

1 Peter 5

If I said to you the word “church” this morning I wonder what would come into your mind. Perhaps a beautiful old building. Perhaps this week a bad tempered wrangling political institution. Many in our society would imagine an elderly and dwindling group of people huddled on oak pews.

Not surprisingly, though many today are still looking for something spiritual in their lives not many look in churches. Even amongst Christians church gets mixed reviews. Every church I know has a growing proportion of occasional attenders or even regular Christian attenders who nevertheless keep church at arms length. An increasing number get spiritual food from the internet or simply gather as a small group of Christian friends.

In our world of paedophile priests and bitter church politics on the one hand, and facebook groups, and podcasts, and ever increasing mobility on the other, perhaps we simply need to abandon conventional church altogether. Many think so.

And in many ways I would be among them. An awful lot of what we conventionally think of when we imagine church has only a tenuous link to the bible anyway. Imagine the energy that could be released if Christians abandoned their interminable synods, and handed over their decaying monumental buildings for someone else to pour millions into restoration projects, and focused rather on gospel living.

But in the New Testament gospel living still focuses around church! Not buildings but people. But crucially for us this morning not just fluid egalitarian collections of likeminded friends. In the Bible church is a diverse group of people who, without Christ, would not naturally associate with one another. And it is a group bound together in deep covenant commitment, with leaders and mutual accountability. Our age is deeply suspicious of such things in part because of abuses, but also because, for all our talk of community we fight shy of the central thing that holds a community together – mutual accountability.

Almost every New Testament letter is written, in part at least, to hold a local church together. And 1 Peter is not exception. Peter began his letter by addressing Christians living over a wide region as “scattered exiles.” What will keep them strong and joyful and fruitful as believers? Certainly strong biblical understanding will keep them – Peter gives them careful instruction. In particular how to relate in their hostile world to authorities and employers and neighbours – Peter tells them a lot about that. How to deal with suffering and difficulty.

But he ends in a massively important place. He ends by telling them how to live together in churches. Scattered Christians will not survive and thrive unless they gather in churches.

What Peter has to tell us in 1 Peter 5 is not only generally valuable for all churches it is particularly important for us to hear. Because as John Fenning put it last week we are embarking on a plan for growth which John has not seen in his 28 years!

As a church we have launched Cowley Church Community which at present is a missional small group within Magdalen Road but which we intend will grow in the coming years to become a new independent church in Cowley.

And then somewhat from left field I have felt called to establish a new church in the centre of Oxford. In many ways it adds quite a lot of complication to our vision, but as I have explained before, I felt God very firmly setting it on my heart during our period of prayer and fasting earlier this year, and after consultation with the elders and others I became convinced that I could not walk away from that sense of call.

And in addition we are actively addressing ourselves to Magdalen Road's on-going vision to be a hub for mission and ministry in East Oxford and beyond. There are some exciting positive developments afoot there too which we will be sharing with the church soon.

And actually I believe that God is already abundantly blessing this painful sacrificial gospel focused set of plans. We have never been so full here. If we weren't already planning to plant we would have to now anyway. Our finances have never been so good. We are seeing conversions.

Because what is going on amongst us is very challenging we have set in place some checks and balances. We have not set a timetable for the Cowley Church Community to become independent. It can grow at its own speed and in the meantime we will retain the wisdom of its elders – Tim Guest, and our co-opted elder Andy Moore.

From the start I have been clear that we cannot commit the resources of Magdalen Road to the central church either – beyond releasing me and anyone else who feels called to join it. So we are seeking outside financial support to get it going.

If the Lord continues to bless us within a few years there will be three churches where once there was one. So as we form new churches Peter's words to us are particularly pertinent. For Peter the future of the gospel in

Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia

And for us the future of the gospel in inner East Oxford, Cowley and the centre lies in forming healthy local churches. And Peter says – leaders: serve humbly, church members: submit humbly.

We will look at church members first in verses 5-7.

➤ *To members – submit humbly*

 **1 Peter 5:5**

Many translations including the old NIV translated the recipients of this command as “young men” since it is formally a masculine noun meaning “young.” The new NIV thinks that is broader address to “younger people” and the masculinity of the noun is incidental, just as the word “men” often means men and women. Actually a number of commentators have pointed out that there was another word which would have unambiguously described young people, but the one used by Peter is slightly vaguer. It may be simply used in contrast to the word “elders” in verse 1. They suggest that just as the word “elder” formally means and older person but actually just means those in authority, so this word “youngers” should perhaps be translated “people who are not elders” – i.e. it is not about age but role in the church.

What are members to do? Submit to elders!

It is a constant theme in 1 Peter. We are submit to authorities – 2:13, to masters – 2:18, wives submit to husbands – 3:1, everything submitted to God – 3:22.

Peter knows that a world in which everyone is their own master is a world of chaos – especially the church. We have to learn to act together. As we said before this call to submit is not absolute. There are checks and balances. We have a church membership here so give a mechanism whereby church members as a whole can challenge the elders if necessary.

But a general attitude is expected.

1 Peter 5:5b

We have a God who watches and who judges. And he puts down those who proudly lift themselves up, and lifts up the humble.

I have been around long enough to see all this happening. There is a certain kind of assertive person who is deeply damaging to God’s church. It is not that discussion and questioning is forbidden in churches. Far from it, there is a strong sense in the New Testament believers are to gather together to pray, consider the Scriptures teach and admonish one another. But there is a kind of person who will not listen, who is divisive, who will not accept anything but their own way.

Far too many times I have seen such people burn brightly, cause significant trouble... and fall. It is as if God let’s them go – for a while at least. As I reflect on the number of times that I have seen that there is a real fear of God in my heart. It is an ominous thing to hear

God opposes the proud

On the positive side I have also seen the way that God exalts humility.

1 Peter 5:6

The most loved, most respected, most listened to members of any church are those who do not push themselves forward, but who pray, who honour their leaders, and who deeply trust Christ. Because that pushiness, that self-assertion, that pride, actually often stems from fear.

 **1 Peter 5:7**

Those who entrust themselves to the God who cares will not be proud, and will be lifted up.

Now I have to say that you are an excellent church in this respect. There is a plenty of discussion in our church meetings. There are varieties of views expressed. But the respect that everyone has for one another, and the honour in which the elders are held is exemplary. I was so proud of you as we worked through the difficult process that led to the appointment of Dan Steel. We had great candidates and a variety of opinions amongst us but we made the decision happily together – and I believe that God has honoured that.

As we embark on the exciting but painful process of becoming three churches – preserve that ethos.

And now we turn to elders. In this letter Peter publicly addresses elders and so I want to follow that form, speaking to our elders, and myself, as everyone listens.

Peter says – elders: serve humbly

➤ *To elders – serve humbly*

 **1 Peter 5:1**

Notice Peter does not put himself above them as an Apostle though he could have done. He places himself alongside them as a fellow elders who will share in the glory to be revealed.

Notice his extra qualification to speak is that he is “a witness of Christ’s sufferings.”.

I took us a few weeks ago in an elders meeting to Paul’s call to Timothy

join with me in suffering for the gospel 2 Tim 1:8

Eldership is not a place for wimps. It is tough. Church members your elders not only work long hours, they have to search their hearts deeply, they have to deal with difficult heart breaking situations, they have to make painful decisions.

Brother elders we are called to be shepherds.

 **1 Peter 5:2a**

Contrary to the Christmas cards shepherds didn’t sit by warm camp fires cuddling lambs. They risked their lives fighting wolves, they roamed the hillsides gathering in stragglers, they led their sheep towards rich pastures.

And elders, though you may sigh deeply at the mention of yet another meeting, and I may have moments when I long for my former comfortable life as a vet, our calling is to be pursued with eagerness.

 **1 Peter 5:2b**

I can hear you saying “where am I going to find the dishonest gain to pursue?” The wages of the average elder are a few cups of coffee and a digestive biscuit at elders meetings. But there are other sinful motives. Some of us are eager to be on the inside. Some of us are eager for the power. Some of us are eager for the status. We must eschew those things and be eager to serve.

And though the Bible says we rule, and have authority, in the church here is how we exercise that power.

 **1 Peter 5:3**

We do not lead by dictat. We lead by example. That is so important to see. Even the Apostle, though he is often in his letters absolutely clear and unambiguous about what a church should do he seeks to persuade them. He expects them to corporately respond. When discipline is to be exercised in the church he does not simply impose it, he calls the church to endorse it. When false super-apostles are to be disowned as leaders he does not remove their license to preach he calls the church to disown them.

That is why we here exercise congregational government. Certainly elders have a particular role in decision making, and many decisions are not of sufficient importance to trouble the church with them. Most people here will be very glad that numerous decisions are made without consultation.

However ultimately we rule by consensus in the church. The authority we wield stems from the respect we earn as “examples to the flock.” And the significant decisions we make, we make together as God’s people.

That is why church members, our first Tuesday meetings and our members meetings are so important.

Over the last fifteen years, through some difficult moments, we have forged a good bond between elders and the church, a bond of mutual trust.

My brother elders you are an amazingly committed group of men. You have accepted significant cost in becoming elders. I know you to be deeply committed to the care of this flock – to their protection, to their nurture, to their spiritual nourishment, to their welfare, to their joy in the Lord. I know that you have no desire to Lord it over this flock.

Here is the reward God promises you.

 **1 Peter 5:4**

Finally Peter says to everyone – watch out for the Devil.

➤ *To everyone: watch out for the Devil.*

 **1 Peter 5:8-9**

The Devil is real and he is active. Not just in the world but also in churches. He works by stealth – he prowls. He works by intimidation – he roars. His intention is to destroy – he devours.

As we work on becoming three churches over the next few years the process is potentially terrifying – not least to us as leaders, or to me who is giving up a secure wage. The Devil loves to play on that fear – just as he loves to play on your particular fears. He loves to make us sinfully protect ourselves, financially, emotionally, practically. Resist him standing firm in the faith – says Peter

What did Jesus say?

“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33, NIV)