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# Are All Elders Pastors?

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In recent years Baptists have recognised that according to Scripture there should be a plurality of elders in every local congregation. However, this has led to some failing to make the distinction between those who are set apart for the *pastoral ministry* and those who work with such a ministry in the capacity of *ruling elders*. Presbyterians have always had ruling elders in their congregations and there has always been debate about a distinction between those set aside for full-time work and ruling elders who are not. There is an important difference, however, between the debate in Presbyterian circles and among Baptists. Baptists are accustomed to using the word *pastor*, whereas Presbyterians usually use the word *minister*. Presbyterian writings leave the whole question of the position of the pastor an open one.

In looking at this subject, some have asserted that just as all elders are also overseers (AV - bishops) so all elders are pastors. They appeal to Acts 20:28 and 1 Pet 5:1-4 (where all elders are to *shepherd* the flock) and to the fact that all elders must be *able to teach* and that the word translated *minister* is not exclusive to the Christian ministry. To them there is simply one office, that of elder, and this they believe saves us from the peril of autocracy. Many are uneasy about such views. They feel there must be a difference between those who are called full-time and those who are not. At the same time they recognise there are gifted brethren who can assist pastors in their work.

## **A Distinctive Teaching Ministry**

In the *Old Testament* the elders of the covenant community never had a teaching role. There was a separate and distinct office to which was entrusted the ministry of the word. Priests and Levites shared with the elders the responsibility of judgment and rule but they were in fact ministers of the word and superintended the worship. Prophets were also set apart to declare God's word. The *New Testament* draws a close parallel in respect of financial support between priests and those who preached the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:13-14). There is also a parallel drawn between prophets and preachers. Rom 10:14-15 powerfully illustrates the New Testament concept of the preacher. Such men must be sent by God before they can preach. This distinction is clearly made in 1 Tim 5:17, "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour especially those who labour in the word and doctrine". The terminology, "labour in the word and doctrine", is particularly helpful as it covers *all* those given by God to minister the word. This function continues to apply when apostles and prophets passed away. The distinction occurs again in 1 Thess 5:12, "We urge you brethren to recognise those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you". Heb 13:7 carries the same message where reference is made to those who not only rule but "have spoken the word of God to you". They are different from those referred to in the 17th verse, having the *additional* gift. Clearly there was a *distinct group* who have a full-time stewardship, labouring in doctrine and the word. This group, separate from the ruling elders, are referred to in Eph 4:11, where five categories are listed as gifts given by the Head of the Church.

## Elders

Some may reasonably argue that since elders should be able to teach, they have a teaching function along with a ruling function. The words “able to teach” given in the list of qualifications for elders in 1 Tim 3:2 are repeated in 2 Tim 2:24 where the context is not public ministry but private admonition. Even more helpful is the passage in Tit 1:9 where qualifications of elders are repeated and instead of the expression “able to teach” we read, “holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and convict those who contradict”. The following verses show that this is not *public* ministry but *private* admonition.

It is said that there is only one office of spiritual oversight. The Scripture merely tells us that each church should have elders. But it is important to recognise that the word *elder* is a collective, generic term because *all* those who had gifts of ministry were also qualified to rule. We know from 1 Pet 5:1 that Peter, an apostle, was also an elder. We can also see from Acts 15:22 & 32 that there were prophets in the church at Jerusalem. Now the letter sent from the church to Antioch went from the “apostles, the elders and the brethren”. Clearly prophets were included along with other ministerial brethren under the title, “elder”. “Prophets” were therefore also elders, just as apostles were. When Paul called the elders from Ephesus to meet him at Miletus, there must surely have been prophets and teachers among them just as there were such at the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1). There were, very likely, evangelists too among these elders from Ephesus.

It is clear, furthermore, that Peter was *first* an apostle and secondly an elder. Agabus the prophet (Acts 21:10) must have been an elder, likewise Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8). They were described by their ministerial gift, not as “elders”. In Acts 13:1 we also have men who must have been elders described by their ministerial gift. These men were *first* prophets and teachers, secondly they were elders.

In Acts 20:28 and 1 Pet 5:2 elders are called upon to “shepherd the flock”. Are not all elders, therefore, shepherds or pastors? This argument assumes that function is equivalent to office. We are all called upon to evangelise. Indeed, Acts 8:4 shows us that the whole scattered congregation at Jerusalem evangelised but that did not make them all evangelists. There are those set apart to be deacons, but the function of serving is a very general one. *Function does not equal office.* Elders are to support those whose calling is specifically that of a pastor. They “shepherd” but he is *the* “shepherd”.

## The Pastor

In the Old Testament there are many references to the shepherd. In no case, however, can it be applied directly or indirectly to elders. It is used of those in positions of leadership - Moses, Joshua, the Judges, David, Cyrus. There are indirect references in its usage to priests and prophets, but never to elders.

In the New Testament, Ephesians 4 is of the utmost importance. We read in verse 8, “He gave gifts to men” and in verses 11 and 12, “He gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists and some pastors and teachers . . . for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”. Clearly there is a distinct *ministerial* gift of pastors. If the word *pastor* was synonymous with the word *elder*, then the word *pastor* would be out of place in a list of ministerial gifts, since the work of those who are elders and have no added gift is simply that of ruling. Furthermore, if it were possible to exchange the word *pastor* to *elder*, we could read, “He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists and some elders and teachers”. This would imply that it was a distinct gift and that prophets

and evangelists were not in fact elders! Now if the words *pastor* and *elder* meant precisely the same thing, since we know that prophets were elders they would in this case also be pastors, and evangelists would be pastors too! Such confusion would arise if the words *pastor* and *elder* were interchangeable.

Let us look at the very term *pastor* itself. Why should we use it? Is it important? The word *minister* (*diakonos*) is used for those who preach the gospel but also for deacons and those who serve in a general capacity. It is not a distinct title for those who preach the word of God nor does it occur in Ephesians 4. For this reason it is unhelpful to use it when defining the distinctive role of the one set apart to minister God's word.

Reference has been made to scriptures that speak generally of those who "labour in the word and doctrine". There are the distinct gifts referred to in Ephesians 4:11 which are covered by these general terms. In the post-apostolic church the word *elder* came to be limited to those whose function was simply to rule and the word *overseer* (AV - bishop) came to be limited to those gifted in ministry in addition to ruling. There was a clear distinction, but the titles *elder* and *overseer* came to be separately applied. Each local congregation had those gifted to minister at their head. In Revelation 2 & 3 each church had an individual *messenger* to give them God's word. It was clearly *wrong* to make a distinction between *elder* and *overseer*, but the fact that there was a distinction between those who laboured and those who ruled only, cannot be disputed. The emergence of separate titles is itself evidence that these groups existed.

We return to the claim that Eph 4:11 refers to one office when reference is made to "pastors and teachers". Now Acts 13:1 shows that there was a distinct office of teacher so there must also have been a distinct office of pastor. If there were *teachers* there must have been *pastors* too. Their work was clearly that of leadership but also of ministry (Ephesians 4:12). The picture of the shepherd is both beautiful and challenging. The pastor leads the flock and must set an example. Christ is the supreme example. The term is without doubt scriptural and is to be preferred to the more general term *minister*. The latter clearly has its place in Scripture but is not so distinctive as the former. Let us not feel we have to use the words *teaching elder* when Scripture uses the term *pastor*. While the pastor is an elder who teaches, he is also the leader of the local congregation. He leads the people out, like a shepherd.

In practice, leadership is essential and it is a gift from God. He gives men to the church who are truly called and set apart for the work, "who labour in the word and doctrine" and are able to view the flock of God spiritually and care for them. The pastor may well be supported by men highly qualified in a managerial and professional capacity. In human terms they may appear to be his superiors but by God's grace they should recognise that the Church of God is not merely a human institution. They must recognise and value his spiritual leadership. It is important for us all to bear in mind Paul's words, "For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body but all the members do not have the same function, so we being many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another" (Romans 12: 3-5).

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