

one

A three-part
Bible Study on
1 Peter and the
theme of ministry

Introduction



Our own thinking of ministry usually starts from our experience of the organised Church as an institution. There are different roles or offices within the Church, local or connexional, some or all of which we may think of as carrying out a ministry. However, for many people the first thing they think of in terms of ministry is 'the minister', someone set aside full- or part-time to give leadership and a sense of direction, as well as to fulfil a number of other roles in worship and pastoral care for the congregation. For many others, the different roles within the Church, whether as a steward, or organist, or organiser of the flower rota, or pastoral visitor, also are forms of ministry even if the term 'minister' is not used.

Experience suggests that while some people are comfortable about exploring their ministry outside church activities, others find this a more difficult idea, particularly when it comes to their personal contribution. **If you have not already shared your responses to the term 'ministry' or 'minister', it might be helpful to do so now.**

A Bible study such as this starts from the experience of the earliest believers in Jesus. Although they were organised into communities often called 'churches', these were largely small and unstructured. Sometimes they may have been formed around an existing social grouping such as an extended

family; sometimes they may have followed the pattern of contemporary semi-formal associations. The New Testament suggests that it took time for any structured patterns of leadership to emerge, and that when they did, they probably took different forms and developed in different ways and rates over time. Although some New Testament writings use what appear to be relatively formal and stable labels, others do not at all. Yet, of course, most groups would need some agreed ways of working and leadership would emerge in diverse ways. Members would also explore how the needs of the group might be met, and in what ways the group would express their new faith outside their communal gatherings. However, the terms 'ministry' and 'minister' do not represent any particular word or words in the original language of the New Testament (although there are a number of words that English translations sometimes represent by these terms). This means that the New Testament does not offer us a definition of or a blueprint for 'ministry'.

This is the context in which we need to set the letter known as 1 Peter. All we know about to whom, when, and why 1 Peter was written comes from the letter itself. Start by **reading 1 Peter 1:1-2**. You may be able to find a map of the area covered by ancient '**Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia**' (1 Peter 1:1): the recipients of the letter

were scattered across a vast geographical area in modern Turkey. They were probably in small groups and communities, a dozen here, maybe 20 there, perhaps hardly aware of who there might be in the next town or village. Indeed, it may have been receiving this letter itself that made them aware of the wider network of which they were a part. **Does this initial picture suggest to you things that we need to bear in mind as we proceed?**

Peter does not describe those to whom he writes as 'churches': he does not use this or any similar term (a fact that shows how the formal vocabulary took time to develop). There is also little clear information about how these communities were structured. However, he does know that they may have been called, or have called themselves, 'Christian' (**read 1 Peter 4:14-16**); the term is rare in the New Testament and this is one of the first times it appears (see also Acts 11:26; 26:28). The passage may suggest that it was first used by others as mocking name-calling, but the author says it should be adopted as a source of pride.

Like this Bible study, the author does believe that a community of believers is the prime place of belonging for those he addresses. **Read 1 Peter 4:7-11** and note the different activities the author assumes will take place within the community. **To what extent are these ministries?**

1 Peter 5:1-5 (read) refers to "elders" (among whom the author includes himself) but puts more emphasis on the dangers of the role than on the details of its duties. It is not clear how many elders there might be in any community since the term "flock" in verses 2 and 3 is influenced by the model of a shepherd and his sheep, rather than identifying a carefully defined group. Elder might simply denote more advanced age, or experience, although the term was also used in Jewish and in civic contexts for those who held corporate responsibility. Since 1 Peter 5:5 speaks

about "you who are younger" we might think that age is determinative (unless 'the youths' were also a designated group). All together, this does not give us much insight into how the communities addressed were organised.

From the letter it is evident that some were slaves, a few in Christian households, but others could expect abusive treatment (**read 1 Peter 2:18-20**). Slaves were (as children once were supposed to be even in our culture) 'invisible', counting for nothing; those who had come to follow Christ would endure the added isolation of not following the gods of their masters and friends.

In **3:1-6 (read)** women are addressed as if they had the time and resources to worry over the latest hairstyles from Rome or to compete over the display of jewelry and accessories that advertised the status of their husbands. Yet some of them also had to negotiate maintaining their role in the home and society even though they had rejected the religious practices still followed by their husbands and the rest of the household.

Because there are no instructions to slave-owners, and only brief ones to husbands (3:7) it may be that free women and male and female slaves were in the majority.

We should recognise that it took many centuries for the Church to recognise that slavery was an affront to the gospel that God created and loves all people equally. Similarly, many today would find the assumptions about the role of women that lie behind the advice given to them here highly problematic. Any careful study of the Bible has both to recognise all that separates us from them in time, culture, and values, but also to expect to find insights that speak to our own situation. **You may wish to share your reaction to these passages.**



Some **questions** to draw this part of the study together

Part of the purpose of this Introduction has been to help us think about the questions and reactions that we bring to the discussion of ministry and to a Bible study such as this. A further part has been to 'set the scene' so that as we read the text we do so against the context in which it was written. To some extent, we are being invited to imagine ourselves into the situation of the letter when it was first sent and read.

- **Are there continuities between your situation and that of these early groups of Jesus believers?**
- **What would be the challenges to such a community?**
- **How could they imagine themselves as equally having a ministry?**

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