

What is a Pastor?

Three Words That Matter

(Can Women Be Pastors?)

There are many churches, denominations, and scholars who understand three words to be synonymous in the New Testament. They seem to be used almost interchangeably, and they refer to very closely related ideas:

πρεσβύτερος (*presbuteros*) = "elder"

ἐπίσκοπος (*episkopos*) = "overseer"

ποιμήν (*poimen*) = "pastor"

Community Church recognizes that male headship in the church is a transcultural biblical concept (see our position paper on Gender and Headship), and according to 1 Timothy 2:12, this headship is to be implemented as the office of elder. Churches are to be governed by a plurality of elders who share the teaching-and-governing authority as overseers of the church.

ISSUE: If these three words are synonyms, and they all refer to the office of Elder in the church, the office of church governance that Paul reserves for men, then women are excluded from any pastoral role because they are excluded from being elders. Women can't be pastors.

Are these three words synonymous?
Can women be pastors?

Danger: The church today has a habit of imposing modern ideas back on the biblical text. One such case is the way we use the word "pastor." Many denominations balk at the idea of women as pastors because the role of pastor has been deemed synonymous with elder and overseer, and as this leadership role is reserved for men, it is concluded that there are no circumstances in which women can be pastors. But to assume that there is equivalence between the way the church uses the word pastor today and the way it is used in the New Testament is careless exegesis at best, and at worst, it is imposing our own modern presuppositions onto the Bible, and then being delighted to find them there, right where we put them to begin with.

Approach: As in all things at Community Church, our first response is "Go to the biblical text." Are these three words synonymous? How does the Bible use these three words? In what contexts are the words used? If they're not synonyms, they're surely closely related ideas. What are the relationships between these three words? These three words *are* different words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and care needs to be taken to differentiate them, even as their semantic fields may overlap and their usage brings them into close proximity with one another. They are all closely related, but they are different words with different meanings and they are used in different contexts to communicate different things.

πρεσβύτερος (*presbuteros*) = "elder"

This word is used to denote an **OFFICE** of leadership in the New Testament church. In the apostolic era, churches were led by a plurality of elders. We see this in places like Acts 20 when Paul gathers the leaders of the church at Ephesus to say goodbye on his way to Jerusalem. He gathers the "elders" (πρεσβυτέρους) of the church (verse 17) and weeps with them, knowing he'll never see them again. The word refers to a leadership position in a church, the office of elder.

ἐπίσκοπος (*episkopos*) = "overseer"

This word is used to describe the **ROLE** of an elder, not his office. What does an elder do? He is an overseer of the church. We see this in places like Titus 1 where Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders (πρεσβυτέρους) in every town in Crete. He then continues to discuss the *role* of elders, and in doing so, begins, saying, "Since an overseer (ἐπίσκοπος) manages God's household..." He doesn't just give the instruction to oversee the church using the word as a verb; he turns that verb into a noun and uses it as a title of the role that an elder carries out in the church.

These two words are *almost* synonyms. As substantive nouns, they refer to the same individual who holds the office of elder and who carries out the role of overseer. They are very closely related, and even used interchangeably in the biblical text, like in Philippians 1:1 when Paul addresses his letters to the two leadership offices of the church, elders and deacons... except he writes instead to "overseers" and deacons. This is not unusual, and perhaps a contemporary example might help.

Consider a member of congress. "Congressman" is the name of an office, a position in the government. It's a leadership role. But what does a congressman actually mean? What does a congressman actually do? *This is similar to identifying an elder in the church. It is the name of the office held by the individual, but what does it mean? What does an elder actually do?*

Congress is responsible for legislation. A congressman will draft, propose, and vote to pass or not to pass legislation in congress. Or at least they're supposed to. They are legislators. Their role is to legislate new laws (among other things). So they are equally called "legislators" almost interchangeably with "congressman." You might hear an activist say, "Call your congressperson!" You might equally hear them say, "Reach out to your legislators!" One refers to a person by their office or title; the other refers to them by their role. While they can be used almost interchangeably, they are indeed distinct and mean different things. Most notably, you would never address a congressperson this way: "Excuse me, legislator?" That's not their office or title. Instead you'd say,

"Excuse me, congressman?" *This is similar to how the Bible uses the term overseer. It can be used substantively and interchangeably with elder, but it tends to show up in places where the role of elder is being fleshed out, like in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, as opposed to direct address. So Elder is the title or office that is held, and overseer is the role that is to be carried out by those in that office.*

But what about that third word, ποιμήν?

ποιμήν (*poimen*) = "pastor"

This word literally means "shepherd." And for a word that many argue is synonymous with elder and overseer, shepherd never appears substantively anywhere near them. In fact, this word is only used 17 times in the New Testament, and it is almost universally translated as "shepherd." There is only in one place is it ever even translated as "pastor," and that's in Ephesians 4:11.

Ephesians 4 is part of Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus encouraging them to love one another, and to keep the unity of the faith even in the midst of differences. In this section, Paul writes about spiritual gifts, and how God gives a diversity of gifts to his people but calls them to unity as one body according to one Spirit because there is one Lord (he goes on from there). Then he lists a series of spiritual gifts that he gives to the church to build up the body towards maturity in Christ. This list includes the gift of apostleship, prophecy, evangelism, and shepherding/teaching.

In Ephesians 4, Paul begins by stating how God gave gifts to his people. In three different ways, Paul indicates he's talking about gifts and not offices in the church:

⁷ But to each one of us **grace has been given** as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and **gave gifts to his people...**" ¹¹ So **Christ himself gave** the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up... (Eph 4:7-8, 11-12, NIV)

The writing style he uses employs these words substantively (he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists...) and so some conclude that these are not people with gifts but rather that these are specific offices in the New Testament church. But consider this example from our world today:

An onlooker sees a new dad playing with his son and sees the way he's teaching his infant about the world. This onlooker might say, "That dad has a real gift for teaching." Or, they could equally say, "That dad is a real teacher." The onlooker is talking about a gift, but by no means can anyone conclude that the father is a vocational teacher. That's not what is being communicated.

It would be equally valid to say, "God have the people with the gift of apostleship, those with the gift of prophecy; the ones with the gift of evangelism..." A compelling case cannot be made that these five (or four, depending on how you count them) words represent offices in the early church. It should be noted that these offices are not listed anywhere else in the New Testament. In fact, not only are they *not* identified as offices elsewhere, they *are* clearly identified as spiritual gifts (as seen just a few verses earlier in Ephesians 4) as well as in some pretty famous passages in other letters Paul wrote:

In 1 Corinthians 12, in a passage clearly identified as teaching on spiritual gifts, Paul lists almost the same gifts in the same order, among a list of spiritual gifts given by God to his people:

²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

Here the substantival use of the gift of prophecy and the gift of teaching and the gift of apostleship appear as "prophets" and "teachers" and "apostles," just like in Ephesians 4. And both texts highlight the unity in the Spirit in the body of Christ and the diversity of spiritual gifts God gives to his church for its edification. These are not texts about governing authority in the church, nor do they reference gender-based limitations in any way. This text does, however, appear to prioritize the gifts and identify some as being greater or "higher" than others, but that does not mean that we're dealing with a governing structure for a church. Paul argues that some gifts are more useful for building up the church than others, which is what the gifts were given for in the first place.

We see the same thing again in Romans 12 with another clear discussion of spiritual gifts and unity and we find the same language used. And again, there is no reference to governing authority, nor any gender-based limitations.

⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

In light of such strong parallelism, we conclude that Ephesians 4 does not contain a list of offices of the church, of which "pastor" is one, nor can "pastor" be considered synonymous with elder and overseer in any of these texts. On the contrary, shepherding/teaching is a spiritual gift given by God to various people in the church for the building up of the church. As such, anyone with the gift of shepherding/teaching can

be called a pastor in the church, whether they hold governing office or not, and regardless of gender.

OBJECTION: But wait. Aren't there places where "shepherding" and "elder" or "overseer" appear literally in the same sentence? Doesn't that infer that they are synonymous? You can't leave out those texts.

ANSWER: Proximity does not imply equivalence. In that same Acts 20 farewell scene with Paul and the Ephesian elders, Paul writes:

¹⁷ "From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders (*presbuterous*) of the church. ¹⁸ When they arrived, he said to them... ²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (*episkopous*). Be *shepherds (poimainein)* of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (NIV).

It's an odd translation, since in the Greek it's a continuation of the previous sentence (not a new sentence) and it's an infinitive verbal form: "to shepherd." A more literal translation would read, "...of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd the church of God..." The ESV removes the noun form all together (Be shepherds) and replaces it with a verbal construction that is closer to the meaning of the original text: "...the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, *to care for* the church of God" (ESV). The Greek text does not present "shepherd" (or pastor) as an office in the New Testament church, but instead identifies that it was a spiritual gift that elders/overseers were expected to have and that they were expected to use on behalf of the church for its care and edification. The elders (πρεσβύτερος) as overseers (ἐπίσκοπος) were called, among other things, to shepherd (ποιμαίνειν) the people in their churches. Pastor is therefore not synonymous with elder or overseer. Pastoring or shepherding/teaching is a spiritual gift that many people in the church can have -- and that elders must have -- that is to be used to build up the church towards maturity in Christ and a living relationship with God, independent of governing authority or gender.

Perhaps an example from our world today might help.

The director of a counseling agency could write to all their therapists (the *office* of therapist) and instruct them, as they counsel people (the *role* of counselor), to be gentle (the *gift* of gentleness). So these licensed therapists are called to gentleness as they counsel. But being gentle is not exclusive to therapists, and it is not synonymous with counseling. People other than therapists can have the gift of being gentle; non-therapists can be gentle. And just because you are able to be gentle does not make you a licensed therapist. Being gentle is not an interchangeable concept with good counseling. Rather, being gentle is a separate instruction being given to therapists who counsel people and will make them more effective therapists.

In the same way, elders are told that as they oversee the church, they are to shepherd the flock. Others can and will have the gift of shepherding/teaching; It is not reserved for elders,

and it is not a synonym for elder or overseer. It doesn't mean that everyone who shepherds someone is an elder. Nor does it mean that only elders can shepherd people. It means that, among other things, elders (OFFICE) should oversee (ROLE) their churches and shepherd people (SPIRITUAL GIFT) in the way they care for God's church.

FINAL OBJECTION

But the idea of a shepherd has been equated with leadership throughout the Bible. Jesus calls himself "the Good Shepherd" (John 10:14) and "the Shepherd and Overseer of our Souls" (1 Peter 2:25). The governing rulers of Israel were called bad shepherds, "Shepherds who feed only themselves" (Jude 12). In some places, the root word for shepherd appears as a verb ποιμανεῖ is literally translated "he will rule." So there's some evidence that the idea of shepherd is used to denote governing authority and rule.

REPLY

The idea of a shepherd is a beautiful metaphor that can be used in many different ways. It is not limited to one single use in which it is categorically equated with a governing office of authority in the New Testament church, nor in the church today. It's a general metaphor for leadership and care that is used throughout the Bible in many ways. But simply because it has been used as a metaphor to describe leadership, careful stewardship, loving care, and even strong rule doesn't necessitate that it therefore *must* refer to an office within the New Testament church, much less the specific office of Elder or Overseer, and even less still restricts this specific office to men.

SUMMARY

If the three words in question *are* virtually synonyms in that they all refer to the office of Elder in the church, then according to 1 Timothy 2:12, women are excluded from any pastoral role because they are excluded from being elders -- as eldership is reserved for men. If "Pastor" is used as the title of an office in the New Testament, and if it is synonymous with elder, women are excluded from being pastors.

But the biblical evidence demonstrates that the three words, while closely related, are clearly not synonymous. "Elder" refers to a leadership **office** in the church; "Overseer" refers to the **role** that elders have in their leadership of the church. "Shepherd" or "Pastor" is a term that can be applied to anyone who has the **spiritual gift** of shepherding/teaching to be used to build up the church in accordance with Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. There are no gender limitations on being called a pastor, since being called a "pastor" is not an assignment of governing authority. "Pastor" is the identification that an individual is recognized by a community as having the spiritual gift of shepherding/teaching, and the community can affirm them into any of a variety of leadership positions in the church. These various positions can include elders, deacons, or even ministry leaders (consider the idea of a Youth Pastor or a Missions Pastor).

At Community Church, those who we call "pastors" are those we have identified as gifted shepherds/teachers that have been employed by the church to free them up from other responsibilities in order to dedicate themselves vocationally to ministry. It is a descriptive title, not a governing one. Pastors at Community Church are people, both male and female, who employ their gifts under the headship and oversight of the elders.

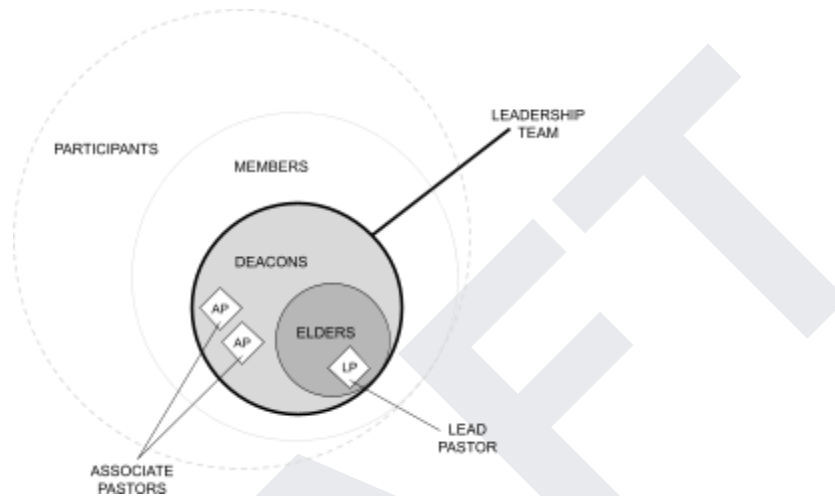


Figure 1: Leadership Structure of Community Church

Pastors as Elders: At Community Church we have hired a lead pastor as a full-time paid elder, and as a member of the elders, such a role is reserved for men. Pastor Tim is our Lead Pastor who is by virtue of his office a full-time elder and participates among the team of elders.

Pastors as Deacons (or Lead Team Members): We also hire associate pastors whose roles function as full-time paid deacons or full-time members of our Leadership Team, under the governance of the elders and accountable to them. Pastor Matt is our Associate Pastor of Worship and Youth, and as such, he is considered a vocational deacon who is accountable to the elders, who leads from among our Leadership Community. Pastor Dana is our Associate Pastor of Discipleship, and as such, she is considered a vocational deacon, and by virtue of her office, Dana is accountable to the elders and she leads from among the Leadership Team.

So while the role of Lead Pastor at Community Church is reserved for men, all other pastoral roles are open to women as they use their gifts to build up the church. As such, as the years go by and the various needs of the church change from season to season, we will remain a church led by a plurality of elders -- which biblically is reserved for men -- but which hires pastors at any number of positions with varying levels of governing authority (Lead Pastor as elder, Associate Pastors as deacons, and individual pastors of specific ministry areas as the Lord leads: Youth Pastor, Children's Pastor, Outreach

Pastor, Worship Pastor, Evangelism Pastor, Missions Pastor). Only the Lead Pastor is an elder by virtue of his office.

CONCLUSION

Scripture teaches that pastoring is a gift, not an office, and celebrates that the Lord gave the shepherding/teaching gift to many people throughout His church to build up the church towards maturity in Christ and unity in the faith. The church would do well to celebrate this gift and see it deployed wherever possible throughout the church for the glory of God through Christ Jesus.

NOTE: This doc will be updated to reflect FOUR words that matter, to include our understanding of the office of διακονία and thus round out the church's full governing structure.