Bible Questions & Answers

# WHAT IS A PASTOR?

The term "pastor" is a biblical term that is commonly used among churches. Today, the term is applied to many different roles. Many churches refer to the primary teacher of the congregation as the pastor. Other churches refer to one person as the "head" or "lead" pastor. Others have associate pastors, worship pastors, teaching pastors, youth pastors, family pastors, and more. Others have women pastors. Therefore, while this biblical word has been used in many different ways today, we need to carefully consider how the Bible uses it so we can use it accurately.

## ACTS 20:17, 28-31

Here we read about "elders" of the Ephesian church (v. 17, "presbuteros" in Greek). An older English word for "elder" is "presbyter." Notice, however, that these elders were also identified as "overseers" ("episkopos" in Greek). An older English word for "overseer" is "bishop." Furthermore, notice that these elders and overseers were also responsible to "shepherd" (from "poimen" in Greek) God's church in Ephesus. An older English word for "shepherd" is "pastor." Therefore, notice that these six words (elders, presbyters, overseers, bishops, shepherds, and pastors) all refer to one role/office in the local church. The same people who were elders (presbyters) were also overseers (bishops) and shepherds (pastors)! These watch over and care for the local congregation of God's people.

## 1 PETER 5:1-4

Notice how these terms are used interchangeably again. The elders were also shepherds and overseers of the local church who would lead, feed, care for, and protect the flock. Since these terms are used interchangeably, any attempt to separate them into different roles/offices in the church runs contrary to Biblical usage. For example, some churches today have a board of elders who are separate from the pastor/pastors. The Bible does not support this concept! Furthermore, only Jesus can be designated as the Chief Shepherd (Pastor). No person should ever be considered as the chief or the head of any church (Colossians 1:18)!

## ACTS 14:21-23

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders (overseers, shepherds) in every church. This helps us learn multiple things. First, congregations existed before elders were appointed. Although a church is lacking when it does not have elders (Titus 1:5), it is permitted to exist in that condition. Second, God's design involves every church having multiple elders (Acts 20:17; Philippians 1:1). There is no biblical authority for a church to have just one elder (pastor). God's wisdom has arranged for there to always be a plurality of elders (pastors) to share in the work and hold each other accountable. Third, there is no mention of any kind of hierarchical structure among the elders (pastors). You never read about a head/lead pastor, associate pastor, worship pastor, youth pastor, family pastor, etc. in the Bible. These titles and roles have been entirely created by people rather than by God!

## TITUS 1:5-9

In God's design for elders to be appointed in every town (in every church, Acts 14:23), He has identified characteristics those who will be appointed must possess (also see 1 Timothy 3:1-7). Therefore, God has not left this critical work of shepherding and overseeing the local church up to just anyone. Overall, these are older, godly, and spiritually mature men who are devoted followers of Jesus Christ and knowledgeable in the truth. Notice, however, a few other specifics. First, they must be men. Therefore, women simply cannot be pastors according to the Bible (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-14). Second, they must be married men with children who are faithful. So, unmarried men, men without families, and men without children who are faithful cannot be pastors according to the Bible.

## EPHESIANS 4:11-16

Notice God's design for His church involved various roles that would help the saints mature spiritually. These were apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers. Apostles and prophets were temporary functions that do not exist in the church today. However, evangelists, shepherds (pastors), and teachers continue. Therefore, while pastors certainly have the responsibility of teaching the congregation (1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17-18; Titus 1:9), not everyone who preaches and teaches in a congregation occupies the role of a pastor.

## CONCLUSION

A "pastor" is an elder (older man) who oversees and shepherds the local church. While the term "pastor" is a biblical term and God has designated it as a role/office in the local church, the term has been widely misused in churches today. Many of the present-day arrangements of the pastoral system in churches have no biblical support or authority. Therefore, you should desire to speak according to God's words (1 Peter 4:11) and be part of churches that follow the pattern of the New Testament in their leadership (2 Timothy 1:13; 2 Thessalonians 2:15)!

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