

# THE NATURE OF PASTORAL MINISTRY

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by

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*“The Holy Ghost makes men bishops or overseers of the Church....God hath determined in his Word, that there shall be such an office, and what the work and power of that office shall be, and what sort of men, as to their qualifications, shall receive it.”<sup>1</sup>*

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## INTRODUCTION

One does not need to be a scholar to recognize the desperate need for spiritual leadership in the church today. The pastoral office is, without a doubt, the greatest responsibility God has called any man to undertake. The pastor’s role contains an abundance of duties and tasks that require a great deal of thought and prayer. Although the pastor’s responsibility is great, his eternal reward, if he faithfully administers his office, will be greater and he will be full of joy in his service (1 Pet. 5:4; Heb.13:17). Seeing that this is such a great service to the Lord and His church, it begs the question: why is today’s church found wavering in the position of desperately needing spiritual leadership to fill such an awesome office? Wagner believes that we as pastors have subtly “sold our biblical birthright as shepherds called by God for the pottage of skills and gimmicks designed by humans.”<sup>2</sup> He offers a plausible reason why, as he adds,

We have misunderstood the role of pastor and defined it incorrectly. We have left our biblical and theological moorings. The result? Our churches are struggling mightily, Christians are wandering from the faith, and pastors are burning out at alarming rates.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the Bible warns that this will be the result in Zechariah 13:7, which states “Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered.” Oden agrees that pastoral ministry is

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<sup>1</sup> Quotation taken from Church History II Primary Source Readings required by Professor: Dr. D.S. Hogg at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary during the Spring of 2009. As cited in Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. William Brown (Edinburgh: 1829), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Glenn Wagner and Steve Halliday, *Escape From Church, Inc.: The Return of the Pastor-Shepherd* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

defined by Scripture as it “provides the primary basis for understanding the pastoral office and its functions.”<sup>4</sup> Mayhue also argues that pastoral ministry is involved in a severe identity crisis in his chapter on *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry*.<sup>5</sup> Piper has also joined this call for a biblical pastorate in the publishing of his book titled, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*.<sup>6</sup>

Since it is blatantly obvious that pastoral ministry is suffering from an identity crisis, and that the church is responding in like form, what is the pastor’s true identity? Is he to be considered a shepherd only, or in part? Is it inaccurate to describe a pastor as a CEO? Is he not considered a professional after all of his specialized seminary training? After all, isn’t that just being more relevant in our modern context? How is a pastor to identify himself biblically? What are his biblical roles and duties? In essence, this paper will attempt to define the nature of a biblically based pastoral ministry. This work will examine the major terminology used in reference to pastoral ministry, primarily focusing on I Peter 5:1-3, while giving an occasional glance at other New Testament passages. It will then attempt to show any relation these terms may have and what implications they may provide in identifying the identity of pastoral ministry. Then, based on the findings of our research, we will draw some conclusions as to the nature of pastoral ministry.

### **BIBLICAL TERMINOLOGY SPECIFIC TO THE PASTORAL OFFICE**

Throughout the history of the church, the minister has been known by a wide

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983), 11.

<sup>5</sup> John MacArthur and The Master's Seminary Faculty, *Pastoral Ministry: How To Shepherd Biblically* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 3-14.

<sup>6</sup> John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), ix-4.

variety of names, including, but not limited to: bishop, clergy, elder, evangelist, minister, pastor, preacher, priest, reverend, shepherd, and teacher. One can be overwhelmed when he considers all of these terms used to describe this office. Which terms are biblical and which are traditional? For the remainder of this paper, we will employ the term pastor, for the sake of consistency, when referring to the ministerial office.

Stitzinger reveals five distinctive terms which refer to the pastoral office, including: elder or *presbuteros*, bishop or *episkopos*, pastor or *poimēn*, preacher or *kērux*, and teacher or *didaskalos*.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that, according to Stitzinger, “First Timothy 5:17 and Hebrews 13:7 associate the terms *teacher* and *preacher* with each other” and “Ephesians 4:11 connects shepherds (pastors) with teachers, as do 1 Timothy 5:17 and Hebrews 13:7.”<sup>8</sup> In light of this, our attention will be upon the remaining three words which contain the essence of the New Testament understanding of the pastoral office. All three of these words appear to be used synonymously in I Peter 5:1-3.

Therefore, I exhort the *elders* among you, as your fellow *elder* and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, 2 *shepherd* the flock of God among you, exercising *oversight* not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; 3 nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. – (NASB)

### *Presbuteros*

The Greek word, *presbuteros*, is a term meaning an older man, or an elder.<sup>9</sup> Marshall believes the use of the term elders, to mean leaders, was a natural development

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<sup>7</sup> MacArthur, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>9</sup> W.E Vine, *Vine's Concise Dictionary of Bible Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 111.

as he notes that “leaders in Jewish communities were called elders, both in Old Testament and New Testament times.<sup>10</sup> According to Picirilli, “apparently the first use of this term within the fledgling church is in Acts 11:30.”<sup>11</sup> This is the same leadership role that is mentioned in Acts 14:23, 20:17-18; 1 Tim. 5:1-2, 17, 19; Titus 1:5, in relation to Christian congregations.<sup>12</sup> Picirilli notes that the term elder is used to indicate “persons with maturity and selected for official responsibilities.”<sup>13</sup>

What were the responsibilities of the elder(s)? Commenting on the responsibilities of elders in the New Testament, Lea and Griffin, Jr. offer this insight from the Pastorals,

Paul discussed elders who directed the affairs of the church and also those who were involved in preaching and teaching....Multiple elders then served collectively in planning and supervising churches in a given area. The individual elder may have presided over a house-church that functioned like a family unit.<sup>14</sup>

Concerning the role of the elder, Oden states, “There is considerable evidence that they exercised general pastoral guidance of a congregation: preaching, teaching, breaking bread, and witnessing to the resurrection.”<sup>15</sup>

Does the term elder rule out younger men from serving in leadership? Not necessarily, as Kistemaker points out in a comment on 1 Peter 5, where he states, “The

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<sup>10</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 159-160.

<sup>11</sup> Robert E. Picirilli, *Teacher Leader Shepherd: The New Testament Pastor* (Nashville: Randall House Publications, 2007), 2.

<sup>12</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 49 (Waco: Word Books, 1988), 279.

<sup>13</sup> Picirilli, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, Jr, *The New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery, *1,2 Timothy, Titus* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 160-161.

<sup>15</sup> Oden, 68.

word elder refers not so much to the age (v.5) as to the task of the person who holds the position of leader in the church (vv.2-3).”<sup>16</sup> This is also proven to be the case in the life of the young pastor of the church in Ephesus, Timothy. Obviously what God had in mind was spiritually mature leadership within the church. His people need elders who can lead them out of experience and wisdom, although this does not necessarily imply that they have to be an older, senior adult. Let’s not forget the age of Christ and his disciples during the time He began His ministry.

It is logically apparent then, that the term, *presbuteros*, refers to church leadership within the life of the New Testament church. In fact, Cowen argues that, “it is by far the most common term used in the New Testament to denote an officer of the local church.”<sup>17</sup> Though the term, *presbuteros*, is employed sixty-six times in the New Testament, it is used at least eighteen times in direct reference to an officer in the local church.<sup>18</sup> The conclusion could be drawn that this term is, indeed, denoting the pastoral office of the church. Furthermore, maturity and experience are part of the job description of an elder, as are the abilities to lead and teach Gods flock.

### ***Episkopos***

The Greek word, *episkopos*, is a term meaning the exercise of oversight, to be an overseer or bishop.<sup>19</sup> According to Vine, “it is not a matter of assuming a position, but of

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<sup>16</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary, James, Epistles of John, Peter, and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 188.

<sup>17</sup> Gerald P. Cowen, *Who Rules the Church? Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Vine, 33, 267.

the discharge of the duties.”<sup>20</sup> He adds, “the word does not imply the entrance upon such responsibility, but the fulfillment of it.”<sup>21</sup> It is derived from the family of Greek words referring to guardianship, oversight, inspection; implying vigilance far more than hierarchy.<sup>22</sup> This is an important distinction due to the fact that in many denominations today (like the Methodist and Episcopal churches) the word *bishop* refers not to an ordinary pastor, but rather to an elite clergyman who has authority over pastors.<sup>23</sup> While discussing denominations governed by a hierarchy of bishops, Picirilli states, “The word is never used that way in the New Testament.”<sup>24</sup> During the time of I Peter, *episkopos*, had not yet taken on the meaning “to serve as bishop,” rather, it simply interpreted the metaphor of “shepherding the flock” as the responsibility to care for and oversee the needs of a Christian congregation.<sup>25</sup> Cowen notes that, in both 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9, the term overseer is correlated to “the position (office) of a bishop” and is deemed a good work.<sup>26</sup> Lea and Griffin, Jr. offer us an insightful warning to avoid reading our current ecclesiastical understandings into this verse,

We must not confuse the office of overseer or bishop mentioned here with the ecclesiastical office of bishop that developed later. In later times a bishop was a superintendent over a diocese. This office did not appear in a fully developed sense until the second century. Paul was not discussing a hierarchical office, but he was

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>22</sup> Oden, 71.

<sup>23</sup> Picirilli, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>25</sup> Michaels, 283.

<sup>26</sup> Cowen, 8.

presenting someone who directed the affairs of the church.<sup>27</sup>

Based upon our study of the word *episkopos*, it appears that we can deduce three distinctions of this word in relation to the New Testament teaching on the pastoral office. First, the term is clearly presented in various texts as an office within the church. The duties of this office are virtually identical to those of the *presbuteros*. Second, the term affirms the churches need for spiritual leadership in the exercise of oversight. Finally, we can deduce from our study that an interchangeable relationship exists between the terms for elder and overseer. Namely, both terms represent a radically similar office.

Is it possible that these two words could be different ways of referring to the same office? Or are they two totally distinct, yet similar, offices within a higher ecclesiastical order? As has already been noted, I Peter 5:1-3 allude to the terms meaning the same office, as elders are instructed to exercise oversight. In Acts 20:28, the terms seem to refer to the same office as well. Cowen notes, “Addressing the elders from Ephesus, Paul says that the Holy Spirit made them ‘overseers’ (bishops, *episkopoi*), and their job is to ‘shepherd’ or ‘pastor’ the church.”<sup>28</sup> Luke calls these men “elders,” yet Paul describes them as “overseers.” Kistemaker teaches that “The word elder refers to office; the word overseer describes the task the person performed.”<sup>29</sup> While this understanding helps to point toward the nature of the pastoral office, it is still insufficient in addressing the issue of one or two offices. However, when this information is combined with the teaching of Paul in Titus 1:6-9, we can begin to see that there is a virtual interchanging of the titles

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<sup>27</sup> Lea and Griffin, Jr., 108.

<sup>28</sup> Cowen, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary, Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1990), 724.

given to a single office. Concerning this interchanging of titles, Cowen observes,

In Titus, Paul seems to equate the office of bishop and elder again. He talks about appointing “elders in every city,” and then he begins a discussion of the qualifications (Titus 1:5-6). In the middle of the discussion, he changes the title of the same office to “bishop” (1:7).<sup>30</sup>

Based on the above argumentation, it would be logical to conclude that these two terms are synonymous. Picirilli quotes Spicq who appropriately observes, “Not only does the *episkopos* watch over and busy himself with the community, but he also sees to its spiritual needs and devotes all his energy to it.”<sup>31</sup> This does not sound like the modern idea of a bishop or a professional CEO; it sounds like the nature of a pastor. Bishops/elders are the leaders in the church who exercise oversight over the flock of God.

### ***Poimēn***

The Greek word, *poimēn*, is a term meaning shepherd that is used metaphorically of Christ and of those who act as pastors in His churches.<sup>32</sup> The term is used eighteen times, fifteen of which are in the Gospels, and only once does it refer to the office of pastor in Ephesians 4:11.<sup>33</sup> In John 10, the good shepherd, Jesus, describes what a good shepherd is like. In 1 Peter 5:4, Peter refers to Jesus as “the Chief Shepherd” after earlier calling him “the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls” (1 Pet. 2:25). Wagner aptly defines the imagery of the shepherd as he states,

The term pastor is filled with magnificent imagery and significance, especially because it connects in a fundamental way to the very character and attributes of God. God is first termed a shepherd in the opening book of the Bible...No doubt the

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<sup>30</sup> Cowen, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Picirilli, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Vine, 341.

<sup>33</sup> Cowen, 5.

most famous of all the Old Testament descriptions of God as Shepherd is found in Psalm 23, where David proclaims, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”<sup>34</sup>

The verb form of shepherd, *poimaino*, is used eleven times, including the dialogue in John 21, in which Jesus tells Peter to “tend or feed my lambs,” “shepherd my sheep,” and “tend or feed my sheep.”<sup>35</sup> Cowen adds that, “In contrast to true shepherds, the false shepherds described in Jude feed (pastor) only themselves.”<sup>36</sup> It is also used again in 1 Peter 5:2, but with a broader meaning that includes all the duties of the shepherd in exercising watch-care over the sheep.<sup>37</sup>

Based on the above discussion, the shepherd/pastor is a title for the pastoral office, however, it carries a different type of connotation. Rather than using shepherd as a definitive title, the New Testament writers sought to use the imagery of the shepherd as a way of communicating the role of the elder – bishop. Although the title pastor has become very widespread in our modern context, it is essentially the elder – bishop title that was preferred in the early history of the ancient church. That has no doubt changed as Picirilli correctly observes,

The English term *pastor* means a *shepherd*. Whenever “pastor” appears in the New Testament, or in the English literature of the period, “shepherd” would be an equally correct translation, and vice versa. The King James translators (like others before and since) chose “pastor” for the very reason that in their usage of the English language it was another word for a shepherd.<sup>38</sup>

While there is nothing biblically wrong with calling church leadership, pastors,

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<sup>34</sup> Wagner, 113-115.

<sup>35</sup> Cowen, 6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Picirilli, 10.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Oden detects that some modern scholars “suspect that modern man is estranged from the meaning of such premodern images as shepherding and can hardly understand their force.”<sup>39</sup> Oden goes on to argue that,

This is no incidental, take-it-or-leave-it image for ministry....Other important images of ministry, such as teacher, overseer, liturgist, elder, or priest, became infused with special significance by analogy to good shepherding. Pastor is our central paradigm....This pivotal analogy decisively informs the unique notion of authority in Christian ministry....Shepherding is thus not just an archaic image. It is as much needed amid the concrete canyons of modern urban centers as it is in rural scenes in which its intriguing images were spawned.<sup>40</sup>

It is logical to conclude that the analogous title of shepherd points in the same direction as the terms for elder and overseer. There is an obvious relationship between these three terms. Next, we will examine the implications of this relationship upon pastoral ministry.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY**

Each term alludes to an authoritative figure who is assigned by God as his under-shepherd to exercise oversight over a flock that needs him to care for their total well-being at the risk of his own personal well-being. It has been argued from three passages of scripture that these terms refer to the same pastoral office (I Pet. 5:1-3; Acts 20:17-28; Titus 1:5-9). Cowen observes one other important fact,

There is no church in the New Testament that has more than two permanent offices in its leadership structure. Philippians 1:1 addresses the bishops and deacons of that church. The Jerusalem church had elders and chose the first deacons (Acts 6:1-7). Paul gives the qualifications for bishops and deacons in 1 Timothy 3.<sup>41</sup>

The issue of the number of offices in ecclesiastical structure is subject to much debate in

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<sup>39</sup> Oden, 51.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 52-53, 59.

scholarly circles today.<sup>42</sup> The view that has been presented in this research is the view of only two permanent offices: elder/bishop/pastor and deacons. It has been argued that the pastoral office is most commonly and appropriately titled in the New Testament as elders. Though the term pastor is commonly used today it was probably intended to provide more of descriptive metaphor of what an elder does.<sup>43</sup> The term overseer is also a descriptive title, prescribing the nature of the elder's work.<sup>44</sup> According to Cowen, "there is no hint in the New Testament that they had any authority over any other churches except the one they pastored."<sup>45</sup> In a way, pastoral ministry is almost analogous to the Trinity. The Elder functions like the Father in being the authoritative, wise, and experienced leader. The Shepherd functions like the Son in being the provider and defender. The Overseer functions like the Holy Spirit in being the guide who watches over the church. Just as it takes all three persons to make the Trinity, it also requires all three functions of these terms to make a good spiritual leader.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS ON THE NATURE OF PASTORAL MINISTRY**

The nature of pastoral ministry is summed up in these three terms. All three of these terms find their being in the work of Christ. As Purves observes concerning Christ,

A central task of pastoral theology, then, is to remind the church that Jesus Christ is the pastor, the one who is the primary pastoral actor – who guides us to streams of living water, who forgives us our sins and saves us, who heals all our hurts, and who

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<sup>41</sup> Cowen, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Oden, 72.

<sup>43</sup> Cowen, 13.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

brings life out of death.<sup>46</sup>

Pastors are his under-shepherds if they seek Him to provide pastoral care to them, in order that they may do likewise to the flock. It has been said that “We minister out of our identity.” As this paper began searching for the identity of the pastor, in the midst of a day when the pastorate and the church are suffering from amnesia, so it will end. Therefore, the identity of the pastor and the nature of pastoral ministry is only found in one place: The Word of God. It is found in passages that we did not even examine like Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 3, 33, and 34. It is time for a great reliance resurgence in the church. We need a great reliance on the one in whom all our hope is found. It is time for pastors to grow up and be elders. It is time for pastors to lead their flocks as wise shepherds, exercising spiritual oversight in such a way as to bring glory to our Creator and to the One who purchased the church with His own blood. In closing, hear the words of a man, who in seeking to define the vocation of the pastorate, has eloquently given us a glimpse of the true nature of pastoral ministry with these words on shepherding,

This is the vocation of the pastor: to know the parish territory, its dangers, its green meadows, its steep precipices, its seasons and possibilities. The pastor leads the flock to spring water and safe vegetation. The flock recognize their own good through the shepherd’s voice. They do not see it in their interest to follow strangers. They know their own shepherd will not mislead them. The shepherd is able to anticipate their needs in advance and is willing to deal with each one individually.<sup>47</sup>

May God raise up a generation of shepherds like this, who know their Lord and their assignment, and who are not professional CEO’s. Amen.

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<sup>46</sup> Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>47</sup> Oden, 52.

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