

PASTORS: THE SHEPHERDS & THE SHEEP // Acts 14:19-23; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 1 Peter 5:1-4

Message from the series, Polity: Church Structures in Baptist Life

1. Biblical Material

Three Greek terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament to denote the same office. *Poimen* (pastor) means shepherd. It is used twice in this context (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:12). *Episkopos* (overseer, bishop) is used four times (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1, 1 Tim. 3:1-2, and Titus 1:7). *Presbyteros* (elder) is used 15 times (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2-6, 22; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:5; 2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1; Rev 4:4, 19:4). The three names point to the three functions of this role. An elder **teaches**—they provide a ministry of the word and are the resident theologian (Acts 6:4). An overseer **leads**—Baptist churches are congregationally ruled but should be elder-led. A pastor—a shepherd—**cares**. The number of times each term is used indicates an order of priority. This office is first about teaching. The pulpit and the bedside are both important, but a pastor must not sacrifice the former for the latter.

There are two significant categories of qualifications for a pastor. First is his **character**. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 provides a list of characteristics, and we might notice how ordinary they are. The pastor is not called to a higher standard of Christian living, but to live an exemplary Christian life. Two points of debate have arisen. One is a debate about gender—can women serve as elders? A number of Biblical arguments answer “no.” Another debate is about marriage—what does it mean to be a “one woman man”? There are several positions, but perhaps the most helpful question in this debate is: “Can this person serve as an example in terms of his marriage?” In addition to qualifications of character, we must also consider **competency**. The one distinguishing feature of eldership is that he must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:1; Titus 1:9). While not all elders will have a primary responsibility of pulpit ministry, they should all be able to publicly explain the scriptures in front of the congregation. LEAD is a helpful acronym, indicating that elders should be able to learn, explain, apply, and defend the Bible.

2. Current Reality

We often see three models of pastoral ministry: the single-pastor model, the senior pastor model, and the plurality model. In the single-pastor model, the ministry is a one-man-show, usually to the detriment of both the pastor and the sheep. The ubiquity of this model among Southern Baptists can be traced back to the nineteenth century when the growth of the denomination outstripped ability to develop pluralities of elders in local churches. The senior pastor model (which CBC currently has) is a model which assumes a pastoral staff—a “junior” or associate pastor, worship pastor, youth pastor, etc. There are unintentional consequences for this model: it creates a “pastor/employee” dynamic, a “hired pastor” mentality, and can also create friction between staff and deacons as two competing deliberative bodies develop.

The most pressing issue is not the dysfunction that takes place, but what doesn't happen—leading, teaching, and shepherding to the full benefit of the church. God's design is more effective than many structures allow.

3. Remedial Suggestions

The plurality model includes both vocational, paid elders and unpaid lay elders who would rotate through term limits. All pastors would share responsibility for pastoring. The lead pastor would be first among equals, but there would be shared leadership—a team of pastors, rather than a pastor and his staff, with the ability to have direction, decision, and doctrine all in the same room. How many pastors would this mean? The New Testament has no set number, but a good rule is one more lay elder than vocational elder.

Why should we consider making this move? The Bible prescribes it, it provides the best care for the sheep, it frees deacons from burdens they weren't meant to take on, the church can best achieve its mission of disciple making, and pastors can have maximal health and accountability. How would we make this move? By first assessing and defining reality, teaching Biblical polity, informally developing elder candidates, and gaining consensus from leadership in the church; then presenting elder candidates, recommending newly-written by-laws, and finally taking documents and candidates before the church for approval. We will not officially move until things are unofficially in practice—we want them in practice before they are in print. The recommendation for an official move must come from the deacons and it must be approved by the congregation. But we recognize that ultimately the Holy Spirit must move hearts—God will be the one to flip the switch.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How are teaching, leading, and caring distinct aspects of pastoral ministry?
2. How could a plurality of elders most benefit the church and the Biblical vision of polity?
3. How do eldership and congregationalism fit together?