

Servant Leadership



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Pet. 5:1–10, Acts 6:1–6, Jer. 10:21, Matt. 20:24–28, Prov. 3:34, Rev. 12:7–9.*

Memory Text: “Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you” (*1 Peter 5:7, NKJV*).

Studies of growing churches almost always highlight the importance of effective leadership. This leadership takes its vision from God and His Word and provides opportunity for everybody in the congregation to exercise his or her own spiritual gifts in pursuit of the gospel commission.

But church leadership is highly challenging. Volunteers, who often give of their time even though they already are busy, largely run churches. Members can “vote with their feet” by ceasing to attend if something happens that they cannot support. Furthermore, an effective Christian leader also must be deeply spiritual. And we shouldn't forget that Peter is writing to churches that are experiencing persecution. The church leader is particularly vulnerable at such times. Who, then, is equipped for this task?

In 1 Peter 5:1–10, Peter addresses the matter of Christian leadership on the local church level. In these verses, he writes about some of the crucial characteristics needed, not just in the local leaders but in members, as well. His words are as relevant for us today as they were then.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 13.

Elders in the Early Church

Look up the following texts: *Acts 6:1–6, 14:23, 15:6, 1 Tim. 5:17, 1 Pet. 5:2.* **What insights do these verses give us regarding the challenges facing the early church and the role of its leaders?**

A large group of people becoming believers and joining the church is a great blessing from God. Yet, as the experience of the earliest Christians illustrates, rapid growth can bring problems.

For instance, Acts 1–5 documents the leading of the Holy Spirit and the conversion of many to Christianity. Acts 6:1–6 shows the result: the group became too big for its leadership, and it needed to put structures in place in order to manage the day-to-day functions of the church.

The issue that brought this weakness in organizational structure to a head was a complaint of discrimination. The Greek-speaking group complained that its widows were neglected in the daily distribution of food. As a response, a group of people, the deacons, were especially appointed to assist the 12 apostles with the management of the church's resources.

It is true that the early church was led by the Holy Spirit in a special way. But even then there was a need to set up church structures. One key group of church leaders needed very early was the elders, who were established for each local congregation. In fact, appointing elders to lead these newly formed groups of Christians was something that Paul and Barnabas did as they went to places that had yet to hear about Jesus (*Acts 14:23*).

Elders were given many different roles in early Christianity. As leaders of their local community, from time to time they acted as instructors in teaching new converts. They preached, and they ensured that the necessary things were done for the well-being of the community (*Acts 15:6, 1 Tim. 5:17, 1 Pet. 5:2*).

What are ways that you can learn to work better with the leaders in your local church, even when you don't always agree on things?

The Elders

Read 1 Peter 5:1–4. What attitudes should leaders bring to their roles in the church? How can these principles apply to any of us, regardless of our role?

Peter begins his instructions to elders by observing that he himself is a fellow elder. He then notes two things about himself: he is a witness of the suffering of Christ, and he is expecting to share in the glory to be revealed. In saying this, Peter highlights the first characteristic that should be found within an elder: an elder should understand the importance of what Christ has suffered in our behalf and what great hope He offers us.

Peter likens the role of an elder to a shepherd tending the flock of God. His comparing a church to sheep suggests that, like sheep, members can sometimes go off on their own. Thus, they need the shepherd to guide them back to the group and to help them work in harmony with it. The elder also should function as a humble example of how a Christian needs to act.

What warning do we find here for those who are shepherds? *Jer. 10:21, Ezek. 34:8–10, Zech. 11:17.*

An important role of Christian leadership is to work with the people in the church as patiently as shepherds must work with their sheep. Elders must gently bring them together for worship and for sharing the message of Jesus with those who need to know Him and the salvation found in Him.

Peter also observes that elders should exercise oversight willingly and not under compulsion. It is not always easy to find people willing to take on the challenges of leading out in the church. This is particularly evident around nominating committee time. For a church to function well, there are a number of distinct roles that need to be filled. There are reasons that many people are reluctant to take on leadership roles. Some of these roles require a considerable investment of time, and people suitable for such roles already might have many commitments. Others may feel that they are not prepared well enough to take on the role. But Peter's word is that if asked, we should willingly take on leadership if it is at all possible.

Servant Leadership

Read 1 Peter 5:3 and Matthew 20:24–28. What crucial principles of Christian leadership are found in these texts?

In Greek, the key word in 1 Peter 5:3 is *katakurieuontes*. The same word also is found in Matthew 20:25 and means to “exercise dominion” or to “lord it” over someone. Thus, the instruction to elders given in 1 Peter 5:3 might be translated, “Do not lord it over those in your charge” (*NRSV*), and reflects the words of Jesus in Matthew 20:25.

Matthew 20:20–23 provides the context for the sayings of Jesus in Matthew 20:24–28. The mother of James and John had approached Jesus with the request that, when Jesus came into His kingdom, one son should sit at His right side and the other at His left.

“Jesus bears tenderly with them, not rebuking their selfishness in seeking preference above their brethren. He reads their hearts, He knows the depth of their attachment to Him. Their love is not a mere human affection; though defiled by the earthliness of its human channel, it is an outflowing from the fountain of His own redeeming love. He will not rebuke, but deepen and purify.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 548.

Jesus explains that this position of honor is one that is granted by the Father, not Him. But then He goes on to explain that a key difference between His kingdom and those of the Gentile nations is the type of leader that will emerge in His kingdom. Those who wish to lead in the kingdom where Jesus is King must become servants because the leaders in Jesus’ kingdom will be like Jesus. “‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many’” (*Matt. 20:28, NRSV*).

Thus, Peter is calling church leaders to the same ideal: the surrender and self-denial seen in Jesus must be revealed in them, as well.

Read Philippians 2:4–8. How does what Paul says here coincide with what Peter wrote? More important, how can we do the things that we are called to in these verses?

Clothed With Humility

Society was very stratified in the ancient world in which Peter lived. The ruling elite had what today might be called a “commanding presence.” Around them were clustered people of lower rank, and the lowest rank of all belonged to a slave. Humility was the proper attitude of those of lower rank toward those of a higher one. The Greek word for humility carries the meaning of “lowly,” “insignificant,” “weak,” and “poor.” It describes people without status and power in society. In the world outside of Judaism and Christianity, the word *humble* was associated with those of low status, and to act humbly would not necessarily have been commended as appropriate conduct of free people.

Read 1 Peter 5:5–7. Given the context and time in which they lived, what is so remarkable about what Peter wrote here?

In the Bible, humility is seen in a different light from how it was seen in the times and culture in which Peter lived. Peter quotes Proverbs 3:34 from the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), a verse that is also quoted in James 4:6. In the Old Testament, part of God’s work in history is to lay low the high and mighty (*Isa. 13:11, 23:9, Job 40:11*).

One’s proper attitude toward God is humility. “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time” (*1 Pet. 5:6, NKJV*). Humility, rather than pride, should characterize the Christians’ relationships, not only with God but one another (*1 Pet. 5:5*).

Christians, even Christian leaders, are aware that they are sinners saved by God’s grace. In this most important sense, then, we are all equals, and before the cross we should all be humbled. And this humility must be revealed in our relationship with others, especially those over whom we have charge. Sure, anyone could be humble before God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Also, it’s relatively easy to be humble before those who are above us, who have power over us, and who are “higher” in status than we are. The true test comes when we reveal humility toward those who are “under” us, who have no power over us. That’s the kind of humility Peter is talking about here.

What is it about the cross and what it represents that should always help keep us humble?

Like a Roaring Lion

As we have seen already, Peter wrote against the backdrop of persecution. The great-controversy theme wasn't just abstract theology to his readers; they were experiencing it in a way that many of us have not, at least for now.

Read 1 Peter 5:8–10 and Revelation 12:7–9. What do these texts teach us about the origin of evil and the work of Satan in our world?

The book of Revelation reveals that Christians play a part in a cosmic battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. In Revelation, the forces of good are led by Jesus, who is the Word of God, the King of kings, and Lord of lords (*Rev. 19:13, 16*). The forces of evil are led by the devil, also called Satan and pictured as a dragon (*Rev. 12:7–9; 20:7, 8*). Though popular media and even some Christians deny the reality of Satan, the fact is that the devil is a powerful being who has only evil intentions for us. Yet, the good news is that the devil will ultimately be destroyed at the end (*Rev. 20:9, 10*).

Peter does not diminish the danger the devil represents. The devil is like a roaring lion that is looking to devour all whom he can (*1 Pet. 5:8*). Peter points out, too, that his readers can see the power of the devil in their own present suffering. Yet, this suffering will end in eternal glory (*1 Pet. 5:10*).

Read 1 Peter 5:10 again. What is Peter saying to us there?

Though we don't know the exact nature of their trials, what we can see is the hope that Peter expresses. Yes, the devil is real. The battle is real, and our sufferings are real. But the "God of all grace" has defeated the devil. So whatever we are suffering, if we remain faithful—even unto death (*see Heb. 11:13–16*)—victory is assured, thanks to Jesus.

How can we learn to hold on in faith, enduring to the end, regardless of what comes our way?

Further Thought: A great example of the servant leadership of Jesus is found in His behavior at the Last Supper. At that time, Jesus was fully conscious of who He was (the Son of God) and that He was about to return to His Father (*John 13:1*). After the meal He washed the feet of the disciples. He then said, “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you” (*John 13:14, 15*). Each time the followers of Jesus wash one another’s feet, they not only reenact this scene, but they remind each other that to be a leader in Jesus’ kingdom one must become as a servant. No doubt, for the rest of their lives, especially after they better understood just who Jesus really was, the disciples remembered this act of humility on the part of their Master. No doubt, too, it was in Peter’s mind when he called on church elders not to lord it over others but to be “clothed in humility.”

“In consenting to become man, Christ manifested a humility that is the marvel of the heavenly intelligences. The act of consenting to be a man would be no humiliation were it not for the fact of Christ’s exalted pre-existence. We must open our understanding to realize that Christ laid aside His royal robe, His kingly crown, His high command, and clothed His divinity with humanity, that He might meet man where he was, and bring to the human family moral power to become the sons and daughters of God.

“The meekness and humility that characterized the life of Christ will be made manifest in the life and character of those who ‘walk even as he walked.’”—Ellen G. White, *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 81.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Jesus began His ministry by confronting the devil. Weakened by 40 days of fasting, He was able to resist the devil’s temptations by quoting Scripture (*Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:12, 13; Luke 4:1–13*). What does this tell us about how we, too, can resist the devil in our own lives?
- 2 What are examples you have seen of what appeared to be true humility in others? What can you learn from those examples?
- 3 In class, answer this question: Besides what Peter taught in the verses for this week, what are the qualities of a good Christian leader? How might those qualities overlap with good qualities in secular leaders? How might they differ?
- 4 How would you answer the claim that Satan is not real but just a symbol of the evil found in human nature?

God Is a Faithful Husband: Part 2

Four months later my husband became ill, complaining of pain in his stomach and chest. He wanted to go to the hospital; so, I went to find someone who could take him there. While I was gone, he died in the arms of our two oldest children, seven and eight years old.

I returned to find my husband dead and my children crying and confused. I became angry with God. “How can this happen when I’ve just given my life to You?” I demanded to know. But no answer came. I wanted to die, too. Others had to care for my children and make the funeral arrangements. Somehow we made it through the funeral. Then the realization hit me: he is gone. I have no job and five children to care for. How will we survive?

We were renting a house, but soon after my husband’s funeral the landlord came to tell us we had to move. My husband’s oldest brother invited us to stay in his home. The relationship was stressful, and after nine months we left. My uncle rented a house for the children and me to live in, but I needed to work. My younger sister came to live with us and care for my children so I could work in the marketplace, buying wholesale vegetables and selling them at a profit. It was difficult, tiring work, the hours were long, and I earned very little. I began attending evening classes to learn a skill that would support my family better. Through all my trials, the brothers and sisters of the church supported me. People cared for my children while I worked and attended classes; others helped with food and money. God sent other compassionate friends to help, as well.

I wanted to share God’s love with others while I worked; so, I began selling Seventh-day Adventist literature. Every day, God provided what we needed and strengthened my faith. After a year, I was offered work in the Adventist publishing house.

I thank God for caring for us through these difficult times. When the children lost their father, God became their Father. He has supplied our needs and helped me train them. I taught them to love and glorify God, and they are faithful to Him.

To be continued in next week’s Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Peter 5:1–6*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that humility is a key ingredient to effective leadership and service for others.

Feel: Appreciate the spirit of humility and loving service that Jesus exemplified, and desire to manifest the same toward others.

Do: Heed the appeal to humble oneself under the mighty hand of God so that He can use him or her effectively as needed.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Effective Christian Leadership

A Peter appeals to church leaders to manifest what general spirit and attitude?

B Peter calls elders to fill what two specific functions? (*Compare with Acts 20:28.*)

II. Feel: The Call to Humility and Service

A Peter advises elders to have what three specific attitudes in 1 Peter 5:2, 3?

B What attitude does Peter expect of all of his readers (*1 Pet. 5:5, 6*)?

III. Do: Humble Yourself Under the Mighty Hand of God.

A In what ways can church leaders exemplify servant leadership while at the same time functioning as overseers?

B What does Peter expect of young men in the church in relation to the older men (*1 Pet. 5:5*)?

► **Summary:** Elders function as both shepherds (pastors) and overseers in the churches. Peter calls for a spirit of humility and service in leadership, as well as among all believers, whether young or old. God will exalt in due time those who humble themselves under His mighty hand.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *1 Peter 5:5, 6, 10*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The church needs good leaders who will be effective in their functions as both nurturers and overseers. As such they need to be humble, eager to serve, and ready to function as examples rather than as dictators. The elders are called to manifest this spirit of service. The youth are called to submit to this kind of leadership. And all are enjoined to clothe themselves with humility. A church congregation that manifests this spirit of humility and service will be made strong and steadfast as God exalts them before their community.

Just for Teachers: The early church had minimal organizational structure. The apostles were the earliest leaders, but the church rapidly outgrew the apostles' abilities to manage it effectively. Acts 6:1–6 describes the earliest attempt to draft additional leaders to share the responsibilities more effectively. These men were later called deacons, which means those who minister to the needs of others (*diakonoi*). Subsequently, the apostles also found a need to appoint spiritual leaders in each church congregation (*Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5*). These men were known as elders (*presbyteroi*)—literally, older men, men of age and experience. The apostles were itinerant leaders, while the elders were local church leaders. According to Acts 15, these two groups came together to represent the church for the first time at the Jerusalem Council.

Opening Activity and Discussion: Have the class read Acts 20:17, 18, 28–31. Discuss the functions that Paul expected these elders to have in the church, and compare them with the functions that Peter expected of the elders in the churches to which he was writing. What functions do the two descriptions have in common? What does this reveal about the terminology being used?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: In 1 Peter 5:1–3, three special terms are used for church leaders—elders, overseers, and shepherds, the latter two of which are expressed in verbal form. These same three terms are used also in Acts 20:28. The first, “elders,” is discussed above. This designation was the general terminology used for local church leaders. In the Old Testament, elders served as counselors and judges for the people. Elders (“overseers” [NKJV]) were to have specific qualifications if they were to function as spiritual leaders in the New Testament church (*1 Tim.*

3:1–7, *Titus* 1:6–9). Peter refers to himself as a “fellow elder” (*sympresbyteros*), indicating his identification with them (*1 Pet. 5:1, NKJV*).

The second and third terms were functional, expressed in verbal form. “Shepherd” or “be shepherds” (*poimainō*, *1 Pet. 5:2*) describes a nurturing function. It also can be translated as “pastor” or “be pastors,” given that a pastor (*poimēn*) is one who leads a flock to pasture. In *1 Peter* 2:25, Jesus is called the Shepherd of our souls. In *1 Peter* 5:4, He is called the Chief Shepherd (*archipoimēn*), indicating that pastors and elders are to work under His authority and guidance. *Hebrews* 13:20 calls Jesus “that great Shepherd of the sheep” (*NIV*), just as He called Himself “ ‘the good shepherd’ ” (*John* 10:11, 14), making Himself the Example for others.

The other term used by Peter is “serving as overseers” (*1 Pet. 5:2, NKJV*), or “exercising oversight” (*episkopeō*, *NASB*), a term that indicates a supervisory or management function. In *1 Peter* 2:25, Jesus also is called the Overseer (*episkopos*) of our souls (*NIV*). The functions of spiritual leadership on the part of the elders are the same functions exercised by Jesus as He cares for our souls. It is not surprising then that *Hebrews* 13:17 admonishes believers, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (*ESV*).

Bible Commentary

I. Qualities of Effective Church Leaders (*Review 1 Peter 5:1–4 with your class.*)

As an elder himself, Peter appeals to his fellow elders to nurture the flocks of God that are under their care, exercising oversight so that none of Christ’s sheep will be lost. Then, when the Chief Shepherd returns, they will receive an unfading crown of glory. There are three conditions under which elders must serve: (1) willingly, not out of duty or obligation; (2) eagerly, with no expectation of financial gain; and (3) humbly, not driving their flock, but leading by example.

Consider This: In what ways did Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, model these three conditions?

II. Counsels to the Members (*Review 1 Peter 5:5–7 with your class.*)

The younger men are expected to submit to the authority of those who are older, having the same spirit of putting the interests of others first. Such submission is in the spirit of Peter’s earlier counsels in *1 Peter* 2:13–3:7.

Finally, all are instructed to clothe themselves with humility in their

relationships, according to the admonition in 1 Peter 3:10–12, based on Proverbs 3:34. In view of God’s opposition to the proud and His willingness to give grace to the humble, all are advised to humble themselves before God and wait for Him to exalt them at the proper time. Although humility was then, and is now, generally associated with poverty and low social standing, the believers don’t need to worry over such things. They need only let God worry about their well-being, because He cares for them and can be trusted to meet their needs.

Consider This: What are some practical ways in which I can clothe myself with humility in my interpersonal relationships?

III. Living in the Devil’s Domain *(Review 1 Peter 5:8–11 with your class.)*

God cares for us. At the same time, we must never forget that we live in enemy territory. Therefore, it behooves us to be self-controlled and alert, because our enemy, the devil, is like a hungry lion, prowling around “looking for someone to devour” (*1 Pet. 5:8, NIV*). Lions stealthily stalk their prey. They seek to keep hidden until the last-minute attack. We might not be aware of the danger unless we remain alert, clear minded, and self-controlled so that nothing impedes our ability to pray (*1 Pet. 4:7*). Not only do we need to remain alert and aware, but we are told also to “resist him, standing firm in the faith” (*1 Pet. 5:9, NIV*).

Peter reminds his readers that they are not alone in facing the wrath of the enemy, “because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (*1 Pet. 5:9, NIV*). Yet, Peter concludes, “After you have suffered a little while,” the God of all grace “will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (*1 Pet. 5:10, NIV*). Our strength is not in ourselves; it is in our God who called us to His eternal glory.

Consider This: Satan (the dragon) is especially angry with those in the last days who keep God’s commands and have the testimony of Jesus (*Rev. 12:17*). As soldiers of Christ, we need to be sober and alert. How may I live as a soldier for God in enemy territory?

Discussion Questions:

- ① What spirit do we display in our relationships with others, whether we are spiritual leaders, younger people, or any other church members?
- ② What steps are we taking to be alert, clear minded, and self-controlled? What are the ways in which we can be aware of the devil’s methods? How are we watching with prayer?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Today’s church is much more highly structured than the early church was. This high degree of organization is necessary because of the complexities that exist in the church and in the world. Elders in the New Testament were essentially the same as pastors and overseers (*KJV*: “bishops”; see, for example, *1 Tim. 3:1, 2; Titus 1:7; and 1 Pet. 2:25*), exercising both functions. The only other spiritual leaders were apostles and deacons, although the deacons apparently handled more of the church’s practical and material needs, while the apostles and elders exercised specifically spiritual or religious functions (*Acts 6:1–4; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 1 Tim. 5:17*).

Thought Questions:

- ① What is the basis for our representative system of church organization, and what biblical principles are connected with it?
- ② Why may we have confidence in God’s continued direction for leadership in His church? What interest does Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, have in leading His flock to safety?

Activity: Have the class read 1 Timothy 5:17 and Hebrews 13:7, 17. Discuss ways in which class members can show support and appreciation for the spiritual leaders of the church. Plan to put at least one tangible idea into action soon.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Many church members have little sense of the organizational structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church today and how it functions largely on the basis of representative elections and funding from the local level upward. Nor may they be aware that once the structure is in place for a given term, some balancing top-down controls do exist that may be implemented until the next elections at constituency meetings or a General Conference session. It may be helpful to review some basic concepts regarding the ways in which leadership and authority are established in the Adventist Church so that there will be a better understanding of the process and of why the church functions the way it does. The *Church Manual* is a helpful tool for understanding church organization.

Activity: If resources are available, create a flowchart of the levels of leadership and authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Show how authority flows in both directions in the organization of the church, with no single individual (other than Christ) or entity in possession of ultimate authority.