
What is a Pastor?

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Before we begin to ask what pastoral responsibility entails, it would be useful to set down some markers in relation to the terminology used in the New Testament to describe the office of pastor. This has been a focus of considerable debate between differing views of churchmanship, but it is true to say that within evangelical scholarship there is reasonable consensus as to the interpretation of the material available at this point.

It is probably worth noting in passing that we ought to exercise caution over trying to canonise particular views of New Testament churchmanship. The New Testament church, as seen through the eyes of Luke in Acts and in the subsequent insights given through the letters, was an evolving church. It was emerging from its roots in Judaism and it was learning to adapt to the entirely new challenges of incorporating Gentile converts and establishing itself in Gentile cultures. There was no code, or blueprint given in New Testament revelation as the indisputable rule for the way that church life should be structured and run. Even though the so-called pastoral letters contain a significant amount of prescriptive material in this vein, it still takes the form of guiding principle rather than a wooden code. As we piece together the various glimpses we are given of church life in that era, we cannot help but be struck by the great diversity which existed – not in belief – but clearly in practice between churches and regions. Indeed, this seems to have contributed to the richness of the character of the church of that time. We never see any attempt among the apostles or the church leaders of those days to impose any kind of uniformity on different congregations. The most striking example of this is in the aftermath of the Jerusalem Council. If ever there was an occasion to establish uniformity of structure and practice among the churches in the New Testament era, then that presented a golden opportunity for it to happen. However, far from issuing sweeping directives to the churches, the apostles and elders who met on that occasion were surprisingly minimalist in the conclusions they reached. They simply required abstinence from food sacrificed to idols and avoidance of sexual immorality. The degree of latitude given on the way things could be done in particular church situations was quite striking.

As we scan through church history with an eye on this aspect of church life, we are again struck by the diversity that has existed. There are differing views on churchmanship and on church practice through the ages and throughout the world. Various attempts to argue a *ius divinum* understanding of any one position has failed singularly. The furthest any serious thinkers have been able to go along these lines is to say that in their opinion certain views of structure and practice approximate more closely than others to the data available in the New Testament, but in so doing acknowledge that there are always lessons to be learned from the wider fellowship of the church universal to which every particular church should be open.

These general comments, by way of background, help us to appreciate why there has been disagreement between different church groupings over the question, ‘What is a pastor?’ To a large extent it has arisen from the fact that the New Testament uses

three different terms interchangeably to describe the office under consideration. Those words are: *episkopos*, *poimenos* and *presbuteros*, meaning, overseer, pastor and elder respectively. Different church traditions have tended to latch on to different words to define their own approach. Most obviously, those who wish to emphasise hierarchical authority have become known as ‘Episcopalians,’ those who have favoured collegiate responsibility, ‘Presbyterians’ and mild mannered Independents simply have their ‘pastors’!

There is no need here to go over all the arguments as to why no one of these terms are to be elevated at the expense of the others. Rather we need to build on the fact that all of them point to there being a special office instituted by Christ and intended for the care of his flock (Ephesians 4:11-12) and also that each of them is designed to contribute something important to our understanding of what that office and its responsibilities entail. The major point at issue within ongoing discussion of this terminology is whether or not the New Testament envisages two distinct offices of those who teach and those who have oversight, or two different sets of responsibility within the one category of leadership. The debate has a long history and in some ways comes down to a matter of semantics as the practical outworking of both positions is very often the same in reality.

There is a sense in which we could home in on one aspect of this office as it is presented in the New Testament, singling out the pastoral element of his responsibility. To do that would be to take the term ‘Pastor’ in a narrow sense and perhaps lose sight of the larger perspective given in the Scriptures. Instead, we will try to consider the full-orbed character of what it means to be a ‘pastor,’ ‘minister,’ or whatever label we might choose to use (within reason) and attempt to relate it to the needs of the contemporary church.

Pastoral Care

If we take the term ‘pastor’ first – a word which has obvious connections to the task of caring for sheep – we will appreciate something of what pastoral care involves in terms of caring for people who belong to the flock of Christ.

Paul emphasises this responsibility at a particularly poignant moment in his own travels as he meets up with the elders from Ephesus on the beach at Miletus at the end of his second missionary journey. There he says, ‘Shepherd the church of God’ (Acts 20:28). One really needs to get into the mindset of the pastoral world of New Testament times to appreciate what the apostle means by this. He is obviously developing the imagery which Jesus himself was so fond of using and which he so often applied to himself as the Good Shepherd.

It is clearly bound up with developing a truly caring relationship with God’s people, one which is built upon trust and respect. Jesus highlights a striking feature of a shepherd’s work in the Ancient Near East when he says, ‘My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me’ (John 10:27). Unlike shepherds in many other cultures, those of Jesus’ day did not drive their sheep, but led them by the sound of their voice.

The story is told of a bus-load of tourists in Israel who had heard this detail about Jewish shepherds, but when they stopped for a rest-break, they saw a flock of sheep and they were being driven – not led – along the road in a somewhat distressed state. The

tour guide smiled when he saw their reaction to this sight and quickly told them, 'That was the butcher, not the shepherd!'

Humour aside, that little tale actually says a lot about where our contemporary attempts at pastoring can come unstuck. Instead of developing trust and confidence with our people, we 'lord it over' the flock (1 Peter 5:3) and create a spirit of alienation and resentment and end up butchering, rather than pastoring the flock. Pastoral care takes place within the context of a pastoral relationship.

That presents its own challenge as we try to contextualise it in a world which is very different from that Mediterranean ease in apostolic times, when people had time for each other, for community and relationships. Our world is very different with busy schedules, long hours and rampant individualism. Yet we cannot allow the defects of contemporary culture to become excuses for not fulfilling pastoral responsibility.

It may well be that the model of church life, advocated by the Puritan, Richard Baxter, which structured congregational life around a grouping of some fifty families – all of whom would be visited regularly by the minister – would be hard to sustain in the present climate. However, there are ways of achieving the same end of providing pastoral care for everyone in the church by different means. There is no reason why the pastor alone is the only one able to provide that kind of care. Indeed, there is a strong argument which says that the pastor alone ought not to provide that care by himself. Especially given the risks involved in pastors meeting with female members of their flock without anyone else being present.

Another argument for a broader view of how we dispense pastoral care lies in the fact that no minister can claim to be omniscient in his ability to deal with the whole spectrum of pastoral needs. There will be cases of depression, addiction, breakdown in relationship and other situations in which he will be out of his depth in trying to cope. In too many cases where pastors have overstepped their competence – even with the best intentions – they have ended up doing harm and not good.

The New Testament has sufficient 'one another' passages to make the church realise that we need to draw upon the range of skills and abilities present in the family of God in such a way as to minister to the needs of those around us. Even the simple fact of an individual's limited capacity to minister to the needs of others should flag up the wisdom of spreading the burden of responsibility.

All of this is borne out by the fact that Paul's command to the Ephesian elders is couched in a plural form. They were not meant to go it alone, or be one-man ministries in isolation. The kind of church leadership envisaged in the New Testament is always corporate with shared responsibility and skills which were complementary. Such a principle translates naturally into the sphere of pastoral care.

The safeguard to ensuring that such care does not become haphazard, or a source of confusion and conflict, lies in its being kept within the orbit of the oversight of those formally entrusted with the care of the church. A team approach to pastoral care is being adopted increasingly by churches wishing to address this need efficiently and effectively. In doing so, this allows the necessary structure and co-ordination in the care being provided and ensures that ultimate responsibility still rests with those to whom it has been given.

Pastoral Ministry

Although it is both wise and biblical to draw some distinction between the ministry of instruction and the ministry of oversight in the church, it would be wrong to divide them from each other completely. All forms of ministry must ultimately be Word-based, grounded in and shaped by the Word of God. We do not draw on the Bible for our pulpit ministry, psychiatry for pastoral care and the wisdom of the board-room for the ministry of oversight. Every aspect of the life of the church is brought under the jurisdiction of Scripture and those who are leaders in the church must themselves be led by God's Truth.

That said, however, we need to spend a moment thinking about pastoral ministry in the sense of how the Word is ministered through and by the leadership of the church.

The obvious and primary means that Scripture sets before us is through the formal teaching office of the church. Both Old Testament and New Testament recognise that there are those who have been specially equipped, called and commissioned by God to minister his Word to his people and to the world. The church is meant to recognise such men (yes, the office *is* restricted to males only!), help them to cultivate their gift and then press it into service while giving due respect to them on account of their office and work. Belief in the primacy of preaching has suffered severely in our multi-media, drama-driven age and the church is none the better for this loss. Regardless of popular opinion, it is through the medium of the preached Word that God has promised to mediate his blessing in a unique and distinctive fashion.

Those who have been called to full-time pastoral care of a congregation need to keep in mind the central focus of their calling: namely the ministry of God's Word. Like Timothy before us we need to devote ourselves to anything which will make us better preachers. Many things are important in our work, but one thing takes pride of place, it is the preaching of God's Word.

Too often, however, it is the 'other things' of pastoral responsibility which damage our effectiveness in the one area that matters most. With the pattern of 'one-man ministry' having become the norm in so many church situations, the poor minister finds himself becoming the proverbial jack-of-all-trades, but master of none. In an ideal world with the kind of church funds we dream of, churches would simply hire the number of full-time staff who can cater for the different aspects of pastoral needs that exist in a congregation and neighbourhood. More often than not the reality of our situations is quite different (as it was in New Testament times.)

The goal for those in leadership, then, is to see that we are 'to prepare God's people for works of service' (Ephesians 4:12). We are to identify and develop particular gifts in others so that the body of Christ might minister to itself (Ephesians 4:16) and in turn be able to minister to the world around. The picture that Paul paints in this Ephesian passage is captivating. It is the sight of the diverse, motley crew of converts who make up the average congregation becoming the instrument in God's hand for advancing his kingdom and cause in the world!

It will of necessity involve developing other Word-based ministries in the church and in the wider community – this is what we see happening in the wonderful array of situations in the New Testament from opportunities for personal witness right through to formal proclamation of the Scriptures. There are in this context Word-based ministries who do allow for gifted women to exercise their gifts – working with other

women and with children – but all under the oversight of a leadership entrusted with responsibility for teaching the Bible.

Pastoral ministry, then, must have a very clear focus: to bring the Bible to the people and to bring the people to the Bible. The ultimate goal is for the lives of men, women, boys and girls to be literally remoulded through the influence of God's Truth as they hear it and respond to it by faith and obedience (Romans 6:17).

Pastoral Authority

Authority is a dirty word in today's world. 'Who says so!' is the defiant watchword of a generation which has been nurtured on the notion that the customer is always right. Sadly that same individualistic spirit of defiance has settled comfortably into all too many churches. Church government has been reduced to the art of the possible and no longer has any real sense of it being the outworking of Christ's supreme government of his people as they are brought increasingly under his lordship.

The term episkopoj, overseer, carries connotations of authority and it is woven through all the aspects of responsibility entrusted to those who hold this office in the church. It is not an authority which is based on the power of personality – the personality cults which have become so prominent in so many evangelical circles are anathema in the sight of Scripture. Indeed, it seems that at least two of the great New Testament pastor-teachers – Paul and Timothy – had pretty unimpressive personas. Nor is it an authority which derives from authoritarian attitudes. There can be a kind of jack-boot authority which crushes, rather than cultivates the Christian spirit. Yet again, it is not a democratically delegated authority which always depends on majority votes.

Instead the New Testament sets before us an authority which is devolved by Jesus Christ upon the office to which he calls the individuals he has equipped to hold that office (Ephesians 4:11). The weight of authority invested in that office is seen in such commands as, 'Obey your leaders and submit to their authority ...' (Hebrews 13:17). The need for such authority is demonstrated by Paul's practice of quickly returning to places in which he had planted churches in order to appoint elders in them, or, as in the case of Crete, sending a colleague to do so on his behalf.

Authority in any sphere of life is something which we ought to view positively and not negatively. Although we so often think of it in terms of restraint and punishment, it is given by God primarily to establish an order in his world which is meant to reflect the order of his character. The same is true in the life of the church. Hence, the function of those tasked with exercising authority in the church is primarily to so order the life and work of God's people that there might be harmony, unity and growth towards maturity.

Whether we look at it from the imagery of agriculture, athletics, or the army – all of which are used by way of illustration in Paul's writings – the discipline exercised in the church is intended to be constructive as well as restrictive.

The practical implications of this run far and wide for pastors and their flocks in the anti-authoritarian age in which we live. It is not just that there needs to be the courage to exercise punitive church discipline when circumstances call for it, but that there needs to be vigorous positive efforts made to restore a biblical attitude to authority where it has broken down, or perhaps never existed in the first place. It has a bearing upon the way that marriage and family life is viewed in light of Scripture, the attitude

to the authority structures of the state in their various forms and, of course, the attitude to the authority of Christ over his people mediated by his Word and through the overseers he has appointed to take care of his people.

Pastoral Care in Action

Any pastor with any integrity will be painfully aware of his own imperfections. We are overwhelmingly conscious of the 'Great Shepherd of the sheep,' Jesus Christ, and his perfect love and perfect care for his people. We are but undershepherds and more often than not we behave as if we were the hired hands who Jesus denounces in John's Gospel. Yet the amazing thing is that it is through such weak and imperfect leaders that Jesus has chosen to accomplish his work of building the church.

Our imperfection and failure must not become a psychological barrier to our fulfilling the calling Christ has given us. We serve, not relying on our own strength and wisdom, but rather by humbling ourselves under God's mighty hand, knowing that he will use and honour our work in his own good time (1 Peter 5.6).

The need of the hour is that we might pray and labour to become better pastors in order that our congregations might be filled with better Christians. Because, when that is so, the light of the gospel will burn more brightly and the world will know that God truly is among us!

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joint charge in Montana. Again this is not a book by a mega-church star with a new approach that is guaranteed to solve our problems, but rather an honest account of the joys and sorrows of normal church life. At the end of a nine-year pastorate both churches had a combined attendance of 270. Hansen is very honest about his struggles in ministry, not least with the doctrine of eternal punishment. I suspect that many of us have gone through spiritual and doctrinal dark nights of the soul that few if anyone know about. It is encouraging to read how one pastor came through the struggle secure in his convictions (as a Calvinist) and with new power in his preaching and evangelism. Hansen sees pastoral ministry flowing from being a disciple of Jesus. He is down on trend-driven, task-driven ministry and enthusiastic about preaching the word and taking walks in the woods to pray. There are many delightful vignettes of the strange and wonderful people that make being a pastor so worthwhile. This book is a refreshing read that will do your soul good.

Let me mention several other books that may be of interest. In *Relational Leadership* (Paternoster 2000) **Walter Wright**, the recently retired president of Regent College, has a lot of good things to say about leading Christian organisations. As the title suggests, for Wright leadership is primarily about relating well to other people and involves both being people of character who are worth following and nurturing godly character in others. Like White, Wright draws heavily on management theory and tries to unsatisfactorily to fit it to Scripture. It is not that what he says is wrong, only that it is not necessarily what the Bible is saying. **David Benner's** *Care of Souls* (Paternoster 2000) is a very

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