

“Preachers” or “Pastors”?

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Those who become upset with people who devote their lives to religious work sometimes call them some very unflattering names. However, that’s a subject for another time. Rather, let’s consider – in light of Bible teaching – a commonly used title applied to those in “full-time church work.”

Pastor may be the word most frequently used to describe a preacher’s work (e.g., “John Smith is the pastor of the _____ church”). This term is also used as a title of address (e.g., “Pastor John Smith will now speak”). Roman Catholics and Protestants alike thus employ the word. Does the Bible sanction this usage?

Pastor is a Biblical term, but the New Testament never uses it to refer to preachers, priests, or their work. It speaks of preachers/evangelists, but it knows nothing of special priests in the church. Rather, **every member of the church** is a “priest” with direct access to the Father through the one Mediator, His Son (1 Tim. 2:5; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6).

The Bible distinguishes “pastors” from evangelists/preachers, apostles, prophets, and teachers (Eph. 4:11). *Pastor* simply means “shepherd.” The New Testament identifies pastors/shepherds with men also known as “elders” (Acts 20:17; Phi. 1:1; Tit. 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:1; et al.), “bishops” or “overseers” (Acts 20: 28; 1 Tim. 3:1; et al.), and “the presbytery” (1 Tim. 4:14). Both Paul and Peter use the verb form of *pastor* to describe the **work** of elders/bishops/presbyters in a church (i.e., *feeding/tending*; Acts 20:28–29; 1 Pet. 5:1–2). Thus, the Bible uses *pastors*, *elders*, *bishops*, and *presbytery* interchangeably.

New Testament congregations never had and still do not have **only one** elder/bishop/pastor (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 20:17, 28; Phi. 1:1; et al.). Thus there is no Biblical authority to call a man “**the** bishop,” “**the** elder,” or “**the** pastor” of a church merely because he is “the preacher.” (While John twice identified himself as “the elder,” he did so in reference to age rather than congregational office [2 John 1; 3 John 1]). Specific qualifications are required of pastors/elders/bishops (1 Tim. 3:1–8; Tit. 1:5–11). Among them, he “must be the husband of one wife” and have “believing children” (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6). Other factors aside, no Roman Catholic priest can ever qualify as a “pastor” and be true to his celibacy vow. Further, many so-called Protestant “pastors” simply have not met these qualifications.

“The One-man Pastor System” is foreign to the church the Lord built through His apostles. The **plurality** of elders/pastors/bishops in a congregation have authority over that entire church—including the preacher (Acts 20:28), not vice versa.

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