

Biblical Understanding of a Pastor

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Integration Question: *Where in the Bible would you go to find the model of a contemporary pastor?*

Theological Statement

How does the contemporary church recognize the role of a pastor if the word pastor never shows up in the original language of the Bible? While it is true that the word pastor does not show up in the Greek or Hebrew, there are three words (church officers) used in the Bible to describe our modern-day pastors. The first word we derive our understanding of pastor from is *poimēn*. *Poimēn* is Greek for “shepherd.” As a position of a church officer, it is only used once, in Ephesians 4:11. The Greek verb *poimainō*, which means "to shepherd", "to feed", and "to tend", is used far more often than its noun counterpart in the New Testament. This action is mainly used of a person whose job it is to watch over, protect, and ensure the growth and livelihood of livestock. When a person is charged to *poimainō* others, it extends figuratively to mean one who spiritually leads, protects, guides, governs, and fosters growth and life toward relationship with Jesus. In fact, Jesus referred to Himself as the good *Poimēn* (Shepherd) in reference to all who follow him, His sheep, are ensured abundant life through Him (John 10:1-18). He genuinely loved and cared for people, He built relationships with people, He confronted the sin of the religious, He spoke the truth, and He was not afraid of the sinful people or situations he encountered. Jesus equipped His disciples for ministry by engaging with them in teachable moments and helping them to catch what He taught them. He engaged in regular, real, spiritual warfare and did not back down from the enemy. As a result, a shepherd and the act of shepherding is most associated with the function of a pastor.

There are two more roles that are attributed to the act of shepherding, *presbuteros* and *episkopeō*. *Presbuteros* is the Greek word that means “elder.” The basic definition of *presbuteros*

is to be relatively advanced in age, older. Among the Jews the term *presbuteros* was used as the title of members of local councils, as well as members of a group in the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Self-governing Jewish communities typically had a ruling council to direct their affairs who was made up of respectable older men, called *presbyteroi*. One *presbyteroi* was usually recognized as the presiding elder. In Paul's letter to Timothy, Paul writes that the *presbuteros* who direct the affairs of the church are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is to teach and preach (1 Tim. 5:17). Here, *presbuteros* is seen as someone who governs the church and works as a preacher and teacher of the community.

The third role attributed to shepherding is *episkopos*, a Greek word that means "overseer" or "bishop". When used as a noun, its basic definition is someone who exercises oversight and gives attention to, looks at, takes care of, and/or sees to it. In Paul's address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, *episkopos* is used as a position of a church officer (Acts 20:28). When charged as a position in the church, it spiritually denotes someone who accepts responsibility to oversee the governance and overall health and care of the community. There are multiple examples of all three words being used synonymously. In Peter's first letter, he wrote, "to the *presbuteros* (elder) among you, I appeal as a fellow *presbuteros* (elder), a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be *poimainō* (shepherds) of God's flock that is under your care, serving *episkopeō* (overseers)— not because you must, but because you are willing...." (1 Pet. 5:1-4). Likewise, Paul wrote to the *presbuteros* (elders) of the church in Ephesus, calling them to "keep watch over [themselves] and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made [them] *episkopos* (overseers). Be *poimainō* (shepherds) of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:17, 28). The evidence of the New Testament, specifically for Paul and Peter who were ministering from 50 to 65 AD, points to the fact that *poimēn* (shepherd),

presbuteros (elder), and *episkopeō* (overseer) were used to describe the same leaders. Today, we call these leader pastors.

Ministry Application

Having a proper understanding of the Biblical role of a pastor is vital for the growth and empowerment of disciple makers. For example, in the modern western construct of church (generally speaking), Christian pastors are commonly known best for their role as preacher and teacher, rather than all the other qualifications discussed above. In fact, a vast majority of evangelical pastors spend nearly fifty percent of their work week preparing for their three-point sermon rather than preparing to practically equip and empower their congregation to share the gospel and disciple others. The hyper focus and attention on pastors as preachers or teachers have negative ripple effects in the church in so far that it has often led lay believers to neglect their commission to be the ones to teach other of Jesus' kingdom. Far too many Christians rely so heavily on the pastor's Sunday morning message to teach interested or new believers, instead of themselves being confident enough to teach and disciple those interested in following Jesus. To be clear, it would be a logical fallacy to blame pastors for people's lack of obedience, but I believe the average Christian has a deviated concept of their participating role in the New Covenant priesthood of believers due to an erroneous understanding of the office of "pastor."

We see Paul charge Timothy to "preach the Word" and to "be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage-- with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Tim. 4:1-2). We see Jesus instruct His disciples to make more disciples and to teach them His commands (Matt. 28:18-20). We also see Jesus instruct His chosen apostles to bear His witness to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Similar to how many Christians rely solely on pastors to teach those interested about Jesus, many take these passages and argue that it was just a specific,

specially chosen people that Jesus charged to teach, disciple, and preach, not layperson. But Scripture says otherwise. The author of Hebrews writes to the entire congregation to “exhort one another daily” so that they would not fall into sins of deceitfulness (Heb. 3:13). Paul writes to the entire church in Colosse, a letter that was meant to be circulated to other churches in the area, that all who follow Jesus are supposed to teach and admonish one another (Col. 3:16). Likewise, Paul writes to the entire Jesus community in Corinth to follow his example, just as he followed Jesus’ example of how to live as His servant (1 Cor. 11:1). These verses give us a clear example that Jesus’ command to teach and preach His way of living, was meant to be done, passed on, lived out, and shared by all Christians, not just those who have advanced degrees or stand on a stage in front of a pulpit.

The importance of community is another implication of having shepherding, wise, and overseeing pastors. Because we all bear God’s image and have His Spirit indwelling us, we all have spiritual gifts. There are some who are gifted in shepherding, applying wisdom to other’s lives, and governing communities, while others are gifted elsewhere. For this reason, followers of Jesus must become unified as His bride (John 17). No Christian was meant to do this life alone, nor was the Church ever meant to not be one. This means that the giftings and passions of each person are meant to be used for the common good of the community. Along with this comes the idea that every person should humbly, yet joyfully and confidently, use their gifts to serve others. While some gifts are more seen than others, such as a pastor teaching in front of the community, it does not make any more giftings more significant than the others. Having pastors should encourage the community that there are shepherds who are gifted in coming along side us and to lead us to the place where we can best utilize our gifts for His kingdom.