

Is My Preacher a “Pastor”?

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Question: *“I’ve always called our preacher the pastor of the church. Recently a friend told me this was wrong. Why?”*

Answer: The word "Pastor" occurs in Ephesians 4:11 of the New King James Version of the New Testament: "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. . . ." Our first task is to determine the meaning of the word. If one does not properly define a word, then he is apt to use it wrong!

According to Young's Analytical Concordance the term literally means a "shepherd, feeder." Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words confirms this definition, stating that pastor means, "a shepherd, one who tends herds or flocks ... Pastors guide as well as feed the flock ... this was the service committed to elders (overseers or bishops) ... this involves tender care and vigilant superintendence."

So, the meaning of our study word is straightforward --a pastor is a shepherd or overseer, and, as Vine's accurately points out, this role is given to the elders who tend the flock of a local congregation. Nowhere in the New Testament is a preacher laboring with a local congregation described as "THE pastor" of the church. Indeed, such a designation would be a corruption of the role and responsibility of the preacher. Man's tradition has come to use the word pastor as a synonym for preacher but such is a misuse of the term.

People often misunderstand the term because they are not familiar with what God's Word says about the organization and government of the local church. The New Testament describes each congregation as an autonomous body under the headship of Christ. Each congregation consists of elders (pastors, shepherds, bishops), deacons (servants), and saints (other Christians). This organization is perfectly described in Philippians 1:1, "Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons..."

Elders must meet the qualifications set forth in I Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:3-9 (blameless, husband of one wife, gentle, not a novice, having faithful children, etc.). The qualifications for deacons are also stated in I Tim. 3 (not double-tongued, not given to wine, not greedy for money, etc., w 8ff). It's important to notice that a plurality of elders is always mentioned in connection with local churches. For example, in Acts 20:17 the apostle Paul called for the "elders of the church." (See also Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5)

Of course, a preacher could serve as one of the elders, or pastors, of a congregation if he met the qualifications (just as Peter was an elder, I Pet. 5: 1). He could NOT, however, be THE pastor. The elders have the responsibility to shepherd or oversee the flock (I Pet. 5:2).