greek literature), in particular, rather than "apostle" (cf 1:1), underlines the *collegiality* that the author wishes to establish between the elders he addresses and himself as fellow elder. As the details of verses 1 Peter 2-5a make clear, these elders were not simply persons older in age, but seniors in households (and in all likelihood seniors in their longevity as believers) who, because of their prestige and status in the household churches of which they were the household heads (Campbell 1994), were recognized and respected as *leaders* of their respective household churches.

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As leaders, these elders are exhorted to “shepherd the flock of God among you”, (v 2a) by “exercising oversight” (v 2b) in a responsible manner spelled out by a triad of qualities unique in the New Testament (vv 2c-3). As a consequence of their responsible leadership, they are promised that when the “chief Shepherd” (Jesus Christ, cf 2:25) is manifested, these “under-shepherds” will receive “the unfading crown of glory” (v 4). To these honourable elders-leaders, the younger persons (i.e. the recent converts of the community, the novices in faith) are to be subordinate (v 5a).

Throughout the ancient world, both in Greco-Roman and Israelite circles, heads of households respected for their age and prestige were known as “elders” (*zekanim, presbyteroi, gerontes, seniores*) and exercised the role of local leadership (Campbell 1994). By the time of 1 Peter (ca 73-92 CE), this traditional form of leadership also was firmly in place among the households of the messianic movement. Although Paul makes no explicit mention of elders in his letters, their presence in areas visited by Paul is likely, given the leading role of household heads like Stephan, a senior in the faith (an “early convert in Achaia,” 1 Cor 16:15), whom Paul calls a “fellow worker and labourer” (1 Cor 16:16) but who was an elder in all but name. This likelihood is strengthened by the fact that the author of Acts notes that the earliest Jerusalem church was led by “apostles and elders” (Ac 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; cf 11:30; 21:18) and that Paul and Barnabas appointed such elders in each congregation on their first missionary journey (Ac 14:23). Elders also functioned as leaders in Asia Minor, the area to which 1 Peter was addressed (1 Pt 1:1), as attested by a variety of writings including Acts (20:17), 1 Timothy (5:17-22), 2 John (v 1), 3 John (v 1) and the later letters of Ignatius (*Magn* 2:1; 3:1; 6:1; 7:1, 2; 12:2; *Phld inscr*, 7:2; 10:2; *Pol*. 6:1) and Polycarp (*Phil inscr*, 5:3; 6:1). They likewise functioned as leaders at Corinth (1 *Clem* 1:3; 3:3; 21:6; 44:5; 47:6; 54:2; 57:1) and Rome (1 *Clem* 21:6; 44:5; *Herm Vis* 2.4.2, 3; 3.1.8).

A noteworthy feature of our Petrine passage is the pastoral imagery and verb *episkopountes* used to describe the task of these elders. The Christian community is referred to as “the flock of God” and the elders are urged to “shepherd” (*poimanete*) this flock (*to poimnion*) “by exercising oversight” (*episkopountes*) (5:2). To “exercise oversight” or to be an *episkopos*, involves “the responsibility of safeguarding or seeing to it that something is done in the correct way”, to function as a “guardian” (BDAG, under *episkopos*, 379). Thus the verb *episkopountes* fits well both with elders and especially the function of shepherding. The depiction of God’s people as a “flock” or as “sheep” under the guidance and care of God or human leaders as “shepherds” (*poimanes, poimainein*) has familiar Old Testament roots. (On

the pastoral metaphor in general and its use in 1 Peter, see especially Bosetti 1990). Jesus applied the pastoral metaphor to himself and his disciples (Mk 6:34/Mt 9:36; Mk 14:27/Mt 26:31; Jn 10:1-18) and, according to John 21:15-17, commissioned Peter in particular to “feed my lambs ... shepherd my sheep ... feed my sheep”. In 1 Peter, the pastoral metaphor is used of Jesus Christ in 2:25 and 5:4.

As a term for Christian leaders, “shepherd” as either a verb or a noun, is employed in other texts as well (Ac 20:28; Eph 4:11; Ign, *Phld* 2:1; Rm 9:1; *Ascen Isa* 3:23-27; Herm, *Vis.* 5.5; *Sim.* 9:31.5-6). Acts 20:17-35, recounting Paul’s farewell address at Miletus to the elders of Ephesus, is particularly noteworthy because of the cluster of terms it shares with 1 Peter 5:2. Here the Ephesian “elders” (*presbyteroi*, Ac 20:17) are urged to “take heed to yourselves and to all the *flock* (*tō poimniō*) over which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers* (*episkopous*) to *shepherd* (*poimainein*) the church of the Lord” (Ac 20:28). While the similarities suggest the influence of common tradition, 1 Peter and Acts, both composed in the final third of the first century, provide the earliest evidence of a developing trend to attribute to elders the function of oversight and to portray elders and overseers as shepherds of the flock. Three terms are brought together here – elders (*presbyteroi*), overseers (*episkopoi*, *episkopein*), shepherds (*poimanes*, *poimainein*) – in a manner that indicates their initial synonymous use as designations for Christian leaders. The somewhat latter writings of 1 Timothy (3:1, *episkopos*; 5:17-22, *presbyteroi*) and Titus (1:5, *presbyteroi*; 1:7, *episkopos*) still attest a similar synonymy of “elder” and “overseer” and the singular *episkopos* still appears to be one of the several elders. The *diakonoi* of which the Pastorals also speak (1 Tm 3:8-10, 12-13; cf 2 Tm 4:10) appear to constitute a further emerging group of functionaries known as “deacons” (cf Ac 6:1-6 and Phlp 1:1; 1 Clem 42:4-5; Polyc, *Phil* 5:2; Ign, *Eph* 2:1 and *passim*; Herm, *Vis* 3.5.1; *Sim* 9.26.2). Clement of Rome (ca 96 CE) likewise describes elders functioning as *episkopoi* (1 Clem 44:1-6) and in 44:3-5 “flock of Christ”, “oversight”, and “elders” occur in tandem similar to 1 Peter 5 and Acts 20. The fact that 1 Clement, Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas speak only of overseers in the plural (with the exception of 1 Clem 59:3 where God is identified as *ktistên kai episkopon*) is consistent with their equation of *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi*. It also indicates that among the churches producing these writings (communities at Rome in the case of 1 Clem and Hermas [mid-second century]) nothing is known of a monepiscopate.

### **3. A NEW AND DIFFERENT PATTERN WITH IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH**

The letters of Ignatius of Antioch (c 106 CE), on the other hand, marked a new and different concept of order presumed among the churches addressed. Ignatius distinguished between a plurality of elders and a singular *episkopos* (Ign, *Eph* 1:3; 4:1; *Magn* 2:1; *Trall* 1:1 *Phld* 1:1; *Smyrn* 8:1 and *passim*). It is the bishop (*episkopos*, *Rm* 2:2) of Antioch in Syria who first makes a distinction between the roles, titles, and statuses of *presbyteroi*, *episkopoi*, and *diakonoi* and who describes the pattern adopted more universally in later time. Ignatius advocated a pattern aimed at strengthening the unity (*Eph* 5:1; *Phld inscr*; 3:2-3) and orthodoxy (*Eph* 6:2; 16:1-2; *Magn* 11:1; *Trall* 6:1-2; *Smyrn* 6:1-2 etc) of the churches and warranted by divine authority (e.g. *Eph* 3:2; *Trall* 3:1; *Smyrn* 9:1). In this pattern, certain persons from among the *presbyteroi* and the college of *presbyteroi* (*presbyterion*, *Eph* 2:2; 4:1) were chosen as *primi inter pares*, first among equals, to preside over all other *presbyteroi* and *diakonoi* (*Magn* 2:1; 4:1) and for them the title *episkopos* was reserved. To this local *episkopos* and the college of elders all believers were to be subordinate (*Magn* 13:1-2; *Trall* 2:1-2; 7:2; 13:2; *Phld* 7:1-2; *Smyrn* 8:1-2). This shift in the status and role of the *episkopos* to presiding and superordinate elder is usually indicated by a concomitant shift in terminology whereby *episkopos* can be rendered “bishop” rather than “overseer”. The term *diakonoi*, in turn, designated subordinate ministers assisting the bishops and presbyters as “deacons” (*Magn* 6:1; *Trall* 7:2; *Phld* 4:1; 7:1; *Polyc* 6:1). This reflects for the first time a hierarchical structure demarcating three distinct levels of authority and competence:

*episkopos*/bishop

*presbyteroi*/elders

subordinate to *episkopos*/bishop

*diakonoi*/deacons

subordinate to bishop and elders

In this arrangement, the role of shepherd/pastor (*poimên*) appears reserved for the *episkopos*/bishop alone (Ign, *Phld* 2:1; cf *Rm* 9:1-2), an additional harbinger of later development following the Ignatian pattern, and *topos* (“position”) takes on the sense of “office” (*Polyc* 1:2; cf *Smyrn* 6:2).



This stratified Ignatian arrangement is a more elaborated and rationalized form of church order than anything found in the New Testament, though the Pastorals come closest. In fact it differs also from *1 Clement*, the *Didache*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, all of which speak of *episkopoi* only in the plural (*1 Clem* 42:4, 5; *Did* 15:1; *Herm*, *Sim* 9.27.2) and equate *episkopoi*/overseers and *presbyteroi*/elders. It is also noteworthy that while Ignatius refers to Polycarp of Smyrna as *episkopos*/bishop (*Polyc inscr*), Polycarp himself in his letter to Philippi makes no use of the term *episkopos*, but identifies himself only as “Polycarp and the elders with him” (*Phil, inscr*). Such diversity in the nomenclature for ecclesial leaders and the equation or demarcation of their functions and statuses reveals a concomitant diversity in the structure and order of the early churches that prevailed down through the mid-second century. While 1 Peter and other New Testament writings contain the building blocks for a hierarchical pattern as advocated by Ignatius, it is only with Ignatius that these building blocks are integrated into a pattern that can be described as stratified or hierarchical in nature. Accordingly, only with the point of development reflected by Ignatius is it appropriate to speak of an attempt at the “institutionalization” and rationalization of distinctive modes and levels of leadership involving distinct levels of authority, distinct roles, and differentiated “offices”. One important implication for this state of affairs is that the term “office”, which presumes the institutionalization of a bureaucratic form of governance, is a historically anachronistic and sociologically inaccurate designation for the roles and functions described in the New Testament and ought to be avoided in all discussions of New Testament leadership and church order.

#### 4. 1 PETER 5 IN VIEW ONCE MORE

1 Peter, in particular, reflects no such stage of institutionalization and addresses persons who are not “office-holders” but rather heads of household churches known traditionally as “elders,” who as “shepherds” are urged to “oversee” (not “act as bishops of”) the flock of God in a manner befitting “under-shepherds,” as it were, of Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd. The “serving” of which it speaks (*diakonein*, 4:11) is not reserved to functionaries known as “deacons,” but is an activity made possible by the divine grace conferred on *all* believers (4:10).

The mode and motivation for responsible leadership is spelled out in a triad of negative-positive antitheses (1 Pt 5:2c-3) that is unique in the New Testament while also reflecting a blending of tradition:

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Not because compelled [to do so]	but willingly in accord with God
not for shameful gain	but eagerly
not as domineering those allotted [to you]	but being examples for the flock

The point made here is that pastoral leadership must be freely and willingly undertaken “as God would have you do it” (NRSV), with no trace of self-serving or “lording it over” the flock.

Elders/shepherds exercising oversight are to act in accord with God’s will, ever mindful of the fact that the flock is not theirs to dominate but God’s (cf v 2a) and that it is God who has “allotted” these sheep to their charge (v 3). Their task is to lead by example and not as overlords. A domineering mode of leadership can be avoided only when elders “walk the talk” and lead not by domination but by inspiration. The final member of this triad (v 3), with its term *katakyrieuontes* (“domineering”) and its call for serving *by example* has linguistic and conceptual affinities with Jesus’ instruction of his disciples concerning the nature of appropriate discipleship (Mk 10:35-45/Mt 20:20-28/Lk 22:25-27). Since Mark 10:42/Mt 20:25 are the only other New Testament occurrences of the verb *katakyrieuô* (cf *kyrieuô*, Lk 22:25), it appears that the Petrine author has incorporated a reminiscence of this dominical logion into his triad of antitheses. The disciples, Jesus insisted, are not to be concerned with precedence, power, and who among them is greatest. In contrast to Gentile rulers who “domineer” or “lord it over” (*katakyrieuousin*) their subjects, Jesus’ disciples to take Jesus their leader as their example and to serve as did the Human One who “came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45/Mt 20:28; also John 13:1-15 for a similar emphasis on Jesus as humble servant and example). According to the Petrine author, as Jesus was God’s humble servant and example for believers (see the same thought in 1 Pt 2:21-23), so leaders, like all believers, are to “follow in his steps” (v 2:21d) and as leaders provide a similar model for all believers to follow (v 5:3). The emphasis on humility implied in Jesus’ instruction and example is echoed here and is expressed explicitly in 5:5b-7 where the *entire* community is addressed and the mutual humility of *all* believers is enjoined. When elders conduct themselves as instructed in verses 2-3, these faithful “under-shepherds” can be confident that when the chief Shepherd is manifested at the close of the age, they shall receive “the unfading crown of glory” (v 4).

A final reference to these elders occurs in 1 Peter 5:5a. In this accompanying address to “younger persons” (*neôteroi*), best taken as a reference to recent converts, these persons who are young in the faith are

instructed to maintain order and unity within the community by subordinating themselves to the elders and giving them the respect they deserve (Elliott 2000:836-841).

When 1 Peter 5:1-5a is seen in connection with 5:5b-11, which addresses the *entire* community, a relativization and limitation of the authority of these elders/leaders becomes even clearer. Here elders/leaders are included among *all* believers who are enjoined to “clothe yourselves with humility in your relations with one another because ‘God opposes the arrogant but gives grace to the humble’” (5:5c, citing Pr 3:34 LXX). Elders, like household slaves (2:18-25), wives (3:4), and all the believers (3:8; 5:5b-7), are to exemplify in their lives and conduct the humility manifested by the Christ (2:21-23), for humility is a fundamental characteristic of those favoured by God.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The cluster of vocabulary and images (elders, overseers/exercise oversight, shepherds, flock) contained in 1 Peter 5 represents a growing coalescence of terms for Christian leaders and their functions that will continue far beyond the time of this letter. As one of the earliest witnesses to this constellation and its symbolization of Christian leaders as “pastors”, the text of 1 Peter 5:1-5a deserves more attention than it has hitherto been accorded.

The traits of leadership which the Petrine author outlines had a direct relation to the precarious situation in which the addressees of the letter found themselves. For communities of believers under pressure from Gentile outsiders to compromise their exclusive allegiance to God and Jesus Christ, to soft-pedal the holiness that set them apart from others, to “go along in order to get along” in order to avoid insult, reproach, public shaming and the suffering such mistreatment entailed (1:6, 14-17; 2:11-12, 15-16, 18-20; 3:9, 13-17; 4:1-4, 12-19; 5:8-9), courageous and competent elders were needed to lead the way and help “take the heat” of society’s scorn. The maintenance of the social cohesion and religious commitment of God’s flock required pastors who willingly accepted the role of leadership, who were committed to carrying out the will of God, who sought not their own personal gain but rather the welfare of the flock, and who exercised their oversight not as overlords but as under shepherds of the Chief Shepherd. In emulating the humility of the Christ, they, in turn, would be examples of the humility that was to characterize and bond the entire community.

### **5.1 1 Peter 5 and the church today**

The church of the present finds itself in a situation far different from that faced by the beleaguered addressees of 1 Peter. No longer a minority messianic sect threatened by social absorption and extinction, the church today has a firm place and a respected voice in the corridors of power. Accordingly, one might claim that only in those exceptional instances where pockets of the church encounter hostile opposition and persecution could these Petrine words to elders be found “relevant” and “empowering”. On the other hand, could one not also propose that 1 Peter 5 also speaks to issues of ecclesial leadership typical of each and any generation, differences in political and social conditions notwithstanding? This would include instances where leadership roles are foisted upon the timid rather than accepted willingly by the courageous; where there are self-appointed pastors-for-profit and merchandisers of God’s grace; where pastors treat the flock not as God’s but as their own; where overseers and bishops attempt to command from top down like princes of the church rather than as shepherds who lead by humble example? With regard to such instances of corrupt leadership, would it be that much of a hermeneutical leap to suggest that these words of 1 Peter continue to indicate the qualities, spirit, and motivation that should mark the leaders of the church in any age?

### **5.2 A cautionary afterthought**

After the completion of this article, I happened to glance through some recent issues of *The Lutheran*, a parish magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Virtually every issue carried some report about the ELCA’s recent full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church, *Called to common mission*. These reports often mentioned objections to that agreement by a minority within the ELCA who discount the historic episcopate as an authentic element of the ministry and structure of the Church Catholic and hence of both Lutheran and Episcopal communions. Suddenly it occurred to me that a final comment in this present essay was necessary to forestall any misunderstanding and misuse of this essay by persons opposed to the historic episcopate on the grounds that it is not present in 1 Peter or the rest of the New Testament, and since non-biblical, therefore not an authoritative element of the church’s heritage.

Therefore I wish to make perfectly clear that nothing stated in this article supports such opposition. What we see in 1 Peter is one early phase of a long development. What Paul, 1 Peter, Acts, the Pastorals, *1 Clement*, Hermas, the *Didache*, and Ignatius of Antioch say about leadership/ministry and order in the early Church represents different steps on a journey taken at

different times and in different places under differing sets of historical and social circumstances. These diverse writings give witness to a historical, social, and theological *process* in which over the course of several centuries a form of ministry and order took shape which eventually settled on a threefold form of leadership (bishop, elders and deacons) and an Episcopal form of church governance. The regularization of the transmission of personal authority from bishop to bishop constituted one of three interrelated means for measuring and maintaining the truth of proclamation and practice throughout the church. Preaching, teaching, confession, worship and behaviour had to be in conformity with the authoritative *written* Scriptural canon, the living canon of the confessing and worshipping *community*, and the *personal* authoritative witness to the Gospel commencing with the apostles and transmitted thereafter to their personal successors in diverse localities. In the regard to the *personal* witness by the *episkopoi* succeeding the apostles, Irenaeus of Lyons (ca 180 CE) underlined both the historical actuality of this succession, as *1 Clement* had earlier (42:2-4; 44:2-3), and its function of maintaining the truth of the faith: "It is within the power of all, therefore, in every church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times" (*Against the Heresies* 3.3.1). This threefold constellation of canonical authority assured a system of checks and balances preventing, or at least limiting, the dominance of only one norm of the faith over the others, thereby forestalling a fall into sheer Biblicism, or heterodox confession and worship, or Episcopal domination and monopolization of authority. Each was essential to keeping the faith faithful to its origins while also responsive to ever new exigencies of the present.

In particular, the threefold ministry, including the episcopate, was adopted and institutionalized as the most effective means for coordinating and ordering the ministries of the church in its proclamation of the gospel, its sacramental activity, and its evangelical witness and service to society. (For studies of these developments see, *inter alia*, the several relevant essays in *Eucharist and Ministry* 1970; Goppelt 1970; Delorme 1974; and Lienhard 1984; Noll 1993.) The fact that neither *1 Peter* nor any other New Testament writing reflects such an ecclesial structure cannot be used to reject this structure as "unbiblical" or "anti-biblical" or inconsistent with Lutheran history and theology. This is the case for at least three reasons.

Firstly, this structure is the end result of a *process*, a historical and ecclesial *development*, of which the churches of the New Testament did have

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a part. As noted above, elements or building blocks employed in this structure were already in place in various ways among the New Testament communities. What the threefold ministry represents is a structure in which these building blocks of roles, functions, and terms have been employed, modified, and consolidated. As early as Ignatius it was also believed that this structure assured the unity and orthodoxy of the church and that it had divine warrant. To ignore or dismiss this fact of historical process would be to discount the church as a historical entity which grew and developed variously over time.

Secondly, to insist that only that structuration of Christian ministry that is found in the New Testament is valid, would amount to the rankest form of Biblicism. For Lutherans to so argue would be to espouse a position at complete variance to their own theology, their embrace of the ecumenical creeds of the 4<sup>th</sup> and later centuries, their liturgy which is an amalgam of several post-biblical rites, and their own Lutheran symbols of the faith.

Finally, the threefold ministry is part of the historical and ecclesial development in which the present Lutheran Church and the ELCA currently stand. To deny this would be to deny the catholic roots and heritage of the Lutheran church – a move that would have been abhorrent to Luther and his fellow reformers and a position never taken by them.

The minority within the ELCA who today persist in questioning or rejecting the threefold ministry and the historical roots of the episcopate as realities that have shaped the Lutheran church from Luther onward run the grave risk of succumbing to an anti-historical and Biblicist mentality at complete odds with the historical consciousness and catholic theology of the Lutheran church from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

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