

Living In The Church

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[0 : 0 0] Let's share our prayer together. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit, our teacher, and your great glory, our supreme concern.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. I wonder if any of you over these past weeks have been reading through 1 Peter, just these five chapters as we've gone over them.

It's a real blessing to us to be able to read over God's word, sharing with one another as we do that, and doing it in a concentrated way.

We come to the end of 1 Peter this morning. There's a way of thinking and talking about our Christian life, which makes it sound like the whole thing is about Jesus and me.

I am the only one who is important. I have decided to follow Jesus. I have my sins forgiven. Listen, I have my future assured.

[1 : 1 8] If you hear yourself talking or thinking about your Christian life and your discipleship, and using the words I and me and mine over and over again, you need to rethink how you understand the gospel.

Because something somewhere isn't quite right. If the gospel is all about Jesus and me, why do I need you? If the gospel is only about Jesus and you, why do you need me or anyone else who's here today?

Why can't we be good Christians in a desert island? There are Christians about today who are abandoning the church.

It has become quite popular to say, I am a Christian, but I don't need to go to church. Somebody said that to me one time, and I must have been tired and feeling grumpy, because I held out my hand and I said, let me shake your hand, because you're the only Christian in 2,000 years who doesn't need the church.

He wasn't best pleased with me. Now, after a night at a presbytery meeting or a day at the General Assembly, I can understand that sentiment.

[2 : 4 9] We might have a discussion. We might even agree that the church continues to need reforming.

But to give up on the church, to abandon the church, is a step too far and will damage our life of faithful discipleship.

Even without getting as far as presbyteries and general assemblies, we can get worn down by the thought of too many committee meetings where nothing ever seems to get done.

Tense words in the kitchen about who's allowed to cut the cake and how it's to get cut and what plates goes on and who serves it can wear us down when we think about church.

I am in a position where I hear some of you speak to me about your frustration with our slowness to change, and some of you speak about your frustration that we're moving too quickly away from the past.

[3 : 5 6] It's easy to be hard on the church, but we cannot give up on the church. Here's the thing.

If you are not regularly part of the life of a local church, within six months, you will not be recognizably Christian at all. God has a purpose for the church.

Out of all the possible ways that God could have chosen to make known the good news of his son Jesus and the forgiveness and new life that we can have in Jesus, God chose to do that through us, through the church.

We believe that in the sacrifice of Jesus, salvation has been achieved. Now, in the church, salvation is lived out, is displayed before the world.

God has a purpose for the church, and we cannot give up on that purpose. And so as he brings his letter to its end, Peter, in this final chapter, writes about the church.

[5 : 11] He writes about our shared life together as Christians in the church. He writes about the church, which is living in a strange place, living in a place where the church is opposed, where the gospel is rejected.

He's not writing about a church with privilege and power, but a church which is on the margins, which, if the rest of society could, would be excluded altogether.

And yet a church which, on the margins, bears faithful witness to a crucified Savior. Do you mean, I think, paragraphs like that.

I really do think that Peter wrote this letter yesterday, because that's where we live. That's where the church is in Scotland and in Edinburgh in 2024.

This is the church. The church is our mother. We love her. And we are called to serve in her.

[6 : 25] The first five verses in chapter five, Peter writes about leadership in the church. Neither Peter nor anywhere else in the New Testament is the attempt made to argue the case for leaders in the church.

That there are leaders and that there is going to be leadership in the church is assumed. The description of leaders as elders suggests maturity in spiritual things rather than old age.

It is not chronological eldership, but spiritual eldership. But I wonder if you noticed when Jill read out these verses that Peter writes of himself as a fellow elder.

We might think Peter could write of himself as an apostle. Or maybe he could even write of himself as, I'm the best apostle, don't you know? I'm the one who stood up and answered Jesus' question and said, you are the Christ, the son of the living God.

I'm the top apostle. But he doesn't do any of that. He makes himself one with others in the church.

[7 : 42] Peter is a fellow witness of the suffering of Christ. He is a sharer in faithful service. as all the leaders in the church bear witness to their own experience of the gospel.

Peter takes part in the glory to be revealed. He does not write of himself as the only one who takes part in this glory, but as one among others.

Peter demonstrates in just a few simple words an example of humility, which becomes a major theme from verses six on in this chapter.

Many of the arguments in churches end up being about who gets to be the leaders or what we call them. It's difficult to imagine that in Scotland for 400 years we've argued about whether we should use the word bishops or not.

It doesn't much matter what you call them, and the New Testament isn't really concerned about that. The New Testament is primarily concerned about how leadership in the church is exercised.

[9 : 00] Peter writes here about the characteristic marks of church leadership, which are to be sought in those called to leadership in the church. Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, a shepherd leadership.

Peter actually uses the word episcopacy, from which we get in English the word episcopal, which is bishop. But don't tell anyone I said that in the Church of Scotland.

This episcopal leadership is to be shepherd-like. And the example here is the Lord Jesus in John chapter 10, the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep.

A good leader, a good shepherd, must not serve under compulsion, but is made willing to serve by the work of the Spirit of God within them. There is no excuse for any leader in the church serving themselves for financial gain or any other kind of gain.

The difference between a stipend and a salary is important and not likely to be set aside, as is the difference between a minister being an office holder or an employee.

[10 : 21] Shepherd leadership. Example leadership. Be examples to the flock. This is the bit that terrifies church leaders.

If only the New Testament said that leaders were to stand up and talk and tell people, do what I say, but don't bother about what I do. But the New Testament never says that.

The New Testament consistently says, in your life be an example. Display godly living so that without your words, others will see and know.

Living in a way that models Christian discipleship. When the chief shepherd appears, leadership is shaped in light of the appearing of Christ.

The Lord Jesus is and must remain the chief shepherd. No earthly human shepherd can take his place. The Lord Jesus is the king and head of the church.

[11 : 27] And so leadership in the church is Christ-shaped. those who are called to leadership in the church must lead in the knowledge that Christ will return. And like so many parables, we'll ask them, well, what have you been doing with those talents that I gave you?

Now you might be thinking, this has got nothing to do with me. I'm not a leader in the church. I'm not an elder.

Well, verse 5 comes along. Likewise, you who are younger be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, plural yous, we should all be Glaswegian, with humility towards one another for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Peter uses the word younger and elder simply because it's a contrast but it's not a chronological contrast. Younger here means those people in the church who are not called to leadership or who have not yet been called to leadership in the church.

You cannot have a church in which everyone is in leadership but there should in every local church be those who are growing up, being trained and encouraged and equipped to take on responsibilities of leadership in the local church.

[12 : 54] Leaders in local church deserve the respect of the local church. When they lead the church, the church is to follow. Leaders with nobody following are just a group of people taking a walk.

That means all of us have a duty to respect and follow our leaders. leaders. This encourages leadership and good leadership in the church.

This week of all weeks, we need to say very clearly the church is not a democracy. Christ is the king. He calls and he appoints those leaders he wants in his church.

The church is called to submit to, to encourage and to follow those in leadership called and appointed by Christ.

The Lord Jesus spoke of a house divided being unable to stand. Where there is division between the leaders in the church and the church, that church will not be able to stand.

[14 : 09] over the next two weeks, we are going to see displayed on our television screens the difference here. In the singles at Wimbledon, there is only one player on one side of the net running about making all of the decisions, deciding what to do and when he's going to do it.

At the same time, we're going to see football teams playing games in a football team.

Each member of the team has their own specific role, their own specific place to be on the field, and unless they do it, the team won't work.

There's a difference between individual sports and team games, and unless the church is a team, all of us working together, it won't work at all.

this is the only kind of church there is, a church where Jesus is king and head, where we get to be on the team, where we get to serve together to make Jesus known.

[15 : 26] So then the chapter continues, verse 6. This really centers around the idea of humility. Peter makes clear these are not only for leaders but for all Christians, and this is about the kind of life the church is to live in our community.

Humble yourselves, cast all your anxieties upon God. The picture of the hand of God is mainly used of God's wonderful care for all those whom he gathers to himself.

With his hand, God picks up his people and carries us. In his hand, God will not allow any of us to fall out of his care.

It is a comforting thought, but it is one we need to submit to. We need to say to ourselves often and to one another's, we can't do it.

We are not strong enough. We are not able to follow Jesus in our own strength. We need to depend wholly for everything upon God.

[16 : 46] I wonder if you have ever said to someone, I don't want to be a bother. Or someone said it to you, especially when you have offered to help them.

Oh, I don't want to be a bother. And yet we know what a privilege it is when someone allows us to help them.

When someone shares their hardships, their sorrows, their troubles with us. When they are a bother to us and we are able to come alongside them and partner with them and support them and encourage them.

we need to get over our unhealthy independence. Because as often as we say it to one another, I don't want to be a bother, we train ourselves and we end up saying it to God.

Who is standing saying to us, cast all your cares upon me. And we turn around to God and say I don't want to be a bother. Really?

[17 : 53] But you can't carry your cares on your own. Don't you know that yet? God is begging you, cast all your cares upon him and he will care for you.

Be dependent, be humble enough to say to God, here, I can't do this anymore. and he will care for you.

It really is that simple. Be sober minded, resist the devil, firm in your faith. C.S.

Lewis taught us in the Screwtape Letters that our best defense against the devil is to learn of his schemes. There is a devil, he opposes God and Christ and the church, he rages against us, but he is a defeated enemy.

We are not to get caught up in an unhealthy over-interest in the devil and his schemes, but we are watchful against him.

[19 : 05] Resisting the devil is the best we can do. We are not strong enough to defeat the devil, only Christ can defeat him and he already has.

The best we can do is resist him and keep on standing. When we come to themes like this, we need to remind ourselves, we are not the only Christians to suffer the attacks of the devil.

And quite honestly, in the United Kingdom, we hardly suffer at all. We have brothers and sisters in places around the world who, if they were meeting together today, would be terrified that someone was going to burn down the building where they were meeting or break in the door with a gun and start shooting them.

We, as we resist the devil, pray for our brothers and sisters in the church. How then can we stand against the devil?

How can we learn to live in submission to God? We trust his promise. We read God's word, we trust what he says, and we try it out, and we find that it works.

[20 : 27] Do you feel weary? God will restore you in Christ. Do you live with doubt and uncertainty? God will confirm his promise and his grace through Jesus Christ for you.

Are you weak and feel like your feet will stumble? God will catch hold of you and carry you. That power with which God will empower you is the joy of the Lord, which is your strength.

What we feel is often wrong. We feel weak and defeated and weary and downcast, but the truth will set us free. The truth of God's grace in Christ, the truth of the gospel, which will stand for all time.

Whatever we feel, don't depend upon what you feel. Depend upon God's promise. This is the life of the church which God calls us to live.

The final verses are words of fellowship and harmony. Peter has written this letter to us as though he were writing it yesterday to encourage us.

[21 : 39] us. We need to be more deliberate in speaking words of encouragement to one another. This has to become a more conscious part of our living together.

Are our words tearing down or building up? Do we hinder faith or strengthen faith in one another together?

By what we see? The church is to be a fellowship where all are welcome, where all are encouraged to trust in Christ and to live as the people of God. We are to greet one another.

The word Babylon in this verse is the church in Rome. Greetings are conveyed from one congregation to another. That's the pattern of the letters in the New Testament.

would that it were the pattern of our church life. Whenever we're on holiday and we go to another church, why not say to one of the elders or the folks at the door, I'm from Craiglockert Church and we want to greet you and share Christian fellowship with you.

[22 : 51] We should seek out partners in the gospel that we might share together with them. We should greet one another as Christian brothers and sister.

Any symbol of greeting, a handshake or a holy kiss of love or even a free hug, see Gordon later. All of these things can become empty symbols but if we do them with genuine love and a deep desire to encourage one another, they become ways of building up the church.

A greeting of one another as Christian brothers and sisters should be warm, reflecting the love we have for one another, recognizing and honoring one another in Christ. And then Peter finishes with peace.

The wholeness of being in right order with God, with one another and with ourself. This is Peter's prayer for the church and should be more often our prayer for one another.

father, how can we live in a fellowship that treasures and lives in the example of peace? If peace is not merely about the end of conflict or the absence of conflict, what does it mean for us to be peacemakers, those who bring wholeness into the lives of one another?

[24 : 19] God will answer this prayer of Peter's. As God answers this prayer, he will build us like living stones into a fellowship of his people, which is characterized by peace.

All this is for the glory of God through Christ Jesus the Son and the power of God's Holy Spirit. Let's be this kind of church.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word. And we pray that your spirit would drive it deep within us. That there would be special words and special verses that we take hold of today, which transform our lives.

Be with us for this, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.