

THE NATURE OF PASTORAL SERVICE: representing Christ's Lordship to his Church and the World

by Rev. Grant Thorpe

Available at
www.corobaptist.org.au

The following article may be copied and distributed freely
if it is acknowledged and not used for profit.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

In addition to the papers written by Noel Due at the time when eldership was being first considered in Coromandel Baptist Church, I have sought to describe the nature of pastoral service—what it is about, what it does and how. This is with a view to understanding who we should recognise as elders for our own congregation.

Terms

Pastors (shepherds), overseers (bishops) and elders (presbyters) appear to designate one office or function in the New Testament. We will take them as one. In particular, I will take pastoring as the most comprehensive term for describing what these leaders do.

Fairly early in church history, 'overseer' came to be used of a leading elder. Since the Reformation, 'pastor' has been often used of the leader of a particular congregation. For the moment, I wish to put this aside for a general consideration of what pastoring entails.

CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

The church does not exist of herself but lives in the life of Christ. She does not only begin in Jesus Christ, but lives and ends by him. This means that there is no source for our understanding of what pastoring is than the word of Christ or the gospel. It is not just the shape of things but the dynamic of their operation that is conditioned by Christ being the church's life.

APOSTLES AND THE CHURCH

Jesus said he would build his church, and, on a particular rock. He said this when Peter had confessed that Jesus was the Christ (Matt. 16:18). Jesus would build his church beginning with this man as a definite human reality in the world. Given later that Jesus said to all the apostles that the keys of the kingdom would be given to them (Matt. 18:18), the foundation seems to include them also. The church is not conditioned by its establishment on this human beginning, but by the fact that Jesus will build his church and keep it so that not even death can assail it. The apostles, as

living stones, are such only in Christ (I Pet. 2:4–5).

Paul says the church is established on the foundation of the apostles, with Jesus Christ as the chief corner stone (Eph. 2:20). That is, it is Jesus Christ who determines what the foundation is but it is clear that the foundation is established as a particular human society in history and that there cannot be a church that is not apostolic.

In practical terms, this means that the church is only what Christ has made it when it gives itself to the apostles' doctrine and authority in history. A Christ without the apostles would not be known to us. Nor would his church be established. The apostles were appointed as witnesses of the resurrection. They opened the kingdom of God to Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles by the preaching of the gospel. They transmitted revelation that is now documented for us in the New Testament and they exercised discipline in the churches.

ELDER, OVERSEER AND PASTOR

Paul appointed elders in the churches he established or asked a representative to attend to this. They were to be people who would establish people in the truth they had come to know and to train others for the same purpose.

Three terms, elder, overseer and pastor—and the verbal forms of the latter two—are used by the apostles concerning leaders of the churches. A study of them shows that the task of the church's leadership is to represent to the church the Lordship of Christ—nothing more than this, but nothing less. It appears that the more pastoral service is conscious of itself, the less it is what it is trying to be. The more it bears witness to the one Shepherd's service, the more it does what it is about.

Rightly understood, it is a wonderful thing to consider what pastoral service—or any service—is because it is nothing other than a standing under the service of Christ as a recipient, participating in the dynamics of his care for the world and representing this to any who will receive our service or hear our word.

We now look at the terms used for this leadership of the church.

PASTOR-TEACHERS

The church lives in the ambit and dynamic of Christ's victory over sin, death, Satan and the world—not in its wake but in its very substance. Part of this is that we have received the outpouring of the gifts of his victory—the making of certain persons to be apostles, but also, others to be prophets or evangelists, and others pastor-teachers—for equipping all the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11–12). A church without these equipping gifts could not be the church (so the practice in Acts 14:23).

God does not 'daily send angels to make known his truth; but employs pastors' to nourish the people day by day through their whole life. 'If there are not godly ministers who, by their preaching, rescue truth from darkness and forgetfulness, instantly falsehoods, errors, impostures, superstitions, and every kind of corruption, will reign' (Calvin in Oden on the Pastoral Epistles, p. 147).

Pastors

The term ‘pastor’ (*poimen*) occurs only in Paul’s Ephesian letter and is inferred in Peter’s first letter (I Pet. 5:1–5), but the idea is essential to understanding the representing of Christ’s headship over his church. Christ was chief Shepherd (*archipoimen*) (cf. John 10:1–18) to those who otherwise were harassed and helpless, and he desired (with a change of metaphor) for others to be sent out into the harvest (Matt. 9:36–38).

Israel’s kings priests, prophets and wise men were the shepherds of Israel. The kings, in particular, were to represent God’s kingship to the people, not to replace it. Before that, as representative of God’s shepherding, Moses became a shepherd to Israel. One of his major functions in that position was to pray for God’s intervention at each of their numerous crises.

The verb ‘shepherding’ (*poimaino*) occurs in Jesus’ address to Peter (John 21:15–17) and in Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17–35).

Peter was told to feed (*bosko*) the lambs, tend or rule (*poimaino*) the flock and then, to feed the sheep.

The more general word for shepherding (*poimaino*) is also used of Christ’s ruling the nations with a rod of iron (Rev. 19:15).

In Acts 20, elders were told to attend to (*prosecho*) themselves and to the flock over which the Holy Spirit made them overseers (*episkopos*) or bishops, to be alert (*gregoreuo*), to feed (*poimaino* = to feed or rule) the flock purchased with Christ’s blood and to support (*antilambanomai*) the weak.

Paul, as an example of shepherding, showed (*anaggello*), publicly and privately, the whole counsel of God, taught (*didasko*), testified (*diamarturomai*) to the gospel, proclaimed (*kerusso*) the kingdom, warned (*noutheteo*), and showed (*hypodeiknumi*) what the gospel meant in everyday life.

Recalling that the task of pastoring is representing Christ’s shepherding to the congregation, it would rightly include all the objectives of the shepherd in Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34 and John 10. This would come with all the meekness and gentleness of Christ (II Cor. 10:1).

Among other instructions, Paul says that the elder must not be arrogant or quick tempered (Titus 1:7). “There are some who unseasonably smite the consciences of their brethren” (Chrysostom). Others “wound with the tongue,” and “deal much in threatenings,” wrote Calvin. ... Contrasted with these behavioural deficits were the positive excellences of gentleness, a patient, forbearing disposition, especially in admonishing errors, remaining peaceable, conciliatory, averse to contentiousness’ (from Oden on the Pastorals, p. 143f).

Teachers

Teachers are noted at Antioch (Acts 13:1) and are listed third in a list of gifts of God to the church (I Cor. 12:28–29). There being associated with apostles and prophets links them with the pastor-teacher designation in Ephesians 4. To see teaching as feeding the flock may help to avoid the cerebral connotation that teaching has in our society.

The desire to be a teacher, or to hear one, may not necessarily be a good if the content is not apostolic (I Tim. 1:7; II Tim. 4:3; James 3:1; II Pet. 2:1–3).

ELDERS

The Acts 20 passage shows that the elders (v. 17) who did the shepherding (v. 28) were overseers (v. 28). There were a number of these men in the church at Ephesus but we do not know how they worked in relation to one another. There may have been meetings in many homes.

The emphasis on feeding (in John 21) and on the pastor-teacher probably being one office (in Eph. 4) is reflected in Paul's requirement that elders be '*apt to teach*' (I Tim. 3:2; II Tim. 2:24). This would include direct teaching of truth—whether publicly or privately, and 'wisdom in applying the word of God judiciously to the advantage of people' (Calvin). It would involve defending that truth in the face of false teachers who constantly pull back from and then defy the apostolic deposit (Titus 1:9–11). It must also include instruction to others who will be able to be teachers (II Tim. 2:2).

'Those who are charged with governing the people should be qualified to teach. And what is required here is not merely a voluble tongue, for we see many whose easy fluency contains nothing that can edify. Paul is rather commanding wisdom in knowing how to apply God's word to the profit of His people' (Calvin on I Tim. 3:2).

'The leader must also be capable of withstanding opposition, correcting the recalcitrant, meeting resistances. "For the language of reproof is the key of discovery" (Gregory, Pastoral Rule). The capacity to stand up against opposition must have been especially important requirement under the conditions that apparently prevailed at this time of writing" (Oden on the Pastorals, p. 143).

'Elder' has a rich background in Israel's history (and parallels in other nations). From early days of the community life of Israel, elders were in action, leading and speaking for their people—perhaps as an extension of the role that heads of families had (Num. 11:16–17). They had civic duties but were also to teach the law to their people (Deut. 31:9–13). This latter duty continued into the first century AD.

In the centuries immediately before Christ, gaining wisdom from elders was encouraged (Sirach 6:34; 8:8–9). It was recognised that younger men could be wise and have the dignity of elder (Susanna 50). Youthfulness was not necessarily a bar to the service given by Timothy (I Tim. 4:12).

The elders of Israel in Jesus' day were those who shared with the chief priests the determining of religious matters and were included in the Sanhedrin. The synagogues had elders and this was their main area of influence. The synagogue also had one or more synagogue rulers for maintaining of order (Luke 13:14) and choosing who should preach (Acts 13:15).

It seems likely that apostles and churches were guided in their establishing of leadership for new churches by synagogue patterns. The apostles called themselves elders (I Pet. 5:1; II John 1; III John 1) who passed on the teaching they had received—as others were also to pass it on (I Cor. 11:23; 15:1, 3; II Thess. 2:15; 3:6; II Tim. 2:2).

The elders or bishops they appointed were to do the same. Their tasks included teaching (I Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5, 9) and deciding in matters of dispute (Acts 15:2, 6, 22–29). Their ruling function was present but given pastoral rather than political character (Acts 20:17, 28; I Tim. 5:17; James 5:14; I Pet. 5:1–4).

The elders who surround God's throne in the vision of Revelation, take us to the heart of eldership (Rev. 4:4, 9–11). Here we see most clearly that though their service is necessary and directive for the church, they are first of all worshippers and attentive to the action of God.

OVERSEERS

The meaning of overseer is illustrated in God's loving care for the promised land and its people (Deut. 11:12; Ruth 1:6; Ps. 80:14; Zeph. 2:7; Heb. 2:6).

It is difficult to trace usage from Old to New Testament. More influence seems to come from usage in the Qumran community whose bishops had considerable authority. Their office linked with Old Testament pictures in being compared to a shepherd: 'He shall love them as a father loves his children, and shall carry them in all their distress like a shepherd his sheep. He shall loosen all the fetters which bind them' (quoted in NIDNTT 1/190).

Christ is our overseer—together with his being shepherd of our souls (I Pet. 2:25), and the same word is used several times of church leaders (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; I Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7). The overseer is to tend (*poimeino*) as was Peter (John 21:15–17)—in addition to feeding the flock. In effect, they represent the apostles who are—
together with Christ—the foundation on which the church is established.

'It is no light matter to be a representative of the Son of God, in discharging an office of such magnitude, the object of which is to erect and extend the kingdom of God, to procure the salvation of souls which the Lord himself hath purchased with his own blood, and to govern the church, which is God's inheritance' (J. Calvin, quoted in Oden on I Tim. p. 140).

Augustine warned that *episkpos* is 'the title of a work, not of an honor,' so that 'he who loves to govern rather than to do good is no bishop' (quoted in Oden on I Tim. p. 140).

Cf. Moses who asked for a successor who would lead Israel and be a shepherd (Num. 27:17). In verbal form, 'overseer' is used of Moses (Acts 7:23), and of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36) and of caring for the sick (James 1:27; Matt. 25:36, 43), and, of the whole church (Heb. 12:15).

No less than elder, this word is wonderfully rich with meaning.

OBSERVATION

If pastoring is representing Christ's headship to the congregation and the world, it could be daunting if the emphasis was on the role which the pastor played. In fact, it is a gift. It is Christ in his action to the church. It is not a replacement for Christ's pastoring but the bringing of this to others by bearing witness to it without wavering.

Discussions that focus on the status of the pastor—as distinct from the witness he bears—can never do justice to what is being discussed. The more the pastor is aware of the grace and the authority and the gentleness and the truth of Christ (the list could go on) the less he need be concerned with himself. The nature of Christian life as well as of ministry is that it is most truly itself when it is most clearly focussed on Christ. 'One is your Master' must always be his cry (Matt. 23:8–10).

Pastoring is marvellously spelled out in personal terms in Psalm 23. Christ, the good Shepherd, leads his people to pasture and water so that their very life is restored, and to paths of righteousness. Even deep valleys are traversed without fear because

of his company, protection and discipline. Enemies cannot prevent their feasting on his provisions and coming to fullness of life and attaining to glory.

What a service to represent this shepherding to others! It is, of course, the task of all, but particularly given to pastors as the focus of their whole attention. The difference lies in the givenness of pastors to the church. It is the will of Christ that his church be led by particular service and the will of the Spirit to select those who would render this service.

A SUMMARY OF THE TASKS OF PASTORING

The apostles saw that the prime attention for their service was service of the word and prayer (Acts 6:2-4). This fits with what we learned of Moses as leader of Israel. If he did not first fear God and wait on him for every step of Israel's otherwise uncertain progress, he could be no leader. Pastors must first give themselves to the study and worship of God and to seeking from him the things necessary for the life of the people of God in the world.

As servants of Christ, they must guard the gospel (II Tim. 1:14). Not to recognise false teaching would be for the church to be subverted. If humanity lives by every word proceeding from God's mouth, overseers must 'hold firm to the sure word as taught' (Titus 1:9). If this is not done, the church is without its apostolic foundation.

Feeding the flock was mostly on Jesus mind when he established Peter in his apostolate. He also told Peter to tend the sheep—the more general word for caring for sheep—but mentioned feeding when he spoke a third time (John 21:15–17). It is not information which congregations need but the milk and meat of the word (I Peter 2:2; I Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12), the cleansing word (Eph. 5:26), the word of his grace which is able to build his people up and give them an inheritance among all who are sanctified (Acts 20:32).

Tending the people of God acknowledges that the church is to be cared for (Heb. 3:6), or to be managed (I Tim. 3:4–5). If the Spirit of God makes a person a pastor and he is given to the church, the result is leading or ruling (Heb. 13:17). This cannot be readily understood by human analogy because its source is Christ himself. Where it takes place truly—ie. as witness to the authority of another rather than as bringing others under one's own power (I Pet. 5:1–4), and as a service given—it should be received.

Paul links 'ruling' with 'taking care' in I Tim. 3:5, and the only other use of 'taking care' in the NT is the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:34–35).

Questions as to where pastors and people stand in a hierarchy are secondary. All stand before God and must render service to him and to one another, but there is pastoral service to be given and received. It is not to be the preoccupation of pastors to be in a certain place in a hierarchy, or for the people to avoid this, but to know Christ's lordship over his creation in acknowledging the functioning gifts he places in his congregation and to let each one have its proper place.