

**The Elder and His Ministry: From
a Baptist Perspective**

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There has been a lot of discussion in recent days about what an elder is and what his ministry should be.¹ On this subject, there is one fact on which there is broad agreement. Pastor, elder, and bishop are titles that all refer to the same office. *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000* makes it clear that the prevailing view among Southern Baptists is that there are only two offices in the church. Article VI says the church's "scriptural officers are pastors and deacons." This conclusion assumes that *pastor, elder, and bishop* refer to the same office. Therefore, the ministries of these three are all one and the same office.

Elder is the most common title for the leader of a congregation in the New Testament. It is used at least eighteen times to refer to an official of the church. Two other terms, "pastor" and "bishop," can also refer to an office; however, they are more descriptive of what the elder is to do.² Acts 20:28 uses these terms to describe the ministry of the elder: "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (bishops), to shepherd (pastor) the church of God."

¹The material in this article is excerpted from the book, Gerald Cowan, *Who Rules the Church?* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003).

First Peter 5:2 echoes the same instruction to elders: “Shepherd (pastor) the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers (bishops).” Using these descriptive concepts as a guide, the role of the elder-bishop-pastor will be discussed under three headings: instructional duties, pastoral duties, and administrative duties.

Instructional Duties

The most important job of the pastor is that of teacher. Lightfoot says, “The work of teaching must have fallen to the elders from the very first and have assumed greater prominence as time went on.”⁶ The reasons for this conclusion are many. First is Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts in Ephesians 4. One of the gifts God gives to the church is pastor-teacher (v.11). In this passage *teacher* is part of the name of the office. God gives such individuals to equip “the saints for the work of ministry.” He is to do this by teaching the Word of God. He should train believers until they become spiritual adults who are fully mature in Christ. If taught well they will not be carried away by false doctrine or by the “craftiness of deceitful plotting” (Eph. 4:14).

Some argue that pastor-elders do not have to have any particular spiritual gift.³ Since some assume that there will be many elders in each church, then each should practice the gift he has, whatever it is. Some will have the gift of teaching. However, it should be noted that there is no such office in the New Testament as an elder who is not “apt to teach,” nor is there any elder who is not a “pastor,” and pastors are teachers (Eph. 4:11). A second vignette is found in Acts 6:1-4. Because of the growth of the church and the many demands placed on them, the apostles called a church meeting to discuss the problem. Their assessment of the situation is found in

²In Eph. 4:11 the pastor-teacher is listed with the apostles, prophets, and evangelists (see also 1 Pet. 2:25). The office of bishop is mentioned in 1 Tim. 3:1 and Titus 1:7, where it is used interchangeably with “elder,” and Phil. 1:2.

verse two: “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.” The point is not that the apostles were too good to minister to the church in this way, but that it was not good for the church for them to be distracted from their primary function. They needed to keep the main thing the main thing. They said, “But we will give ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.” The whole church suffers when the pastoral leadership is not spending time with God in prayer and the study of God’s Word. This is the spiritual food they are to give out to the congregation.

One may ask, why can the church member not study for himself? He can and should. However, the pastor should be able to help others to go deeper into the Word as he matures in Christ. One of the reasons God had blessed the church in Jerusalem in the days after Pentecost is that they “continued steadfastly in the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). This is a must if a church is going to become mature in Christ.

A third reason to believe that teaching is the first priority of the ministry is found in the list of qualifications for bishops in 1 Timothy 3. Most of the qualifications have to do with the person’s character. However, at least one spiritual gift is required. That gift is the gift of teaching. The pastor may have many gifts, but he must be “able to teach” (v.2).

Another reason for pastors to emphasize teaching in their ministry is the “Great Commission” (Matt. 28:19-20). Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.” The verb “make disciples” means to make them “learners.” They are to be “baptized” and “taught.” Who is to teach them? As it has been pointed out previously, the pastor is called to be the primary “teacher” of the church. Hopefully, he will

³Marvin Mayer, “An Exegetical Study on the New Testament Elder,” Ph.D. diss. (Dallas Theological

not be the only one in the church who has this gift. There may be many others who have this gift, but the pastor is the “overseer” who makes certain they are being properly taught in the things of Christ.

Another little snapshot of the church, recorded in Acts chapter eleven, demonstrates the importance of teaching in the spiritual development of a congregation. The church at Antioch had had a great influx of new believers, and the church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to survey the situation. He was pleased with what had happened there and encouraged them to “continue with the Lord” and to become “disciples of Jesus.” Realizing he needed help with the job, he went to Tarsus and enlisted Saul to come and help disciple them (v.25). Acts says that for a “whole year” they met with the church and “taught a great many people” (v. 26). The interesting thing is the following comment Luke makes about the result of their teaching: “The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.”

Yet another line of evidence supports the contention that teaching is the primary role of the pastor. When Jesus spoke with Peter after the resurrection, He asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” (John 21:15-17). After Peter's three replies, Jesus gave these commands: (1) “Feed my lambs”; (2) “Tend my sheep”; (3) “Feed my sheep.” This motif of feeding the flock is a common one in the New Testament. What does it mean? The meaning is fairly obvious, but in case anyone has a problem understanding, Peter himself gives us the answer clearly in his first epistle: “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby” (1 Pet. 2:2). The spiritual food for the believer is the Word of God. It was the responsibility of the Apostles first to teach the brethren. As the church increased, the responsibility for teaching was conferred on the elders, who were the pastor-teachers of the churches.

Seminary, 1970), 164-65.

Paul also emphasizes the importance of pastoral teaching. He instructs Timothy to give attention to three things (1 Tim. 4:13). The first is “reading.” The reference is not just reading in general, but reading of Scripture in the worship services. This was important because few people had copies of Scripture, so the only time they could hear it read was at church. One may argue that it is not necessary now because everyone has a Bible. However, it is still necessary because few actually read it.

The second is “exhortation.” The word *exhortation* has more than one emphasis. It can refer to “encouragement.” In other words he was to cheer them on in their walk with Christ. In addition, *exhortation* can mean an “appeal.” Timothy was to appeal to them, to earnestly beg them to continue to be faithful. Finally, *exhortation* includes “comfort.” Another task of the pastor is to comfort those who are in sorrow. Besides “reading” and “exhortation,” Paul tells Timothy to give attention to “doctrine” or “teaching.” He is to emphasize teaching in his ministry.

In the next chapter, Paul comes back to the matter of the Pastor’s role in teaching. He gives this instruction in 1 Timothy 5:17: “Let the elders who rule well be counted as worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.” It is important to look closely at this verse. Some have seen it as dividing elders or pastors into two groups, those who rule and those who teach. If this be the case, it is the only place in Scripture where such a division of labor is mentioned. What it more likely means is this: there is a distinction between those who “rule well” and those who do not “rule well.” Those who do should be considered worthy of more pay (see v. 18). The second part of the verse expands on the first part. “Especially those who labor in the word and teaching” further qualifies the statement about those who “rule well.” It is not about those who “teach” as opposed to those who “rule.” This is a false

dichotomy. There is no such thing in the New Testament as an elder who only rules and does not teach. The “ones who rule well” and the “ones who labor in the word” are the same ones. The word translated “labor” here is κοπιάω. This is not the ordinary word for “work” (ἐργάζομαι), which means to be active or busy and refers to work in general.⁴ The word used here, in contrast, refers to a special category of work: hard work (NASB), labor, toil to the point of becoming weary.⁵ As Solomon said long ago, “Much study is wearisome to the flesh” (Eccl. 12:12). Perhaps this is why so few do it, but one cannot “rule well” without “laboring” in the Word in order to be able to teach and thereby feed God’s flock.

The point is further emphasized by Paul to Timothy in his second epistle. He gives Timothy a charge: “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”

Two things stand out here. First, there is an urgency about this business of preaching and teaching God’s word. It has eternal consequences for good if done properly. One cannot afford to be careless or lukewarm, missing good opportunities for making mention of the faith. Second, he must “convince” (reprove) people of the truth of his claims by argumentation and teaching.⁶ To convince people by careful arguments takes adequate preparation - in other words, hard work.

Pastoral Duties

The office of pastor-elder includes a second category of responsibility. The role of the pastor-elder includes several functions that come under the general heading: pastoral duties. The

⁴William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 306-07.

⁵Ibid., 444.

⁶See Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1944), 2:474, for the meaning of *elegcho*.

title of this category comes naturally from the many references to a church as a flock of sheep who need a shepherd (cf. Acts 10:28; 1 Peter 5:2). All of the functions of a pastor in some way come under this category, hence the title pastor (shepherd). For instance, teaching could be included under “pastoral duties” because it involves feeding the flock. Administrative duties can also be considered to relate to the taking care of the sheep. Because sheep are not independent travelers, someone must guide them and make plans for their care. One reason for not putting all the categories under the heading of pastoral duties is that the comparison of the church to a flock of sheep is not the only figurative description of the church and its leadership. The subject is larger than just one illustration. Let us look again at Paul’s message to the Ephesian elders. Beginning at v. 28, he says, “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock.” This means to “turn one’s mind to something,” “to pay attention.”⁷ Focus your attention on yourself first. This does not mean to be selfish, but to be concerned about your own spiritual condition. If the shepherd is not spiritually alert and walking closely with Christ, then he will be of little help to the sheep. In the following verse it becomes clear why the shepherd should be focused and paying close attention to his sheep. Paul warns that “savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the sheep.” Of course he is not speaking about four-legged wolves and the physical welfare of the sheep. He is talking about their spiritual welfare. In v. 30 he warns them that “men will speak perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.” From whence will these men come? They will come “from among yourselves.” A shepherd who does not constantly guard against the encroachment of false doctrine will lose some of his sheep to false teaching.

Jesus also speaks about this aspect of pastoring in the sermon about the good shepherd (John 10:1-30). He presents a contrast between a real shepherd and a hireling. The shepherd

⁷Arndt and Gingrich, 712.

leads the sheep out to find pasture. In other words, he nourishes them. The big difference between a real shepherd and a hireling becomes apparent when the wolf comes. The hireling flees, the good shepherd protects his sheep even to the point of sacrificing his own life (John 10:11-12). A great example of a good shepherd in the Old Testament is David. His own testimony is this: “Your servant used to keep his father’s sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb out from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it” (1 Sam. 17:34-35). David’s courage and faithfulness to the literal flock was part of the testing that prepared him to lead God’s real flock: Israel. Courage is an absolute necessity for a pastor.

The pastoral epistles, written to Timothy and Titus, have a lot to say about the subject of protecting the flock from false doctrine. Some will argue that Timothy and Titus are not specifically given the title “elder” or “pastor,” which is true. Therefore, these Scriptures cannot be included in a discussion of pastor-elders. However, if they were not serving as elders in their respective churches, Timothy at Ephesus and Titus in Crete, what position in the church did they have? Mayer, for example, concludes that they were “not elder-overseers but apostolic legates.”⁸ They had authority to direct the churches because they represented Paul the apostle rather than because they held any office themselves. This is unlikely because the churches had had pastor-elders to lead them for about 15 years by this time (ca. 63-67 A.D.)

Timothy and Titus did not simply go to their churches, deliver Paul’s message, stay a short time, and then leave. They apparently were there to stay for an undetermined amount of time. Several years may have elapsed between 1 and 2 Timothy. If he is still in Ephesus after so long a time, he is certainly more permanent in the church there than a mere messenger (also

⁸Mayer, 114.

Titus 3:12). In addition, the ministries they were told to perform were the same basic duties that a pastor-elder performs. It has also been pointed out that at least two of the apostles also called themselves elders see (2 John 1, 3 John 1). First Peter 5:2 has Peter calling himself an “elder” and the date is somewhere in the same time period as those epistles (ca. 63 A.D.). Therefore, there is little reason for denying that Timothy and Titus were serving as pastors. There is no other office mentioned in the New Testament that they could have held.

According to Plummer, the first epistle to Timothy treats three subjects: “Christian doctrine; Christian worship; and the Christian ministry.”⁹ Hendrickson outlines the entire second letter to Timothy around the theme of sound doctrine (teaching). He says to: “Hold on to it,” “Teach it,” “Abide in it,” and “Preach it.”¹⁰ Paul admonishes Timothy to sound doctrine (1 Tim. 1:3) because there are some who have already departed from the faith (1 Tim. 1: 19-20), and there are more who will depart and teach ungodly doctrines (4:1-3). He charges Timothy to “guard what was committed to your trust” (6:20) and avoid false teaching.

The same message is reiterated in 2 Timothy. Timothy is to “hold fast the pattern of sound works which you have heard from me” (2 Tim. 1:13). Paul admonishes Timothy to “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2:1). He will need courage to deal with the false teaching of people like Hymenaeus and Philetus (2:17). There are also people like Alexander the coppersmith that Timothy will have to face (4:14). In other words, standing for Christ in Ephesus will be a difficult task. Someone must protect the flock from these false teachers and their ungodly teachings. This is the task of a shepherd, to protect the flock from these spiritual wolves.

⁹Alfred Plummer, *The Pastoral Epistles*, in *The Expositor’s Bible*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (New York: Holder and Staughton, 1905), 32.

¹⁰William Hendrickson, *Thessalonians, Timothy, and Titus*, in *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 219.

In order to protect the flock from false teaching, a pastor must know what good doctrine is and what it is not, so he can recognize it and warn the church of its evils. The best way to protect the flock from false teaching is to feed them a steady diet of good teaching. As they mature in Christ, they will also be able to discern between good and evil.

In Titus, elder-bishops are instructed to do this very thing: “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” (Titus 1:9). Those who “contradict” are those who “profess to know God, but in work they deny Him” (1:1b). The problems addressed in Titus appear to be related to godly behavior or rather the lack of it. They are guilty of several types of immoral behavior, even to the point of being “abominable” (1:16). Paul gives instructions about being “chaste” (2:5), showing “integrity” (2:7), having “sound speech” (2:8), and “not pilfering” (2:10). It is not enough just to profess to know Christ, but there must be the evidence of a changed life. The false teachers in Crete needed to learn the lesson that sound doctrine leads to clean living. It is not clear what the origins of their false teaching were, but they were exposed as false by the low standard of morality which they produced. These are just some of the problems pastor-elders must face.

Although most of the New Testament pastor’s role was spiritual in nature, they also had some responsibilities related to the physical needs of the congregation. There are three primary passages which deal with the pastor’s involvement in issues. Acts 11:30 describes Paul and Barnabas bringing an offering from the church in Antioch to aid those who were suffering because of a great famine that affected Judea in those days. The money was delivered to the elders at Jerusalem. Since all of Judea was affected, there may have been elders or pastors from other cities there to receive aid, but this is not known. The point is that the elders had the responsibility to see that the hungry were fed. However, they probably did not give out the

money themselves because this was the expressed reason that the “deacons,” or almoners as F. F. Bruce called them, were elected: to take care of the money for the poor and see that it was fairly distributed.¹¹ The elders were responsible for overseeing this ministry.

A second passage which refers to this pastoral ministry of elders is Acts 20:35. Paul says to the Ephesian elders, “I have showed you all things, how that so laboring you ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” The key word here is the “weak” (ἀσθενέω). Who are they? Does it refer to those who are spiritually weak or those who are physically weak? The word may refer to someone who is sick, physically weak or feeble, to someone who is morally weak or weak in faith (spiritually immature), or to someone who is weak economically (poor) or without influence.¹⁴

In this context it almost certainly refers to the support of those who are physically unable to care for themselves because of sickness or some other disability. The elders were to lead the church in giving them aid. Paul cites the fact that he worked hard so that he could provide for himself and those who worked with him. He then quotes the words of Jesus on the blessedness of giving. Therefore there is little question the passage is referring to providing for physical needs. The pastor is to show concern and lead the church to help the needy. False teachers were known for their greed (1 Tim. 6:3-10), faithful pastors should focus on the needs of others. As Polhill says, “The minister is to be a servant, a giver, and not a taker.”¹⁵

¹¹F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, in *New International Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 130. See also H.A.W. Meyer, *Acts*, 2d ed., trans. William P. Dickson, *Commentary on the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 124-25.

¹⁴See Arndt and Gingrich, 115.

¹⁵John B. Polhill, *Acts*, *New American Commentary*, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 430.

The third reference to elder-pastors and ministry to physical needs is James 5:14-16. The exact responsibility of the elders, as well as the significance of their actions, has been variously interpreted. In the verse immediately preceding, the believer who is being persecuted is instructed to pray (v. 13), but in v. 14, the sick person is told to call for the elders to pray for him. Two different words are used to refer to the sick person. In verse fourteen ἀσθενεῖ is used and in verse fifteen κάμνοντα is used. The first word refers to “one who is sick” or “ill.” The second word is more specific. It can refer to one who is “weary” or “worn out by time.” It can refer to someone who is “hopelessly sick” or “wasting away.”¹⁶ Mayer argues that since both of the verbs are in the “present tense, and probably progressive, they indicate that this person was making no progress toward recovery.”¹⁷ The elders would be called in this case because the sick person is not able to pray for himself.

Another issue is the anointing with oil. Some believe that oil was used for its medicinal value.¹⁸ An example in the New Testament of this use is in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34). When he had bandaged his wounds, he poured on “oil and wine.” An Old Testament example is Isaiah 1:6, where it is used as a treatment for wounds, bruises, and sores on the body. Others believe that the anointing was ceremonial or symbolic.¹⁹ In this case the oil would act as a stimulant to faith. It is the “prayer of faith” that “saves” the person in either case, not the medicine or the act of anointing. This does not mean that a person should not take medicine. All the means for health that God has provided should be used in addition to prayer.

¹⁶Arndt and Gingrich, 403.

¹⁷Mayer, 142.

¹⁸R.C.H. Lenski, *Hebrews and James* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1934), 661-62. See also A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. VI (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1953), 64.

¹⁹R. V. G. Tasker, *Epistle of James* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1957), 129ff.

For instance, in Isaiah 38:21, when King Hezekiah prayed for God to extend his life (38:2), he was instructed by Isaiah to apply a “poultice on the boil” and he would recover (see also Mark 6:12-13 and 1 Tim. 5:23).

There is one more possible way to interpret this passage. Verse 15 adds that there is a possibility that the sick person has “committed sins.”²⁰ If this be the case, then confession is necessary before one prays for healing. In the final analysis it is God who decides.

However, as one looks at the interpretation of these verses, one thing is clear. Elder-pastors have the responsibility for praying for the sick when they are called upon to do so. There is no mention here that a gift of healing is necessary. In fact, there is no mention in the New Testament of elders being required to have any particular gift except the gift of teaching. They minister and pray because they are the spiritual leaders of the church. Neither does this mean that other believers are exempt from praying for the sick just because they are not pastors. The only requirement in James 5 for prayer to be acceptable to God is that it must come from a “righteous” person.

The other ministries that a pastor undertakes (such as witnessing in the community, helping those with various kinds of needs) he performs not because they are specific ministries assigned to him by Scripture, but because these things are commanded for all Christians.²¹ He does them in obedience to the Lord and as an example to other believers. He cannot expect his congregation to be faithful in witnessing if they do not see him being faithful to share the gospel.

²⁰The use of the subjunctive shows that it is possible that his sickness is a result of sin, but it does not say that all sickness is because of sin. Whether healing occurs must be according to His will (1 John 5:14). It is impossible for human beings to manipulate the will of God.

²¹Timothy was not an evangelist, but he was told to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5). The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) is for all believers.

By example and by word he should teach them to do the same. If he has no concern for the needy, it will not be a priority in the ministry of the church either.

In summary, the primary pastoral duty in the elder-pastor's role is to protect the flock from false teaching. As Hebrews 13:17 says, "They watch out for your souls, as those who must give account." In addition, the pastor is to pray for the sick, especially those with serious problems when called upon, and he is to be generous and lead the church in helping those with basic physical needs.

Administrative Duties

The last of the basic functions of the pastor-elder is that of "overseeing."²² Mayer includes overseeing with shepherding. However, these two terms are not entirely parallel. The word ἐπίσκοπος means "bishop" or "overseer." A shepherd does "oversee" a flock of sheep. This could include all the functions of guiding, feeding, protecting, and care taking. Today, however, to many in the church "shepherding" has a different connotation than "overseeing." Shepherding is connected primarily with taking care of the physical needs of the church such as visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, etc. Overseeing would be primarily associated with "guiding" and "supervising" the work of the church.

Some argue that the term "bishop" is only descriptive of the function of the pastor-elder; it is not an official title.²³ While it is descriptive of the pastor's role, it is used as a title too. In Philippians 1:1 Paul addresses the "bishops and deacons." The qualifications for the "position of a bishop" are given in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Support for this use of ἐπίσκοπος is found in the Greek

²²Harvey E. Dana, *Manual of Ecclesiology* (Kansas City: Central Seminary Press, 1994), 254-55. Dana argues all other functions of the elder derive from this one. He says, "The chief function of this official was administrative . . . He might sometimes 'labor in the Word and in teaching.'"

²³Fenton John Anthony Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1914), 212.



papyri of pre-Christian times and later. In Rhodes, for example, members of the city council were called “bishops.” The officials of the temple there were also called “bishops.”²⁴ In the writings of Philo, Moses is referred to as a “bishop” also.²⁵ Arndt says that an ἐπίσκοπος is one who has a “definite function or a fixed office within a group.”²⁶ He is a superintendent or guardian.

In this context of the church, the question is, what does he superintend and what does he guard? As pastor (bishop) he is the chief officer in the church. Overseeing implies that he has administrative responsibility for the entire operation of the church. He is not responsible for doing all the work, but for seeing that it is done and done properly. As someone has observed, sheep are not independent travelers. It is his responsibility to guard them from false doctrine: to keep them from going astray, and keep them going in the right direction. In order to perform this task, he must have the authority from God to do it. He is not, however, to lead the flock by fiat, but being an example to the flock.

A second word describes the administrative function of the pastor-elder. In Titus 1:7 he is described as “God’s steward.” By the very nature of the office he is to manage the things of God. The word used here is οἰκονόμουν. In Luke 12:42 and 16:1-8 it refers to the manager of an estate. He was a servant who supervised the other servants. Because of his position he was held responsible for his master’s business. Paul uses this term to refer to himself in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2. Paul and the other ministers who had been there (Peter and Apollos, 1

²⁴James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 244.

²⁵Kittel, II, 615.

²⁶Arndt and Gingrich, 299.

Cor. 3:22; Sosthenes, 1:1), were “stewards of the mysteries of God.” The “mysteries” of God refers to those things revealed which were once secret, but have now been revealed to the church (Eph. 3:3-5). His job in regard to the “mysteries” was to safeguard the message by passing it on clearly and completely to the church. The steward will be judged by only one criterion—faithfulness (1 Cor. 4:2).

The use of the word “steward” has two different emphases in the New Testament. The steward is to safeguard the message to see that it is passed on and not corrupted. Second, he is to oversee the work of the other servants and give an account to the master.

The third term which is associated with the administrative duties of the pastor-elder is *προιστεμι*, which is usually translated “rule” in the King James Version. In secular Greek literature, it can refer to one who “presides over a meeting.” It is used to refer to the head of a guild (a group of craftsmen) or to the “head man of a village.”²⁷ It literally means to “stand before” or “put before.” In reference to groups like a church, it would mean to “preside,” “rule,” or “govern.”²⁸ Arndt adds that the word means “be at the head (of), rule, direct.”²⁹

In the New Testament, *προιστεμι* is used eight times. Six of these uses refer in some way to the duties of church leaders. One of the qualifications for the position of bishop given in 1 Timothy 3:4 is the ability to “rule his own house well.” He must show his ability to govern, administrate, and lead his own household. If there are problems there, if he does not show his leadership ability in the home, how will he be able to “take care of” the church of God? Notice the connection between “ruling” or “leading” and “taking care of.” It shows that there should be

²⁷Moulton and Milligan, 541.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Arndt and Gingrich, 713-14.

a nurturing relationship between the pastor and the flock. The same word is used to describe the qualifications of a deacon also. It says the candidates for deacons must “rule” (govern, lead) their “children and their own houses well.” The proving ground for church leaders is the home.

Later in 1 Timothy 5:17, there are directions to the church about the treatment and reward of elders. Ruling (governing, leading) “well” is connected with “laboring” (working hard) in the word and teaching. Ruling or leading well cannot be separated from “laboring.” Teaching effectiveness is increased by working at it. Knowledge of the word is not gained by osmosis, but by diligent study. Without knowledge of the word one cannot rule well. Effectiveness at teaching is also increased by the personal example of being faithful at one’s job day by day. Such devotion to the task does not go unnoticed by God or men.

First Thessalonians 5:12 discusses how the congregation should treat its leaders. They should “get to know” them (v. 12) and “esteem” them (v. 13). In particular they should respect those who: (1) “work hard among you,” (2) “stand in front of you” (lead), and (3) “admonish you.” This last word literally means “putting sense into the heads of people.”³⁰ In other words they are to follow leaders who teach, lead the way, and work hard. This verse pictures a leader who rules, but not by coercion, but by persuasion and example.

There is one other use of *προϊστειμι* in the New Testament. In Paul’s list of spiritual gifts in Romans 12, there is a word to those who rule (lead). Those who lead do so because they are gifted by God to do so. It is God’s choice, not ours. Being called of God to be a pastor-elder involves the recognition of gifts given to the individual by God’s grace (v. 6). Sometimes a person has gifts that may have remained dormant for years because he has not surrendered himself to Christ and allowed them to be used. The one who has the gift is commanded to lead

³⁰Robertson, 36.

“with diligence.” This means literally “in haste” or “in earnest.”³¹ In other words, the leader should be serious about his task. He should have a sense of urgency about it because people are dying without Christ.

Conclusion

The role of the pastor-elder can be described under three separate headings. He is to be a teacher, a pastor, and a leader of the congregation. The primary job of the pastor is to teach the word. It is to be considered primary because it is the most emphasized function of the Pastor in the New Testament. Preaching and exhortation are included under this function.

The second function is the pastoral role. This includes prayer in general, prayer for and visitation of the sick (when called). The most often mentioned pastoral function after teaching is guarding the flock against false teaching. This necessitates being able to detect false doctrine and to expound and apply the cure of sound doctrine.

The third function of a pastor-elder is leadership. He is one who stands in front. He is the overseer, the steward, who is responsible to the master for the spiritual well-being of the congregation. He must remember that he is also a servant who must give an account of his own stewardship.

Anything else the pastor does is because he is a believer, not because he is pastor. He is not exempt from anything that all Christians are commanded to do. He is to give because all are to give. He is to witness because all are to witness. The difference is that the pastor-elder is to lead other believers by being an example to them. He is to model what a Christian should be.

³¹Ibid., IV., 404.