

## **PETER'S TEACHING ON LEADERSHIP: AN EXAMINATION OF 1 PETER 5:1-3 IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

1 Peter was known and accepted as a letter written by Peter from the earliest time. The purpose of Peter as summarized in 1 Peter 4:19 "therefore let those who suffer according to God's will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful creator" aptly described the author's expectation from both Christian leaders and followers. Two basic themes are found in this text: suffering and good conduct. The believer who might be "suffering" as a result of his righteousness and unwillingness to compromise with the corruption of the world is expected to trust in God for succor but such trust in God must be accompanied by obedience, for they must continue to "do right". No biblical writer shows the connection between faith and conduct in a clearer manner than does Peter. (Ronald, 1995). 'Conduct' is a key word in the epistle (1 Pet. 1:15, 17, 18; 2:12; 3:1-2). The 'conduct' Peter describes is the result of a life redeemed by Jesus Christ and patterned after Christ who is the model and goal of the redeemed life.

The behavior or character of leaders and their manner of managing affairs could encourage or discourage the followers. It is pointed out in 1 Pet. 5:1-3 that all in leadership positions, particularly in the church, must realize that the requirement to live a life worthy of imitation, and an exemplary life is not optional rather it is a major part of the job, as challenging as such responsibility may be. The leader must strive continually to make his life an 'example' to others, a pattern to imitate. This is very important in view of the fact that leadership is a kind of influence which touches people and involve them. The manner in which the influence is exerted could either affect the society positively or negatively. The leadership principles of 1 Pet. 5:1-3 enables a considerate and thoughtful leader to influence his society for good. Many of our leaders today are driven by ambitions and pretensions that have nothing to do with their character and integrity. They do anything to gain recognition from the greatest possible multitude. (Emeka, 1995). Egbuji (2007), observes that in the past, leadership was envisioned by the privileged minority as a kind of economic system in which the fundamental productive relation is the lording it over the follower, by the leader. The follower, without choice, commits himself to the leader's whims and caprices without asking questions and works tirelessly for the achievement of the leader's primary objective. It is common to see leaders who dominate their followers in our churches rather than being examples to the flock. They assume they are the only intelligent beings and expect everything to go right at all times. They make threats where necessary to ensure that their orders are obeyed. Such leaders seem to be ignorant of the fact that power and leadership gifts multiply as they are shared and more people are involved in the struggle for accomplishments. Authority becomes more effective when it is exercised by

standing with others, identifying with them in their needs and problems, and by seeking to share power. True greatness is not a matter of authority or high personal achievement but an attitude of the heart that sincerely desires to live for God and others.

Peter's teaching on leadership needs to be re-examined as it offers a model of leadership that if followed would make our churches and the nation as a whole a conducive environment for human development and fulfillment in every sphere of life. With his unique position and experience, Peter urges the church leaders to discharge their duties in a ready, enthusiastic exemplary manner.(Carson,1994).

### **The Text of 1 Pet. 5:1-3**

So I exhort the elders among you,  
As a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as  
a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed. Tend the flock of God that is your charge,  
not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those  
in your charge but being examples to the flock. (RSV)

Elders, (Presbyteroi) referring to older and wiser men skilled in judging cases, ruled in most Israelite towns in the Old Testament (Numbers 11:16-25). In the New testament period, 'elders' held a respected place in the synagogues from which the church took over this form of leadership.(Craig,1993). They were appointed from earliest times to take spiritual charge of the infant churches which came into being with the spread of the gospel (Acts 14:23). In the early days of the church they were called elders, indicating their status, and also episkopoi (bishops, overseers) to describe their functions.(Carson,1994). Peter ranks himself among them as a fellow-elder. He used the term 'fellow elder', which is not found elsewhere in the New testament, to emphasize his oneness with those he was encouraging.

The verb 'tend' (poimaino) which means to serve as shepherd, and the noun 'flock' (poimnion) are from the same root, as such the phrase 'tend the flock of God...' could be translated 'shepherd (watch over) the sheep of God'. Jesus used the same verb in John 21:16 when he said to Peter, 'tend' (poimaino) my sheep'. The command to elders to shepherd the flock is found only here and in Acts 20:28-29 and both passages significantly connect 'shepherding' with "watching over it" ,*episkopountes(Peter,1990)*.

The image of a shepherd is that of a concerned guide, not of a severe ruler. 'Elders', pastors, overseers (all three were used interchangeably in the New Testament, Acts 20:28-29), in essence church leaders, are expected to be people filled with consideration and concern for their followers, builders who shape the lives of their 'flock' so as to bring out the best in them. The first verse is thus a description of those that Peter was addressing, he specifically mentioned the 'elders', the leaders of the people of God. Having done that he moved on to describe how they are to act, the conduct of a leader in the church. How should Christian leaders conduct themselves in the church and in the society at large? Peter listed three things to which elders are especially prone and three antidotes to which they must give attention.

“Tend the flock of God that is in your charge”, Peter points out that it is the ‘flock of God by this he shows that the elders have no proprietary rights over the church. This is significant since it is easy for pastors particularly, founders of churches/denomination to see the church as their personal property where they unquestionably control both the human, materials and financial resources the way they like. “not by constraint but willingly”, while it is true that elders did not volunteer themselves for the work but were selected by others (Acts 14:23) yet they were not to think of their work as something forced upon them. Peter (1990) notes that even if they had wanted the job (1 Tim.3:1) the stress of pasturing (often while supporting themselves with long days of work) and the added danger in which it puts them and their families (they are the first targets of persecution) could well make the ministry an unwanted burden. Peter however teaches that in spite of whatever hazards that may be associated with the job, as leaders, the elders must do their work with joy and not with groaning. In essence no one should be pressured into accepting a church office which he does not really want to have, in order to avoid leaders doing the job simply as an obligation without concern for the followers.

The prohibition against serving for shameful gain does not mean one should not engage in church work in order to earn money. After all those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings (1 Cor. 9:13). Peter is rather saying that one should not take the advantage of being the church leader to earn money through unfair practices, selfish motives or by dishonest means. Just as there are encouragements to support elders and other ministers financially (Matt. 10:10, 1 Tim 5:17-18) so there are warnings that some, due to human depravity, would tend to turn ministry into a business (2 Cor. 11:7-21; 1 Tim 6:5-6). Charges of illegitimate gain were often made against moral teachers in the ancient world, and it was necessary for Christians to avoid even the appearance of impropriety.(Craig,1993) Leaders must constantly guard against greed and selfish interest while they serve “eagerly”, enthusiastically. Such enthusiasm is the opposite of the calculating spirit that is concerned mainly with how to make money.

The term translated ‘domineering’ (kataklyreuo) means ‘forcefully ruling over’, ‘subduing’ and can carry the nuance of a harsh or excessive use of authority.(Wayne,1988). The phrase ‘not as domineering over those in your charge’ implies that leaders should govern not by the use of excessively restrictive rule, threats, emotional intimidation, or flaunting of power within the church, but rather by power of example. Jesus has taught that the way of the world was for leaders to domineer over the followers, expecting obedience and the ‘perks’ of leadership, but his own disciples were not to follow that pattern (Mark 10:42). His disciples who would become leaders after his departure were to be servants, not bosses; ministers not executives. Rather than dominating the church, the elder is to lead by example, “being examples to the flock”. Being an example fits well with the image of “flock”, because the ancient shepherd did not drive his sheep, but walked in front of them and called them to follow.(Peter,1990). Jesus often presented himself as an example (Matt. 10:24-25; Mk. 10:42-45; Lk. 6:40; Jn. 13:16) and Peter taught the elders to follow this example.

### **1 Pet. 5:1-3 in Nigerian Context**

In contemporary Nigeria, it is rare to see church leaders who feel being pressured or forced to lead a church by some people. Rather majority have freely and willingly chosen to become pastors, founders and overseers. Almost everyone claims to have been called by God into his service and not being compelled to do the job by some others. As such most church leaders are doing the work willingly and with all their energy and zeal. Many are willing to get into the church ministry at all cost for different reasons and this explains why there are so many denominations in Nigeria ranging from African independent churches to Pentecostals, evangelicals and the mainline churches. Churches abound everywhere and in the major cities like Lagos, it is common to see up to three or four churches/denominations in the same building. Almost everybody has a call to become church leader and since it is freewill choice of vocation in most cases the issue of doing the job grudgingly does not always arise.

It is significant to note that many of these church leaders while free from the first sin have fallen headlong into the second sin listed in 1 Peter 5:1-3 'doing the work of God for shameful gain'. In the actual fact, the "call" many claimed to have received is nothing but personal feelings on how to survive the economic hardship in the nation. Many have felt the easiest way to make money is by establishing churches particularly the unemployed graduates who have some oratory and charismatic gifts. Contrary to the teachings of Peter, these leaders have turned the ministry into a business.

Gwamna(2006) observed that within the church, "commercialization" of the gospel has overtaken salvation message coated in "prosperity" passages. Dada(2004) added that sin or failure to adequately contribute to the preacher's church or ministry are adduced as some of the reasons prosperity gospel remains ineffectual in the lives of some believers; because the leaders most of the time live on funds generated from their ignorant followers.

Religious leaders today commercialize their sacred responsibilities. A researcher once attended a church service where during the service the leader came up and announced to the congregation that he needed two people who could by his 'agbada'(a kind of dress popular among the Yoruba) for N50,000.00 each, one to buy his slippers for N10,000.00 then others could buy handkerchiefs which sold for N500.00 each(Oyedokun,2006). He claimed that the 'agbada' is a shield because his body and sweat has touched it, it possesses great power and any time those who bought it face any trouble all they need do is to kneel under the 'agbada' and claim their victory and they would have instant victory. The same goes for the slippers as they wear it they must surely experience victory and breakthroughs in life while the handkerchiefs were meant for healing and deliverances. To the amazement of the researcher more than ten people came out ready to pay for the agbada' but the first two people were given the privilege and they paid instantly. All the other items were equally purchased without any waste of time.

This is just one of the numerous ways through which church leaders siphoned money from their followers. On several occasions believers would be asked to put their hands in their pockets and bring out the highest denomination of naira or all the money there as special offering to the Lord with a promise that they would receive special miracles of provision from God that very week. They extort the hard-earned money of their followers easily, they live on Christian charities, they minister for profit, shameful gain.

In some cases, most people involved vocationally in ministry (those who are not full-time pastors) could be earning more money in another profession hence the temptation for monetary gain may not be there. But one kind of personal gain which is often a temptation to them is that of quest for personal recognition or power. In many churches, the pastor is the centre of attention and has great power or authority which can be used for good or evil.(Cedar,1984). Many Christian leaders count self-esteem and recognition as more important than the souls of their followers. They demand to be adored, honoured and catered for by their followers. The case of Rev. King-Emeka Ezeugo is one of the most recent in Nigeria, a church leader (the founder of Christian Praying Assembly) who claimed to be God and demanded to be honoured as such (Punch,2007). He committed a lot of atrocities in the name being God ranging from adultery to murder. The penchants for power, recognition and show of affluence have found a dwelling place in the Nigerian churches.(Gwamna 2006). Ezemadu cited in Gwamna laments that the craze for recognition and titles that is very common in the Nigerian society (as a status symbol) has also caught up with the church. Preaching has become an ego-trip, opportunity to show off as powerful great minister.

Sequel to this unwholesome desire for 'shameful gain' in form of money and recognition, is the domineering nature of many church leaders in Nigeria. It just follows that a leader who is greedy for power and recognition will 'domineer', delighting in the use of his authority and seeking to increase, preserve or flaunt it. Though Peter taught that church leaders are not to domineer, many leaders today have become bosses and lord over their followers. They employ every means, threats, emotional intimidation and 'political' forces, to ensure that members comply with their 'decrees'. Though a certain authority attaches to all leaders and leadership would be impossible without it, yet the emphasis of Jesus was not on the authority of a ruler-leader but on the humility of a servant-leader(Nwigwe,2004). The lust for power and prominence often gets mixed up with many of our cries for God's manifestation of power(Akanni,2000). Peter in verse 5 commanded others to 'be subject' to the elders, which implies that the elders have genuine governing authority in the church, and that they can give directions which the church ought to obey. This authority is expected to be exercised with all sense of humility. Leadership demands humility and gentleness, affection and empathy, it does not involve any kind of demonstration of an empty affectation of courage(Egbuji,2007). No leadership is authentically Christ-like which is not marked by the spirit of humble and joyful service(Nwigwe,2004). The essence of good leadership is not only the ability to influence people to follow, coerce them to obey you, but also the ability to create leaders from your followers hence the injunction, 'being examples to the flock'.

Achebe observes that the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership(Achebe,1985). Obaje described religious leaders as those who demonstrate commitments to religious truth and are eager to show the evidence of this truth in their daily conduct.( The conduct and attitude of many Christian leaders today are at variance with this teaching of Peter and the example of Christ, 'being examples to others,. Their talents and spiritual gifts have become means of self assertive pride and the inordinate desire in them to demonstrate their gifts and excellence is nothing to emulate. They would rather lecture or command people to do what is right than being examples to follow-the slogan is "do as I say not as I do".

## CONCLUSION

Peter's teaching on leadership enjoins leaders to fulfill their duties in ways pleasing to God, not in order to obtain honor or wealth in this life, but to obtain a special reward 'an unfading crown of glory' (verse 5) when Christ returns. Leaders' conduct is expected to be characterized by humility. Humility, when acquired, enables the individual to see God at the apex of all things, accept the good in others and enhance one's own talents for the good of humanity.<sup>26</sup> Humility helps to control and moderate ambition and produces a leader who is highly sensitive to people's feelings and make things pleasant for his/her followers. The Chinese sage, Lao Tzu, says "a leader is best when people rarely know he exists, not so good when people unquestioningly obey and acclaim him.... but of a god leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, the followers will say: 'we did this ourselves.'

Our religious leaders need humility; they lack humility which is a determining factor in Christian conduct and life. It takes humility for a leader to allow the followers to participate in decision making. Effective leaders inspire motivation in their followers through recognition, arousing a feeling of accomplishment and sense of importance in them and by delegating responsibility. Recognition builds positive self-esteem in the followers while responsibility gives them challenges and opportunities to expand their skills and become more productive.<sup>28</sup> They feel the job could not have been done without them and that motivates them as they look for more opportunities to prove their usefulness and relevance. The authority by which the Christian leaders leads is not power but love, not force but example, not coercion but reasoned persuasion.<sup>29</sup> Rather than domineering and manipulating others for their own ends, Christian leaders are to be examples of sincerity, self-sacrifice, integrity, honesty and total commitment to character-building in their followers.

Peter forbids the use of arbitrary arrogant, selfish, style of leadership. Those who exercise legitimate power or authority are those who assist members of the congregation in making use of their gifts in the service of God. Humility is the peculiar virtue that can set our leaders free from the enslavement of ambition, quest for power and recognition.

A leader can only be an example to the followers when he is humble enough to admit that he does not know all things and recognizes the importance, relevance and indispensability of good character and godly conduct in daily living.

## ENDNOTES

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