

The Unscriptural Use of the Term 'Pastor' as a Designation
for the Local Preacher
By Brian A. Schulz

Introduction and Background

And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. Acts 20:17-18,28 (NASB)

These verses in Acts record the account of Paul tearfully leaving the ministry which he had so lovingly supplied to the city of Ephesus. Paul assuredly had developed many close friendships as he helped to establish the Church in this cosmopolitan city. The time had arrived when Paul knew he must move on to his next ministry. To leave the Church without some form of leadership would be a dangerous proposition. Fortunately, Paul was armed with the structure and doctrine that would prove to be the basis for the care of the flock he was leaving behind. He had gathered together the elders and then he charged them with the care of this flock. Therefore, it was clear that the elders that Paul had appointed in this church body were responsible for the care of this congregation.

Today in most Evangelical Churches the Biblical structure for church leadership has gone by the wayside. The Biblical form has given way to church board politics

and clergy focused leadership. The mentality within most churches applies its focus to a central figure in the leadership structure. This central figure has taken on the moniker of "the pastor."

The history of the development of "the pastor" mentality is firmly rooted in the struggles of the early church following the passing of the last Apostle. Even in the days of the Apostolic church, there were many false teachers distorting and perverting the original Gospel message as indicated by many of the New Testament writings. By the second century, the people were already straying from the original Apostolic teaching. The church with the motive of preserving the purity of these teachings began to search for a way to do so. In the first century the church operated on a governmental system termed a collegiate eldership; That is a system of a body of elders who had equal authority and made decisions as a whole.

In the second century the church perceived a need for an individual to make the determinations of the truth of scripture. This was in reaction to a great deal of false teachers. Thus the monarchical bishop was established as the elder who would be the end all for any "gray areas" in the individual church.

As this initiative progressed, the perceived need for one bishop to rule over a group of churches (synod) developed. Eventually, by the fourth century, the Papal system was in place as one individual over the entire church.

Therefore, that which arose from this quandary was to begin to distinguish and reform the leadership structure of the local church body to an extra-Biblical external denominational structure. Through the following years this system with the influence of John Calvin in the sixteenth century manipulated the one pastor system into a firmly rooted infrastructure. These dynamics lay the foundation for the condition of most church polity issues in the present day.

Summary of Assorted Definitions of the word Pastor

"And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." Ephesians 4:11

(NASB) As Paul was relating to the Ephesian church in this letter, it appears that each one of these designations listed are separate entities. The common practice and doctrine of most church bodies is to merge the duties of pastor and evangelist together. This said conglomeration

in this politically correct society has taken on the most comfortable term of 'pastor.' Society seems to be most comfortable with the moniker of pastor and thus has applied its will above that of the New Testament order. Almost every reference indicates this definition. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia defines pastor this way:

Literally, a helper, or feeder of the sheep (the King James Version Jer 2:8; 3:15; 10:21; 12:10; 17:16; 22:22; 23:1-2, and in Eph 4:11, the King James Version and the Revised Version (British and American): Besides the literal sense the word has now a figurative meaning and refers to the minister appointed over a congregation. This latter meaning is recognized in the translation of the King James Version.¹

The wording alone (now) in this text helps to clearly show that society has determined the meaning rather than the original context determining the definition. The wording in this definition (the minister) also demonstrates the singular mentality of the definition 'the pastor.'

New Unger's Bible Dictionary defines the office of Pastor with some distinct duties:

Paul's pastoral epistles contain the sum and substance of NT teaching on this subject. He laid down three functions: (1) The ministration in divine service includes the ordering of worship, administering the sacraments, and preaching the Word. Here the pastor is appropriately termed minister.

¹ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Electronic Database Copyright (c) BibleSoft, 1996; Pastor.

(2)The responsibility of the pastoral care springs out of no. 1. The feeding of the flock is the instruction of its members, but it is also the vigilant distributive attention to all its interests in the whole economy of life. The shepherds must imitate the chief shepherd, who "calls his own sheep by name." (3) This pastoral relation passes naturally into what we have scriptural authority for calling the spiritual government of the church. Its ministers are called rulers (Grk. hegoumenoi) or presidents (Grk. proestotes), and all its members are bidden to obey them that have the rule.²

Understanding this definition supplied by New Unger's categorically lays a tremendous amount of power at the feet of 'the pastor' over the congregation. The joining together of the office of pastor and evangelist has not only shifted power to 'the pastor' but also the overwhelming brunt of responsibility. McClintock and Strong also elaborate on the effects of the singular entity that is 'the pastor';

As well might there be many heads to an army as many pastors for a single flock. The apostle James rebuked this error when he said, "My brethren, be not many masters." Rather should the energies of an entire flock be guided by the wisdom and zeal of a single responsible head. In this view Christian churches should not be too large, so that individual talent will be in danger of being overlooked or unemployed.³

The most alarming point within this definition is the fact that this office of the pastor should limit the size

² The New Unger's Bible Dictionary Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1988; Pastor.

³ McClintock and Strong Encyclopedia, Electronic Database. Copyright © 2000, 2003 by BibleSoft, Inc; Pastor.

of the congregation to his ability to look over and control it. Again this is antithetical to any Biblical reference on the growth of the kingdom.

It is clear from these references that the word pastor is defined as a singular entity which merges the responsibilities of the evangelist and pastor shifting responsibility and power to this individual over the local church.

The Biblical Distinction between Evangelist and Pastor

In order to understand clearly what the Bible teaches about the word and office and pastor, it is then necessary to define the office of evangelist and pastor separately.

The Evangelist

The office of Evangelist listed in Ephesians chapter four is listed non-consecutively and separate from the office of pastor. A look into the original Greek allows for a clear definition of the office of Evangelist. Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Word's explains:

EVANGELIST-euangelistes NT:2099, lit., "a messenger of good" (eu, "well," angelos, "a messenger"), denotes a "preacher of the gospel," Acts 21:8; Eph 4:11, which makes clear the distinctiveness of the function in the churches; 2 Tim 4:5. Cf. euangelizo, "to proclaim glad tidings," and euangelion, "good news, gospel." Missionaries are "evangelists," as being essentially preachers of the gospel.⁴

⁴ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, Copyright © 1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers.

The primary function of the evangelist in the local church is preaching and teaching. While preaching and teaching is the responsibility of the evangelist this does not limit the congregation from actively participating in the exploration of God's word. One of the results of adhering to the "One pastor" mentality is the fact that the congregation lays aside any personal responsibility in studying and implementing God's word. Mark Frees witnessed this very dynamic while serving as "the pastor" in a denominational church:

Frees writes on the results of the Pastor-Laity Relationship: "Causes believers to neglect their own responsibility for witnessing to the lost, encouraging the brethren, in-depth Bible study, visiting the sick, etc., out of a conscious or subconscious assumption that these are "the Pastor's Jobs." Often the only one visibly working for Christ in the community is the Pastor, whose witness is impaired by the fact that he is perceived as paid to do so, And how rare is serious Bible study outside of the Pastor's study! There is a widespread delusion that only the "ordained" Pastor is qualified to mine the riches of God's Word, and that only he is responsible for using the Word to encourage the brethren and warn the lost. As a result, men who have been believers in Christ for thirty or forty years and "by this time ought to be teachers" are still being spoon fed them selves. (Heb. 5:12)"⁵

Properly understanding the role of the evangelist in that of preaching and teaching provides for the equipping

⁵ Frees, Mark. "Is the One Pastor System Scriptural?" Life House.org Home Page [Web Site] ; accessed 20 Apr. 2007; available from <http://www.lifehouse.org/tracts/IsTheOnePastorSystemScriptural.html>.

of the saints for works of service. This Biblical precedence is the most effective method for all in the church body to operate at maximum efficiency. The broad reaching effectiveness of a Biblically equipped motivated church body exponentially outweighs the limited reach and scope of the one pastor.

The Pastor

Having discussed the priority of the original Greek concerning the term evangelist, it is then beneficial to explore the same in that of the term pastor. Just as in the English modern vernacular there are synonymous terms for the same 'thing', the New Testament Greek employs the same usage in order to explain the multi-functionality of the office of elder. Not distinguishing these terms as synonymous allows for much confusion of the roles and offices within the church body. Steve Rudd answers the question, "Why do people confuse the one office, for many distinct offices?"

A failure to recognize that the English terms "Elder and Presbyter come from the same Greek word "Presbureros". That the English terms "Overseer and Bishop come from the same Greek word "Episcopos". And that the English terms "Shepherd and Pastor come from the same Greek word "Poimen". Part of the confusion is that one Bible translation will consistently translation the Greek word "Presbureros" as "Elder, while another translation will render the same Greek word "Presbureros" as Presbyter. We are find no fault with these translations, but people simply do not look

closely enough to notice what is really going on between translations.⁶

Jason Jackson adds to this understanding of these synonymous terms in the Christian Courier:

In Acts 20:28, Paul identifies those who are to "take heed . . . to all the flock" as "bishops" (i.e., overseers or administrators). Likewise, Peter instructs these servants to "act like shepherds" as they "oversee" the flock of God (1 Pet. 5:2). This exhortation is addressed to "the elders" (1 Pet. 5:1). We observe how the words "bishop" and "elder" are interchangeable in another passage as well - Titus 1:5-6. These terms - elder, bishop, and pastor - are used of the same service in the church. These words describe a man who is older and experienced in the faith (i.e., an elder); a person who is a decision-maker, manager of church affairs, and leader (i.e., bishop); and one who maintains a careful watch for the spiritual needs of all the members of the flock (i.e., a pastor).⁷

With this understanding the church should operate from the premise that the elders of the church should synonymously and properly be called the pastors (plural) of the flock. Therefore it is then clear that understanding the original Greek is of utmost importance and thus takes precedence over 'man-made' societal monikers and offices.

⁶ Rudd, Steve. "Organization of the Local Church" The Interactive Bible Home Page [Web Site] ; accessed 20 Apr. 2007; available from <http://www.bible.ca/ntx-elders-pastors-bishops.htm>.

⁷ Jackson, Jason. "What is a Pastor?" Christian Courier Home Page [Web Site] ; accessed 20 Apr. 2007; available from <http://www.christiancourier.com/questions/pastorQuestion.htm>.

Conclusion and Summary

Studying the Bible closely reveals the beauty and simplicity of the proper model for church leadership. These roles when properly applied and implemented produce a highly effective group of leaders. These roles also allow for the best possible environment for the spread of God's word. Simple math would reveal the superior productivity of a Biblical functioning Church body and leadership over that of a clergy-laity focused church body. Jackson summarizes the origin and complimentary nature of Elder (Pastor) / Evangelist (Preacher) design:

These complimentary roles of service were designed by Christ to lead all members to serve God according to their abilities (Eph. 4:12). In that respect, all Christians should be "ministers" of the gospel. Working together with preachers and elders, the whole congregation can grow according to the Lord's plan.⁸

The key issue coursing throughout this entire discussion is the right use of the Bible. This key should be the goal of every Christian who desires for the Church to serve its purpose upon this earth. God desires for His Kingdom to grow, and thus He has places the responsibility upon the members of this Kingdom to facilitate its

⁸ Jackson, Jason. "What is a Pastor?" Christian Courier Home Page [Web Site] ; accessed 20 Apr. 2007; available from <http://www.christiancourier.com/questions/pastorQuestion.htm>.

increase. As Paul related to Timothy, Christians must take care with the Word of God; "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman, who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth." 2 Timothy 2:15 (NASB)