

A Kingdom of Priests, Part 7 FCC 11-15-20

Last week we looked at how the NT places the responsibility for ministry on the whole body of believers. The word brothers or brethren appears 134 times in Paul's writings alone. This points to the fact that all believers are priests, are ministers. To further support this we also discovered that the NT only rarely directly addresses or singles out leaders or elders in any of the churches. There are just a few exceptions and we will look at those today. The word "elders" appears only five times in Paul's letters, and a few other places. "Overseers" appears only four times. And "pastors" appears only once. The term 'elder' is used 67 times in the NT, but the vast majority of those are in reference to the Jewish ruling council. Let's walk through the places where elder and overseer might be used to refer to church leadership somehow. I'm going to rattle off a few of these, and then we will look at some verses specifically.

Hebrews 13:24 mentions elders but doesn't tell us anything about them.

Paul's greeting to the Philippians mentions elders but doesn't tell us anything about them.

Act 14:23 mentions that Paul and his associates appointed elders in every church but doesn't tell us anything about them.

Acts 15 mentions that elders in Jerusalem were involved in working through a conflict with the Jewish Christians, but doesn't tell us anything about their role as elders beyond dealing with that.

Acts 20:17 mentions elders in the Ephesian church but doesn't tell us anything about them.

Acts 20:28 uses the term overseers to describe these same elders.

Acts 21:18 mentions that there were elders in Jerusalem but doesn't tell us anything about them.

1Ti 5:1 Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers,

1Ti 5:2 older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

In these verses the same Greek term for elder is used once to refer to older men and actually used once to refer to older women. That brings up a topic for another day.

1 Timothy chapter 3 mentions qualifications for overseers, all of which are related to their character. There is a great deal of overlap between this list and the character qualifications for elders in Titus 1, so it appears Paul is using the terms elder and overseer interchangeably. *1Ti 5:17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*

Here we see elders active in preaching and teaching. The meaning of the term double honor is debated. We'll look at all that next week.

1Ti 5:19 Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Biblically, we shouldn't accuse any fellow Christian of anything without witnesses. So, while Paul is providing a good reminder, he is not placing elders in a different class.

Titus 1:5 mentions the appointment of elders in the churches on Crete. We went through this passage last fall and saw how Paul explains standards for elders, all of which are related to their character. Titus 1:7 uses the term overseers to refer to these same elders.

James 5:14 mentions elders but in the context it is impossible to determine whether he is referring to elders as leaders specifically or to elders as older men in the church.

1 Pet 5:1-2 The Apostle Peter calls himself a fellow elder. Seems like he is demoting himself. That's the effect of the gospel in his life.

Interestingly, the Apostle John refers to himself as an elder in his last two letters. Seems like he is demoting himself. That's the effect of the gospel in his life as well.

Back to 1 Peter, in chapter 2, Jesus is referred to as an overseer. *1Pe 2:25 For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

Some translations use the term guardian or protector instead of overseer. Just as Jesus is looking out for us, we ought to look out for each other. That's the primary role of elders and overseers in the NT. It is all about serving and caring for others. Being an elder, deacon, pastor, overseer, biblically is servant leadership. It is about leading by example and offering guidance in an unassuming way. It is not about running the church, but helping the church. Now you might wonder, can we have other servant leadership roles in the church if the NT doesn't mention them? I'll address that in the conclusion today.

Now we get to the fun part. The word pastor is used only once in the entire NT to refer to a role in the church. It's from the Greek word *poimen*, which is usually translated as shepherd. It's used a few times to refer to literal shepherds, like in the Christmas story, and it's used a few times to refer to Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The only time that word is used in the NT to refer to a ministry role is in Ephesians 4:11. And this is the only place it is translated as pastor instead of as shepherd. If you want to know my theory about why that is, ask me later.

Eph 4:11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,

Eph 4:12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

Eph 4:13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

Eph 4:14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

Eph 4:15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,

Eph 4:16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

When we think of evangelists, missionaries, pastors, we have certain mental pictures come to mind or we think of a person who in our mind is the idealized version of an evangelist, missionary, or pastor. But do our mental pictures actually match what the Bible says about those roles? And what do we do if the Bible doesn't give us many specifics about what those roles are supposed to look like?

At this point you might ask about Timothy and Titus- maybe they are examples of pastors. The truth is they were never described as pastors. The letters Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus are called pastoral epistles because the letters are concerned with the guidance of churches. Timothy and Titus were just two of many people who were associates of the apostles. Timothy had the gift of evangelism as well.

Ephesians 4:13 tells me that my job as pastor is to work myself out of a job. A church that is made up of mature believers and is working together needs very little pastoral guidance. I have seen pastors come in to churches that are functioning in healthy ways, or at least some of their ministries are functioning in healthy ways, and the people are doing a fine job, and the pastor will take over all of those until he is running everything. By taking away people's jobs, such a pastor is taking away the blessings they would receive for their ministry and taking away their opportunity to express their spirituality through a ministry. If he thinks he has all the answers and can do it the best, that's a messiah complex. Remember, narcissists are drawn to the pastorate. At the same time, I have also seen pastors come in to churches and people want the pastor to do this and then do that and pretty soon the pastor is doing everything and everyone else has farmed out their spirituality to the pastor. Remember, people-pleasers and doormats are drawn to the pastorate too. But the NT does not teach that pastors are supposed to do all the ministry. The opposite is their goal- to work themselves out of a job. How? By equipping all of the saints to do ministry. Then where does that leave the pastor- is he off the hook then? No- that leaves him to operate in his gifts and serve alongside his brothers and sisters as one of them.

Pastors are people. And as such they have different personalities, different interests, different sets of spiritual gifts. And just like any other Christian, a pastor should spend most of his time making the most of his strengths. We all have weak areas, and to be whole, we should work on those from time to time. But the HS gives us spiritual gifts for a reason. The pastor may not be the most qualified person to do any given ministry, and biblically he doesn't have to be.

At the core of this whole issue is the fact that there is no such thing as a distinction between clergy and laypeople in the NT. There is no pastor named anywhere in the NT. We get the whole idea of clergy from Catholicism. And now we are so used to it that we read it back into Scripture. The Protestant Reformation had at its core the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. We have believed that doctrine for almost 500 years now. But the culture of the church has not caught up yet. For many Protestant Christians, the pastor is just a new version of a Catholic priest. They hold the pastor up as someone who is the idealized Christian and who has a connection with God that the rest of the people in the church will never have. I mean no disrespect to Catholics. My point is that as evangelicals we have believed this beautiful doctrine of the priesthood of all believers for a long time but our church culture has not quite caught up with our doctrine.

The Bible knows nothing of a person who stands at the helm of a local church, directs its affairs, preaches to it every Sunday, conducts its baptisms, represents it in the world, officiates its Communion (or Lord's Supper), blesses civic events, marries the living, and buries the dead. No such person exists in the entire New Testament. And it's used as a descriptive metaphor, never as an ecclesiastical office. It is also plural, not singular. This flies in the face of common practice. Today the "pastor" is regarded as the figurehead of the church. His name is exclusively splashed on church marquees all across the Western landscape. One wonders why other ministries don't appear on these marquees when they are given far more attention in the New Testament.

Some folks will point back to the single leaders of the Old Testament to justify the modern solo pastor system overlook the fact that all the single leaders of the Old Testament— Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, etc.— were types of the Lord Jesus Christ, not a human officer.

There is a spirit of community and teamwork and servant leadership. NT church leaders lead by example and they serve the church in whatever ways are needed. But they are not over or above the church. It is not pastor on top, then elders or deacons, and then everyone else on bottom. Biblically, the whole congregation is on top, including the people that might be elders, deacons, overseers, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, and evangelists, and below them are the roles of elders, overseers, deacons, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, and evangelists. Why? Because anyone in a role that we call a leadership role is accountable to the body of Christ as a whole. But as Christians, we are equal.

So then biblically, what is the life and ministry of a pastor supposed to be? The word pastor simply means shepherd or guide. So to use the term in a thoroughly biblical way, any believer who has combinations of certain spiritual gifts that lend themselves to the ability to offer helpful guidance and spiritual care for others, and that believer acts on them by helping fellow believers find their way, that believer is doing pastoral work.

I wish I had time to unpack the terms apostle, prophet, teacher, and evangelist as they are used in the NT, but I'll have to save that for another day. Though we will look at teachers next week.

But you might be wondering, does all this mean we can't have pastors that are educated and ordained? I don't believe it means that, because if we said it did, if we said that we can't implement any leadership structures or roles beyond what we see in the Bible, we end up violating the freedom we have to do ministry as a priesthood. We are called to exercise our gifts, in whatever forms those may take on.

So we have committees to initiate fellowship and keep us connected with our missionaries and offer hospitality and take care of the property and finances. There's nothing biblically wrong with that—those are good things. Just like the apostles in Acts 6 took initiative and created roles and filled them with qualified people to meet the needs of the day, we have the responsibility and the freedom as a priesthood of believers to do the same. As long as any person we place in any role, since they are representing the gospel, should have a life that has been impacted by the gospel. But isn't that the same standard to which every Christian is called?

The bottom line? Every Christian is to think about how to do ministry, every Christian has a part in thinking about how to reach the lost and have a healthy church. Every Christian has a part in peace and reconciliation. Every Christian has that ability because every Christian has the HS living in them. Every Christian is a priest. Together we are a priesthood. And we serve under one head, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Benediction: Heb 13:20-21 Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.