

# Pastor or Bishop: Does It Really Matter?

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*(Leadership is a quality we are constantly trying to develop with the intention of planting other churches in our local area. There are many other issues I would rather bring into focus but the desire for unity and strength amongst these future leaders is potentially jeopardized given recent public discussion amongst pastors and teachers in grace churches. This article was written out of a necessity to establish my position on this subject in my own local church.)*

Recently, there has been some discussion amongst certain brethren over which title local church leaders should be called. Using the reasoning of their stance in Mid-Acts dispensationalism and the King James Bible, some choose to use the title “bishop”<sup>1</sup> instead of “pastor.” Yes, some even demand the title bishop in lieu of pastor. The reason given is that title of pastor associates the followers in the local assembly with the identity of being “sheep.” The brethren then go on to state that “sheep” is a term used to identify the nation Israel while “saint” is what identifies the believer in the dispensation of grace. It has even been stated that to use the term “pastor” is incorrect. Some go further and assert if the leader is too ashamed to use the term “bishop” to describe his office, he should step down.

I believe this discussion has the potential for causing a great deal of confusion and certainly dissension in the Body of Christ as it has gone from being a private discussion amongst church leaders to a public discussion and even a public attempt at correcting some leaders. This paper is written to help put some clarity on the matter, sort out some issues, and hopefully inject a grace perspective when needed.

## What Do The Terms Mean?

First, let’s get our terminology straight. We need a common set of definitions before having a common ground for discussion. There are three terms that we will look at to get this common starting point: Bishop, Elder, Pastor

### ***Bishop***

We will start in the book of 1 Timothy where Paul writes some words of advice regarding the local church to a young leader.

(1Ti 3:1) This *is* a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.

The Greek word translated “bishop” in this passage is ἐπισκοπή or episkopē. It is translated *ep-is-kop-ay*. You might be familiar with the word Episcopal or Episcopalian which are derived from this word.

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<sup>1</sup> For most of this article, I will not use quotations to emphasize the term bishop, pastor or elder. Furthermore, the convention used will not capitalize these terms unless quoted from Scripture or is necessary in the context of usage.

## Strong's Concordance Definition

From G1980; *inspection* (for relief); by implication *superintendence*; specifically the Christian "episcopate": - the office of a "bishop", bishoprick, visitation.

## Thayer's Greek Lexicon Definition

1) investigation, inspection, visitation

1a) that act by which God looks into and searches out the ways, deeds character, of men, in order to adjudge them their lot accordingly, whether joyous or sad

1b) oversight

1b1) overseership, office, charge, the office of an elder

1b2) the overseer or presiding officers of a Christian church

**Part of Speech:** noun feminine

## Other Places In Paul's Epistles Where Bishop Is Used

(Php 1:1) Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

(1Ti 3:2) A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;

(Tit 1:7) For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre;

Thayer's second definition is the one we see most often and it is associated with the description of the leader being an "overseer."

## Elder

(Act 20:17) And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church.

The Greek word translated "elders" in this passage is πρεσβύτερος or presbuteros. It is pronounced *pres-boo'-ter-os*. You might be familiar with the term Presbyter or Presbyterian which are derived from this word.

## Strong's Concordance Definition

Comparative of πρέσβυς presbus (*elderly*); *older*; as noun, a *senior*; specifically an Israelite *Sanhedrist* (also figuratively, member of the celestial council) or Christian "presbyter": - elder (-est), old.

## Thayer's Greek Lexicon Definition

1) elder, of age

1a) the elder of two people

1b) advanced in life, an elder, a senior

- 1b1) forefathers
- 2) a term of rank or office
  - 2a) among the Jews
    - 2a1) members of the great council or Sanhedrin (because in early times the rulers of the people, judges, etc., were selected from elderly men)
    - 2a2) of those who in separate cities managed public affairs and administered justice
  - 2b) among the Christians, those who presided over the assemblies (or churches) The NT uses the term bishop, elders, and presbyters interchangeably
  - 2c) the twenty four members of the heavenly Sanhedrin or court seated on thrones around the throne of God

**Part of Speech:** adjective

### **Other Places In Paul's Epistles Where Elder Is Used**

- (1Ti 5:1) Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren;
- (1Ti 5:17) Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.
- (1Ti 5:19) Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.
- (Tit 1:5) For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:

There is a great deal of confusion in local churches regarding the term “elder.” Today, most people think of the office of elder as being a corporate officer sort of like a member of the board of directors. But there is no such provision in the Bible for an administrative or corporate eldership. We'll investigate the real meaning and use of this a little later.

### **Pastors**

(Eph 4:11) And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

The Greek word translated “pastors” in this passage is ποιμήν or poimēn. It is pronounced *poi-mane'*.

### **Strong's Concordance Definition**

Of uncertain affinity; a *shepherd* (literally or figuratively): - shepherd, pastor.

### **Thayer's Greek Lexicon Definition**

- 1) a herdsman, especially a shepherd
  - 1a) in the parable, he to whose care and control others have committed themselves, and whose precepts they follow
- 2) metaphorically

2a) the presiding officer, manager, director, of any assembly: so of Christ the Head of the church

2a1) of the overseers of the Christian assemblies

2a2) of kings and princes

**Part of Speech:** noun masculine

### ***Elder and Bishop – Clarifying Terminology***

It is clear from Titus 1:5-7 that the elder is meant to be an equivalent term to the bishop. Paul begins the discussion regarding the ordination of elders and their qualifications (vs 6). In verse 7, the word bishop is used interchangeably with the word elder.

Without digressing into a totally new discussion of responsibility, this alone should bring about a sobering realization to anyone who is considering the office of elder.

### **Which Term Is Correct Today?**

Paul uses the term *elder* 4 times, *elders* 2 times, *bishop* 3 times, *bishops* 4 times, and *pastor* 1 time in his epistles.

It is argued that because the term pastor is used in Ephesians 4:11 in a listing of offices that were transitional in nature such as apostle and prophet, and the term pastor is no longer to be used by local church leaders in the dispensation of grace. It has been stated that these are “gifts” that have since passed from the scene of the local church once the Word of God and the Fall of Israel were completed post-Acts 28.

Furthermore, it is argued that the term pastor is a reference in particular to leadership that is specific to the nation of Israel. Israel is identified in the Scriptures as sheep and the Body of Christ is not. Thus, pastor is not applicable because the Body of Christ are never identified as sheep in the dispensation of grace.

We will consider both of these arguments in order.

### ***Can You Have It Both Ways?***

While it is important to understand the clear division between Israel and the Body of Christ and the programs for each, it is equally important to understand the similarities. Furthermore, we must be consistent in our understanding of these programs. If we are to accept the argument that the term bishop is specific to the Body of Christ while pastor is specific to Israel, and the term pastor is not used to describe the Body of Christ, then we should also not expect the term bishop to be applied to Israel. Otherwise, the argument doesn't make sense. In mathematical terms, if:

If:

A=B

C=D

And A is not equal to C

Then B cannot equal D.

If:

Pastor = Israel

Bishop = Body of Christ

And Pastor does not equal Bishop,

Then Bishop cannot equal Israel.

## **The Bishop of Israel?**

Our mathematical formula doesn't work in this case. As a matter of fact, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is called a Bishop, Pastor and Shepherd – all in relation to Israel!

(1Pe 2:25) For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

1 Peter was written to the nation of Israel – it is a Jewish Epistle. Christ is a Bishop to the nation Israel! Israel has a Bishop. If we are looking for a clean separation of terminology, this violates our system.

The word Bishop is translated from the Greek word episkopos. This is the same word used by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:1.

The term Shepherd in this verse is also interesting. It is translated from the Greek word poimēn, which is the word translated “pastors” in Ephesians 4:11.

So the Lord Jesus Christ is a Bishop and a Shepherd (or Pastor) in title. If Christ is a Bishop to Israel, where is the dispensational separation that we are looking for and expecting?

Read on to find out whether there is really a separation.

## **Bishops and Elders Before Paul?**

If the term Bishop is specific to local church leadership in the dispensation of grace, we would expect the term not to be used to describe believers prior to this dispensation. But this isn't the case. There were bishops prior to Paul!

(Act 1:20) For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick let another take.

This verse is actually a compound quote of two Old Testament passages:

(Psa 69:25) Let their habitation be desolate; and let none dwell in their tents.

(Psa 109:8) Let his days be few; and let another take his office.

This passage in Acts is describing the fate of Judas Iscariot. It is very interesting that the translators chose to use the word “bishoprick” to describe the office of apostle that was vacated when Judas left this earth.

Do you know what word is translated “bishoprick?” The Greek word episkopē, which is the same word translated “bishop” in 1 Timothy 3:1!

Wycliffe knew this when he translated the Bible into English in 1395. His translation says, “A faithful word. If ony man desirith a bishopriche, he desirith a good werk.”

In Psalm 109:25, we see this word is translated “office.” So a simple question: What is the title of the person who occupies the office also called “bishoprick?” Obviously, we are lead to conclude that it is a “bishop!” Judas and the other apostles were occupants of the office of bishop long before Paul arrived on the scene as a saved man. There were “bishops” who were overseers in the program for the nation Israel as well as those appointed in the Body of Christ.

It is an interesting side note that the term “elder” was also used to describe those who had authority in relation to the saved Israelites.

(1Pe 5:1) “The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed:”

Can you guess what word “elders” is translated from? You got it – presbuteros – the same word translated in 1 Timothy 5 and Titus 1. In other words, the program to the redeemed in Israel not only had people who occupied the office of bishop, they also had people who were designated as elders. Do you remember that in Titus 1 we also saw that the office of bishop and elder were equivalent titles?

The bottom line is that we must be consistent in our understanding of Scripture. If the office of bishop and elder is specific to the Body of Christ, and pastor is not, then how can we be consistent in our understanding given that all three of these terms are used in both the previous and present dispensation? Is it possible that some are trying to create a division in Scripture where there really isn’t one? Is it possible that these three terms are used to describe the *same* office, just *different* functions?

### ***Are The Sheep Really All Gone?***

The basis for the argument that local church leaders today should be called “bishop” instead of pastor stems from the supposed distinction between Israel being called “sheep” and the Body of Christ believers being called “saints.” But as demonstrated previously the term “bishop” itself is an inter-dispensational title. The term “sheep” will be seen as such also.

(Act 20:28) Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

### **When Did The Flock Become A Body?**

Now this is a very interesting verse because we see a number of things coming together in one place. In order to get a proper understanding, let’s ask the right questions.

First, who is Paul talking to in the passage? He is talking to the Ephesian elders – Acts 20:17

Second, who is identified as “the flock?” Paul tells us later in the verse when he names “the church of God.” Yes the flock is the “church” as in The Church “which is His Body.” God didn’t just purchase the Ephesian church with His own blood, he bought the entire church! Who do we associate with a “flock?” Seagulls, right? No – sheep! (Just a little joke)

We need to ask two simple questions: While we understand that the book of Acts is transitional in nature, and the sign gifts were temporary, is the designation “flock” also temporary? If this is the case, at what point did the Body of Christ, or even the Ephesians in particular, stop being the “flock?”

Before we come to a conclusion on that question, let’s look at one more term in the passage – “overseers.” Can you guess the Greek word from which this word was translated? Yep, it’s our old friend “episkopos.” In case you’ve forgotten already (I have a bad memory and need to be reminded so don’t feel alone) this word is translated “bishops” in Philippians 1:1.

Now let’s consider what we are looking at in this passage for a minute if we are to believe that the Body of Christ cannot be considered “sheep” or a “flock.” We are saying that we have a permanent office of bishop over a group of people who are temporarily designated as a flock. Does this make sense? Is this properly exegeting the passage?

This would mean that the Body of Christ went through a transition from being identified with the same identifying name (sheep) as the nation Israel to a completely new designation (Body) once the book of Acts came to a close. But we know this isn’t the case because Paul wrote 1 Corinthians and Romans prior to the latter part of Acts 20 in which he already understood and called the church the Body of Christ.

Furthermore, this could not have been part of Paul’s ministry of provocation (Rom 11:14) because the Jews were looking for signs, not titles or designations. The transitional nature of the Body of Christ is related to the Fall of Israel and the provocation ministry of Paul, not the incompleteness of the Body.

I would ask anyone who holds the position that the term “flock” is transitional the following question: Was the Body of Christ formed in Acts or after Acts?

Unless one holds to a theological position that states the Body of Christ began after Acts 28, this transitional terminology argument does not make sense.

### **Where Did The Pastors Go?**

(Eph 4:11-12) - “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:”

It is obvious from these two verses that pastors were given to edify the Body of Christ. The argument that they were given specifically to Israel just isn’t true. What other conclusion could we come to except to say that pastors were given for edifying of the Body of Christ?

While we know that apostles transitioned off the scene with the death of the appointed apostles – no one was left to fill the job requirements. Prophets passed off the scene with completion of the Word of God and the Fall of Israel. What about evangelists, pastors and teachers? Are we still exhorted to do the things that these people were given to do?

Are we exhorted to evangelize?

(2Ti 4:5) But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.

Are we exhorted to teach?

(1Ti 4:11) These things command and teach.

Then why would we not be exhorted to care for the local church as a pastor?

(1Ti 3:5) (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)

(Php 2:20) For I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state.

(2Co 11:28) Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.

Just because the word “pastor” is not used verbatim to actively describe the function of caring, does this diminish or change the need or activity of the local church leader? Does the local church need feeding, protecting, and guiding? This sounds like the job of a shepherd, doesn’t it?

Is there a verse that tells us that “pastor” is a transitional term such as apostle or prophet? It isn’t grouped with those two terms in Ephesians 4. It is in a grouping with those activities that describe what a leader of a local church should be doing now. Again, one would have to take the theological position that the Body of Christ began after Acts 28 in order to do away with all of these terms and functions in the book of Ephesians. However, you could not eliminate them in the Pastoral Epistles.

### ***The Bottom Line***

All of this leads to the following conclusions: The term “sheep” is descriptive of the Body of Christ through understanding that “flock” is an acceptable term. The term “pastor” is descriptive of the function of the local church leader today, the leaders in the previous and subsequent dispensations, and of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. It is divisive and incorrect to demand that term “pastor” is improper to describe local church leader today. The term “bishop” describes the office while the term “pastor” describes the function – that of shepherd. Both are equally acceptable terms and under grace, don’t we have a choice of doing what is acceptable to God?

### **What’s In A Name?**

By what title does Paul describe himself or others in Scripture? He speaks of the office of bishop but do we find one instance where he actually uses the title in reference to a local church leader?

Do we have one verse that speaks of Bishop Timothy or Bishop Titus? The answer obviously is no. There is not one verse in Scripture that gives us the title by which a local church leader was called in Paul's epistles.

However, we do find some titles used for church leaders:

(Rom 1:1) Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God,

(Php 1:1) Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

(Tit 1:1) Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness;

(Phm 1:1) Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy *our* brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,

Do you see a pattern here? *The issue has never been the title but rather the man.* It is the *servant* aspect of leadership that Paul emphasizes when we see references in the official introductory paragraphs of his epistles. As a local church leader, we should be bishop, pastor, and elder at any given time as the need arises. The real calling for a local church leader is not tied up in the terminology that provides a title, but rather to exercise in his heart what God really intends – grace!

(1Co 10:23-24) “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth.” Although this passage is not directly describing the issue we've been discussing, we can still find the application. As we seek the edification of other believers, we should decide what is for the enrichment of those believers. In some cultures, calling oneself a bishop would associate you with a religion that you actively preach against! Our culture recognizes the title of both pastor and bishop. Under grace, we are as free to choose the title for our church leaders as we are free to choose the name of our local assembly. Leaders may be “bishop”, “pastor” or “elder.”

Even if you don't agree with the conclusion set forth in this article, it is my hope that you see that dogmatic demands cause more harm than good. Legalism places demands on us that we never find in Scripture. It should be clear by now that there isn't enough Scriptural support for the strict demands of some that others change their title from pastor to bishop. One other word regarding those who would use the position of being a King James Version Bible believer to support strict dogmatism: Based on the discussion and points provided above, hopefully it can be seen that the KJV position has nothing to do with what local church leaders should be called.

My prayer is we begin to focus more on our identity in Christ than our identity before man. Until then, we will restrict the grace that God so richly and freely bestows on us.