

WHAT IS A SUCCESSFUL CHURCH?

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study
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Let's Begin

If you visit most Christian bookstores today, you will find a large selection of books on the church. Many of the books deal with church growth, church planting, and church organization. Some will explain the theological differences between churches or go into a detailed analysis of the social demographics one faces when attempting to “target” particular people groups. Some books profile “cool” churches and others maintain that traditional churches are still effective. The fact is, one may easily be overcome with information overload. How did being a successful church ever become so complicated? What is more, many times the authors insist the only way to be a successful church is to adopt their particular plan. Is it any wonder many leaders and churches are confused about the church today?

What we find in 1 Peter 5 is an inspired periscope of truth concerning success for a local church. All the new trends and stylish fads may be soundly rejected in favor of the Apostle Peter's simple but profound formula for a successful church. In wrapping up 1 Peter, he gives two fundamental criteria upon which success for the New Testament church is judged.

As we close out 1 Peter, we will look at each piece of criteria Peter gives. Our outline is simple:

- I. A Successful Church Must Have a Godly Pastor (vv. 1-4)**
- II. A Successful Church Must Have a Godly People (vv. 5-14)**

I. A Successful Church Must Have a Godly Pastor (vv. 1-4)

As we indicated earlier, one does not have to be a brain surgeon to figure out how to be a successful church. All the books in the world cannot replace the manual which the Lord of the church has given us to evaluate success. Hence, Peter rightly begins with the leadership of God's church, God's man—the Pastor. He writes, “The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away” (vv. 1-4).

There used to be an old saying—“As goes the pulpit, so goes America.” This cliché expressed

the significance of the prophetic voice the church possessed to society at large. Similarly, one might say, “as goes the pulpit, so goes the church.” If the leader fails, the church flounders. Peter could not have been more prophetic to the contemporary church. Our prayer must be, “Lord, give us godly men to lead our churches!”

Peter opens the final chapter by describing three areas which assist the church in determining the godliness of their pastor (especially applicable is the criteria if the church is searching for a pastor).

First, the Apostle reveals the role of the pastor (vv. 1-2a). Exactly what is a pastor supposed to do according to the Bible? Three New Testament words are applicable to the office of church pastor—elder, overseer (bishop),



and pastor. In fact, upon studying the words in the Greek, one finds the words actually function as synonyms. Peter places himself among the churches as one of them when he confesses, “The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder.” Understand: *Peter is not claiming to be a spiritual giant over them but a humble servant among them.* How often he recalled the time he denied Christ, cursed His name, and swore he did not even know Him. Indeed he personally witnessed “the sufferings of Christ,” but only after a defining moment of repentance, did He experience the resurrection of Christ, and hence became a “partaker of the glory that shall be revealed.”

While Peter focuses only on one of the three words applicable to the role of pastor, note the way the New Testament explains a godly pastor’s role:

Elder: this aspect of the pastoral role emphasizes *consultation*. It refers to dignity of the office, a position of respect. To be an elder is to be spiritually mature, exceedingly wise, offering counsel which comes from unquestioned integrity and experience.

Overseer: or “bishop” as it is translated in the Authorized Version, mainly focuses on *administration*. Peter tells them to take “oversight” of God’s flock, not by force but leading them “willingly.” The word “bishop” carries the idea of management and strong leadership. Even so, as the Apostle Paul makes clear, successful leadership is driven more by moral integrity and character than talent and credentials (cp. 1 Tim. 3:1-6).

Pastor: the word translated “pastor” points toward being a “shepherd” of the flock and mainly zeros in on *edification*. The church is called the “flock of God” and the pastor is expected to fulfill the role of a caretaker over God’s flock. He guards the sheep, guides the sheep, and grows the sheep for the heavenly Father. Hence, Peter exhorts pastors to “feed the flock of God,” taking no advantage of them or doing so for profit. While the church of God must care for the needs of the man of God, this is a love transaction not an economic transaction. The godly pastor serves the flock because he loves the flock, not because he gets a paycheck.

Second, Peter reveals the responsibility of the pastor (vv. 2b-3). Not only is it significant to know what the pastor’s role is, it also is important to understand how to carry out one’s role. Though there should be a desire on the part of every pastor to become excellent in what he does, offering professionalism in how he leads, he nonetheless is not a professional. Instead he is a prophet, a man of God, a “God-called” man. Therefore, as indicated above, Peter insists a godly pastor performs “willingly” and “not by constraint.” A godly pastor does not visit hospital patients because he must go out of obligation; rather, he visits because he desires to minister to hurting people. Ministry is not drudgery; ministry is not necessarily duty; ministry for the godly pastor expresses the deepest desires of his heart and life.

In addition, not only do pastors serve their churches “willingly” they also must serve their churches “eagerly.” In other words, their service is not for “filthy lucre,” placing a monetary value on it. Instead it is because of the joy one gets in serving the Lord (cp. 1 Tim. 5:17-18). Finally, no boasting characterizes the godly

Reflection Connection

Does your church have clear expectations on what the pastor’s role and responsibilities are? To what degree do your church’s expectations match Peter’s profile for the role and responsibilities of the pastor? Explain.



pastor. He does ministry humbly. Peter says pastors are “not as lords over” as it were over people. An attitude expressing being “over” another human being finds no place in God’s church. We are all on level ground before Jesus. That does not mean there are no Biblical parameters expressing spiritual authority. Nonetheless, no spiritual authority is commissioned to “lord it over” God’s precious souls. The pastor who learns to lead the church willingly, eagerly, and humbly will be given all the freedom he needs to lead God’s people where God desires them to go. He will not have to *demand* authority over them; they will gladly *deliver* authority to him!

Finally, Peter reveals the reward of the godly pastor (v. 4). Peter implores the church (pastors particularly) to consider the final reward all God’s servants must anticipate “when the chief Shepherd shall appear.” Christ’s coming promises that “a crown of glory” that “fadeth not away” awaits the faithful people of God. Hence, we receive from Christ a never-ending crown, a crown bearing the very glory of God, a victor’s crown.

The way to being a successful church is first paved with godly pastors; men, who love the Lord, live for the Lord, and desire with all their heart to lead the people of God. Yet, as godly a pastor as one might be, there is a further requirement to being a successful church.

II. A Successful Church Must Have a Godly People (vv. 5-14)

Throughout the little letter Peter has penned, he has focused on the pilgrimage of the Christian life (cp. 1:17; 2:11; cp. also Heb. 11:13). In other words, believers are like pilgrims on a journey through a foreign land. And, while they must endure the world around them, they do not belong to it or are of it. Instead they are heavenly citizens and are ever looking upward for Divine guidance. With this in mind, Peter reveals the second of two non-negotiable requirements for being a successful church, a successful church at least in the eyes of the Lord. Not only must a church possess a *godly pastor* to be successful, the church must be a *godly people* if authentic success is obtained.

The Apostle Peter writes, “Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of *you* be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world” (vv. 5-9).

First, note the people’s attitude (vv. 5-7). Attitudes affect the way we treat others and love our neighbors as ourselves. Peter exhorts “younger” believers to “submit” themselves to the “elders” in the community of faith. Interestingly, Peter is not specifically referencing pastors at this point when he mentions “elders.” Instead, he is speaking primarily of older believers. Hence, younger believers must revere older believers. Young people learn from older, mature and godly men and women how to live responsible, holy lives before the Lord and a watching world. Godly people are characterized by humility and teachableness. Older men are



considered spiritual fathers and women spiritual mothers (cp. Titus 2:4; 1 Cor. 4:15; 1 John 2:13-14). In addition, our attitudes are to be “clothed with humility” because God remains against the “proud.” Indeed God actually makes pride His personal enemy. Humbling ourselves toward one another remains one of the most vivid marks of brotherly love we have in the church. Contrary to today’s mistaken opinion, humility is neither weakness nor characterizes a pitiful, broken spirit. Instead humility marks godliness and expresses the character of Jesus Christ. There is a sense, however, in which the believer is passive for it is Christ who makes or acts upon the one who humbles himself or herself. Hence, being humble is not something we decide to become but is what Jesus makes the one yielded to Him. In His own timing, He will “exalt” us by strengthening us with His mighty power.

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Reflection Connection

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of the devil? Do you think the way the devil is portrayed on television and in theatre is fairly accurate? Why or why not?

Second, note the people’s adversary. Peter again writes, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world” (vv. 8-9). Being humble does not mean passively sitting back and letting people and the culture self-destruct before our very eyes. Instead we must consider an active, aggressive enemy exists who uses all his wicked resources to destroy the church and spoil every Christian’s witness he can before the end time.

Not only the vast majority of unbelievers doubt the devil’s existence, but also a large segment of the Christian church doubts the devil exists! Peter is clear about the enemy: our enemy is personal and he is on a quest to affect our lives in a negative way. If godliness ceases in the church of Jesus Christ, the witness to a lost world becomes minimal at best. Peter describes the devil as our “adversary,” which carries the idea of an opponent in a civil matter before the court. He is there to judge, to blame, and to prosecute the child of God. He is, after all, the “devil” which means the “slanderer”; or as John refers to him in Revelation, the “accuser of the brethren” (Rev. 12:10). Peter also describes our enemy as a “roaring lion,” an image which conjures up pictures of a ferocious beast which devours prey at will. A lion scoffs and roars as gullible opponents resist its advance. Nonetheless, the enemy that prances around “seeking whom he may devour” is decidedly defeated. Peter says, “resist” him “steadfast in the faith”! How may the child of God do so? By their trust in Christ Who put to flight the devil’s right to dominate us. The cross sealed his doom, and we are forever victorious through Him!

Third, note the people’s arrival. Peter exclaims, “But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered



a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle *you*. To him *be* glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (vv. 10-11). A godly people not only resists the temptations of the evil one by living holy lives in the present, they also look beyond this present world to the glory beyond the grand horizon. They are pilgrims after all. The church is on a journey, a long trip to another world, with full hope in leaving this world behind. God “called us” to His “eternal glory.” And, even though we bound to “suffer a while” a day remains in the not too distant future when we will be “made perfect” in a dominion “forever and ever. Amen.” The successful church knows its ultimate success is when Christ returns for her, to rapture her to magnificent delights and experiences of the glory of the Lord for all eternity.

Golden Greek Nugget

Peter insists pastors must be responsible men of God, leading the church of God as examples, not as though they were “being lords over” God’s flock (v. 3). The phrase “being lords over” is translated from the single but compound Greek word, *katakurieuo*. This word comes from “kata” which means “down” and “kurieuo” which means “exercise authority.” The idea is “subduing” another because one has a “mastery” over the other. While the Lord God Almighty may be placed in a position of “lording it over” because of Who He is, no other human being may be said to be in such a position over another. Therefore, Peter implores pastors to never consider their positions as humble servants in such caricatured terms.

Wrap Up

What is a successful church? Contrary to all the conflicting books one may find in the nearest Christian bookstore, a successful church has two undeniable marks. First, a successful church has a godly pastor, a pastor who lives for the Lord and loves the people. Second, and no less significant, a successful church is a godly people, a people who live for the Lord now and patiently wait on the promises of God to be fulfilled in the future. Hence, every church is a successful church which bears these two marks.