

# **A Short Pastoral Theology**

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## Linguistic and semantic background

In modern Christian terminology, the word “pastor” is largely the de facto standard for describing one who leads an individual church or congregation. It is derived from the Greek noun ποιμην, which most often carries the meaning of “shepherd” in the New Testament (NT).<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the only time church leaders are referred to directly as pastors (or shepherds) is in Eph. 4:11:

And [God] gave some as apostles, some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors (ποιμενες) and teachers.<sup>2</sup>

The NT addresses the leaders of a congregation as “elders” (πρεσβυτεροι) or “overseers” (επισκοποι) far more frequently (e.g., I Tim. 3:1-16, Titus 1:5-9). A relationship between the office of pastor and that of elder/overseer can be seen in passages such as Ac. 20:28 and 1 Pet. 5:1-2, where Paul and Peter both charge elders/overseers of a church to “shepherd” (from the Greek verb ποιμαινειν, “to protect or nurture, to shepherd or tend a flock”) the people they lead.<sup>3</sup> In his exhortation to church elders in 1 Pet. 5:1-2, Peter appears to classify his apostolic office as a category of πρεσβυτερος/επισκοπος by addressing himself as a “fellow elder” (συμπρεσβυτερος). From Peter’s language, it follows logically that the list of church leadership offices in Eph. 4:11 falls under the broader designation of πρεσβυτερος/επισκοπος. Presumably, the general, overarching function of all elders/overseers (whether apostles, prophets evangelists, pastors, or teachers) is to “shepherd” the flock(s) entrusted to their care; but for pastors—those elders/overseers who are specifically appointed and gifted as “shepherds” in the Church (Eph. 4:11)—the call to care for a congregation as one tending a flock has special bearing on the nature and activity of the pastoral office.

## Biblical and historical background of shepherd-leadership

The idea of shepherd-leadership among God’s people harkens back to the Old Testament (OT), where it is realized most fully in the activity of Yahweh. He is depicted as “the Shepherd who goes before His flock (Ps. 68:7), who guides it (Ps. 23:3), who leads it to pastures (Jer. 50:19) and to places where it may rest by the waters (Ps. 23:2; Is. 49:10), who protects it with His staff (Ps. 23:4), who whistles to the dispersed (Zech. 10:8) and gathers them (Is. 56:8), who carries the lambs in His bosom and leads the mother sheep (Is. 40:11).”<sup>4</sup> As shepherd of His people, Yahweh charges the military and political leaders of Israel to act as shepherds in carrying out their duties (e.g., I Chr. 17:6, where Israel’s judges are said to have been commanded to shepherd the

people).<sup>5</sup> The tender manner in which Yahweh shelters Israel, His flock, is the standard by which

<sup>1</sup> William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* 2d ed., rev., (Chicago, University of Chicago press, 1979), 684.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. VI (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 497.

<sup>3</sup> Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, 683-684.

<sup>4</sup> Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley, 487.

<sup>5</sup> Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley, 487.

the human leaders of Israel are held accountable. Unfortunately, Israel's shepherds ultimately fail in their mission because of their own sin and rebellion. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel condemn the leaders of Israel for their exploitive self-interest and lack of concern for the well-being of God's people:

“Who to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!” declares the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: “You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds,” declares the Lord. (Jer. 23:1-2)

Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophecy can say to those shepherds, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Woe, shepherds of Israel, who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them.”’” (Eze. 34:1-4)

In judgment against Israel's leaders, Yahweh Himself announces that He will assume the office of shepherd over Israel by replacing unrighteous leaders with better shepherds (Jer. 3:15; 23:4). Moreover, He gives the promise of a future Messiah who will shepherd God's people in accordance with His will:

“Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.” (Eze. 34:23-24)

In Palestine during the 1<sup>st</sup> century, shepherding was not considered an honorable profession—rabbinical writings of the time regard shepherds with a degree of contempt usually reserved for tax-collectors.<sup>6</sup> Shepherds of the day were typically hired by owners of livestock to tend their flocks. Since the shepherds' work often took them far away from the owner's home and supervision, it was not uncommon for them to “help themselves” to the increase of the flock.<sup>7</sup>

Against this backdrop of Israel's unfaithful leaders, the Messianic hope for a Davidic shepherd, and the cultural disdain for shepherds in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, Jesus Christ makes a startling declaration in the Fourth Gospel by claiming the title of Good Shepherd for Himself (Jn. 10:11, 14). In contrast to Israel's past leaders and the shepherds of Jesus' day, His pastoral activity is marked not by the exploitation of the flocks entrusted to His care, but rather by self-sacrifice, the impartation of life, and protection:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 489.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know me.... My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. (Jn. 10:10, 11, 14, 27-28)

This both parallels and continues the OT's depiction of Yahweh as shepherd of His people. The NT regards Jesus Christ as the Chief Shepherd and Guardian (I Pet. 2:25; 5:4) of all who follow Him. Thus the activity and ministry of Jesus is where the pastoral office of Eph. 4:11 is ultimately grounded—He is the archetypal pastor. His ministry of selfless love and compassion is the template which all human pastors are called to follow.

### **Three requirements for the pastor**

Before anything can be said of a pastor's practical duties, it must be stressed that certain biblical requirements must be met in order for one to qualify for pastoral ministry. The first requirement is that of *calling*. In Ac. 20:28, Paul makes clear that an elder/overseer is set in his office by the action and leading of the Holy Spirit. One cannot legitimately aspire to or successfully fulfill pastoral ministry without the witness and anointing of the Holy Spirit. The second requirement, closely related to calling, centers around the issue of *gifting*. Eph. 4:11 speaks of the various leadership offices within the Church as gifts given by God to men. Moreover, in 1 Cor. 12:28, Paul identifies three of the leadership offices mentioned in Eph. 4:11 as charismatic bestowments of the Holy Spirit. Thus the pastor is wholly dependent upon the Holy Spirit's enabling power in order to faithfully steward his charge. The third requirement is an issue of *personal holiness*—in essence, the character of Christ must be evident in a pastor's life. Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus provide us with helpful guidelines for what God expects of his leaders:

An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (1 Tim. 3:1-8)

The overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching.... (Ti. 1:7-9)

## **The Good Shepherd's guide to pastoring**

Zechariah 11:16 provides a sound means of breaking down and categorizing Jesus' pastoral template:

For behold, I am going to raise up a shepherd in the land who will not care for the perishing, seek the scattered, heal the broken, or sustain the one standing, but will devour the flesh of the fat sheep and tear off their hoofs.

Although this a negative assessment of a "foolish shepherd" (Zech. 11:15), contained within this verse are four practical ideals for shepherds to follow: caring for the perishing, seeking the scattered, healing the broken, and sustaining those who are standing. Each of these ideals can be seen in Jesus' ministry.

### **Caring for the perishing**

On a number of occasions, Jesus was accused of guilt by association because He was in the company of sinful people (Mt. 9:10ff; Mk. 2:15ff; Lk. 5:29ff; 15:1ff; 19:1-10). The Pharisees grumbled because Jesus was in the habit of receiving and befriending those whom the religious establishment considered off-limits by virtue of their unrighteousness. He was not threatened by sinners, nor did He avoid them—instead, His heart went out to them. It is no coincidence that they came near to listen to Him (Lk. 15:1), or that many of them became His followers (Mk. 2:15).

Pastors must likewise have a special care and concern for those who have not been introduced to the love or the life that is in Jesus Christ, i.e., those who are perishing. Jesus' pastoral model should motivate pastors to reach out to and even befriend those who do not know the Lord with a view toward their salvation. Thus promoting and doing evangelism on both a personal and corporate level within the Church is a vital function of the pastoral office.

### **Seeking the scattered**

Jesus' heart for His people is expressed in His cry at Jerusalem:

How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. (Mt. 23:37)

The Gospels also tell of Jesus' compassion for the people of God, who are described as "distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt. 9:26). When He commissioned the Twelve to carry out and extend His ministry, Jesus instructed them to go only "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:6).

A shepherd with genuine concern for his flock works to keep his sheep together, so that he can provide for and protect them—when scattered and isolated, they are easy prey for predators. Similarly, Christians are meant to be in community with one another, bearing one another's burdens

and encouraging one another. In isolation, Christians are far more likely to fall prey to temptation, false doctrine, or satanic attack.

Paul exhorted the elders of the church at Ephesus to “be on guard” against “savage wolves” who would work among them to destroy their flock (Ac. 20:28). And Jesus particularizes His willingness to lay down His life for His sheep in terms of protection from predators (Jn. 10:11-12, 28). A significant aspect of pastoral ministry is therefore the protection of the flock—pastors must be willing to lay down their lives for those who have been entrusted to their care. This willingness to sacrifice for his congregation also drives a pastor to seek out believers who are scattered or isolating themselves and gather them again into the fold.

### **Healing the broken**

One cannot read the Gospels without noticing the healing nature of Jesus’ ministry. At its inauguration, Jesus stood and declared, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Lk. 4:18-19). Bringing healing to the infirm and the brokenhearted was a major trademark of Jesus’ ministry. Mt. 9:35 states that He went “about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.”

The Chief Shepherd has commissioned those he has appointed as shepherds to carry on this healing ministry through His Spirit. Today’s world is no different than the 1<sup>st</sup> century—among Christians and unbelievers alike, millions everywhere are bewildered, broken, and hurting, both emotionally and physically. A pastor is in a unique position to stand as a herald of the Good News: Jesus still heals. As a special extension of the ministry of the Good Shepherd, pastors are also called and anointed to preach the gospel to the poor, to declare release to those who are in bondage to sin and sickness, and to minister His healing power to those whose hearts are in torment.

### **Sustaining the strong**

Jesus also ministered to those who were His committed followers. The disciples continually received teaching, correction, and rebuke. Jesus also mentored them and equipped them to become an extension of His very own ministry (Mk. 6:7-13). He prayed for them, and made Himself available to them. They were free to ask Him questions (Jn. 9:1-2, Mt. 13:10). And Jesus did not hesitate to express His love for them (Jn. 15:9, 12).

A pastor should prayerfully seek out those in his congregation who are strong in Christ, and work to sustain them by teaching them, spending time with them, and equipping them for ministry. Most importantly, he must love them with God’s love—both in word and deed.