

QUESTION 1

What Is a Pastor?

As a college junior, my heart burned to pastor God's flock. Having sensed this call to ministry five years earlier, this calling began to narrow. At the time, I served on a church staff discipling young adults and teenagers. By doing pastoral work, my calling became clearer. Although seeing only the edges of pastoral ministry, my spirit leaped at the chance to shepherd members of our church toward spiritual health.

Had you pinned me down to ask, "What is a pastor?" I would likely have said, "A shepherd." Of course, that's correct since the English term "pastor," derived from the Old French *pastor*, and the Latin *pastorem*, means *shepherd*.¹ When referring to a leadership office in the church, we use the term metaphorically (we do not mean the actual herding of sheep). Through the centuries, governments and religious groups have used *shepherd* to refer to one ruling, leading, or caring for them. The Bible also uses the term metaphorically. How does it speak to the question, "What is a *pastor*?"

Shepherd as a Metaphor

The ancient Near Eastern culture and Holy Scripture regularly use *shepherd* metaphorically.² When considering shepherd as a metaphor, Timothy Laniak explains, we drag "a collection of inter-related associations from the source domain into the target domain as *prospects* for comparison."³ In other words, we take up the original concept of shepherding sheep, mull the various implications involved in that work, and *then* consider how it is used metaphorically in various biblical contexts. From this process, we begin to derive an understanding of *shepherd/pastor*. Answering the question, "What is a

1. "Pastor," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, www.etymonline.com.

2. See Timothy Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, NSBT 20, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 31–74.

3. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 33 (emphasis original).

pastor?” by merely saying, “a shepherd” proves inadequate until we arrive at its meaning in the original metaphor as developed in Scripture.

The noun *shepherd* (Greek: *poimēn*) is used eighteen times in the NT, but translated only once as *pastor* (Eph. 4:11).⁴ The remaining uses of *poimēn* shed light on the nominal and verbal meanings when referring to the office of pastor/elder.⁵ Moisés Silva explains that Greek literature used *poimēn* literally and figuratively, even for “the divine shepherd.” Metaphorically, it expressed guidance and cherishing. While often describing the actual practice of herding sheep, the biblical term also finds prominent imagery for Yahweh shepherding his people Israel.⁶ Likewise, we find the NT picking up the shepherding imagery of Yahweh and applying it to the Good Shepherd in John 10. Jesus saw the distressed and dispirited multitudes “like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). Paralleling the OT picture of Yahweh, the Gospels fill out the work of Jesus *shepherding*, as he sought to draw near, protect, provide, and guide the shepherdless crowds.⁷ But the Good Shepherd goes one step further: he lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11–18), as prophesied by Zechariah (Zech. 13:7).⁸ From the OT use of *Shepherd* in reference to Yahweh to its NT use in Jesus the Good *Shepherd*, we begin to see the metaphor’s background for the NT office of pastor/shepherd.

Pastors as Reflections of a Model

Neglecting the OT use of Yahweh as Shepherd when thinking of the church office of pastor/elder/overseer impoverishes the term. As the patriarch Israel blessed Joseph’s sons, he called Yahweh “the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day” (Gen. 48:15). He expressed Yahweh’s care, guidance, and protection. Similarly, the psalmist describes the Lord’s power in delivering Israel from Egypt: “But He led forth His own people like sheep and guided

4. *NIDNTTE*, 4:84. The following translate ποιμήν (*poimēn*) as *pastor*: NASB, NKJV, HCSB, GNT, RSV, NIV, while the ESV retains *shepherd*.

5. When using *pastor* as an office, I do so with the understanding of its synonymous use with *elder* and *overseer*, both found more frequently in the NT, representing one church office, with deacon being the other office. Both offices are always referred to in plurality. For the synonymous use of the terms for the one office in the church, see Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, SBL 57, ed. Hemchand Gossai (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); Benjamin L. Merkle, *Forty Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2008), 54–56; Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2014), 45–57. The use of one article in Ephesians 4:11 for pastors and teachers indicates a better translation as “pastor-teacher.” See Merkle, *Forty Questions About Elders and Deacons*, 55–56.

6. *NIDNTTE*, 81–83; mostly “in Jeremiah (19x), Ezekiel (17x), Genesis (13x), and Zechariah (9x).” Family members were the primary shepherds in common OT usage. The Septuagint used the term eighty times.

7. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 78–84 (see Exod. 15:13; 33:15–16; Deut. 23:14; Pss. 78:19; 105:40–41).

8. *NIDNTTE*, 4:85.

them in the wilderness like a flock” (Ps. 78:52). Psalm 80:1 sounds the same note on leadership. “Oh, give ear, Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock.” No wonder there’s great comfort in Psalm 100:3, “We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.” The Lord leads, protects, comforts, and provides for his flock (Ps. 23). This divine leadership occasionally took place through human instruments. “You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (Ps. 77:20), giving hint toward the NT use of *shepherd*.

The biblical narratives utilize shepherd language to describe David’s kingship. In the ancient Near East, shepherding language “is attached most often to the institution of Kingship (both divine and human).”⁹ First, David is introduced as a literal shepherd (1 Sam. 16:11; 17:28, 34). Significantly, when David joined the tribes of Israel at Hebron on the occasion of anointing him as king, the leaders identified him as a shepherd/king. “And the Lord said to you, ‘You will shepherd My people Israel, and you will be a ruler over Israel’” (2 Sam. 5:1–2). Here, *shepherd* “originated with reference to middle-level shepherd contractors,” writes Laniak, showing the connection of the newly appointed king under the Lord God’s authority. “Israel received its desired king, but only on the condition that it understood his [the king’s] role as derivative from and dependent upon the rule of YWHW, the flock’s true Owner.”¹⁰ As the true Shepherd, the Lord gave Israel’s king responsibilities as an undershepherd in care, rule, and protection.

Four of the prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah—make extensive use of pastoral language (a) to describe the Lord God (Isa. 40:11; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:11–15; Zech. 9:16); (b) to rebuke unfaithful civil and religious leaders (Jer. 10:21; 23:1–2; Ezek. 34:1–10; Zech. 10:2–3); (c) to anticipate the Good Shepherd (Ezek. 34:23–24; Zech. 13:7–9); and (d) to assure that he would appoint faithful shepherds for his people (Jer. 3:15; 23:3–4). The future pastoral office remained clearly in view throughout the OT.

The emphasis on the Lord God as Shepherd communicates his presence, care, nurture, comfort, protection, guidance, leadership, and provision. *Any future use of the shepherding metaphor for those serving his flock must connect these characteristics to pastoral ministry.* With the NT pastoral office in view, Yahweh’s appointed “shepherds were not expected simply to tend a flock; they were serving its Owner.”¹¹ Pastors, consequently, must reflect the model of the Lord God as Shepherd over his flock.

Pastors as Promised Servants

Israel grew accustomed to kings who *neglected* defending the weak, judging impartially, leading in the ways of the Lord, and keeping personal

9. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 94.

10. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 102.

11. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 152.

desires in check. Likewise, the priestly religious leaders disregarded those they should have shepherded toward faithful dependence upon the Lord. Consequently, the Lord took action.

First, he proclaimed that he would rescue his flock. He took initiative to deliver his people from bondage, implying future salvific peace in the Lord's presence (Ezek. 34:11–16). This promise lays groundwork for the NT use of the church as God's flock (John 10:1–30; Heb. 13:20–21).

Second, he promised to send faithful shepherds to care for, protect, guide, and provide for his flock (Jer. 3:15). "I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them" (Jer. 23:4). In this eschatological passage, Jeremiah points to Jesus, the coming Messianic King, giving assurance that God would "raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land" (Jer. 23:5). The flock that the future shepherds would tend belongs to the promised Messiah. His promised shepherds find fulfillment in the church's pastoral office (elder/overseer). Kings and priests failed to shepherd God's flock. However, the new covenant foresaw a different dimension of shepherds who cared for the flock. Laniak observes, "It illustrates what we will call a 'divine preference for human agency.' Appointment by God implies calling, stewardship and accountability."¹² He calls forth the promised shepherds to faithfully tend his flock.

The divine promise of faithful shepherds for God's flock adds weightiness to pastors serving local congregations. God's promise of faithful shepherds came in connection with the promised Davidic Messiah (Jer. 23:5–6). No wonder Paul used such striking language to remind the Ephesian elders that they didn't merely have a job, but were shepherding people purchased at the cost of Jesus's bloody death: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). These men, along with countless pastors through the centuries, answered the prophetic promise to shepherd the blood-bought church of God.

Pastors as Appointed Instruments

"What does the exalted Christ give to the Church?" asks Andrew Lincoln, referring to Ephesians 4:11: "He gives people, these particular people who proclaim the word and lead."¹³ The apostolic and prophetic gifts served in the earliest days of the church, but they did not continue in the same manner beyond that period. Apostles and prophets laid the foundation of the church in every age, particularly by the special inspiration through which they gave us God's Word.¹⁴ This seems to have clearly been Paul's position (Eph. 2:19–

12. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 21–22.

13. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 249.

14. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 585.

22; 3:1–10). Once their work of laying the foundation of the gospel in the church took place, as Thomas Schreiner notes, “such authoritative apostles and prophets are superfluous.”¹⁵ Likewise, evangelists served to extend the gospel where the church had not been planted. The remaining gift (or gifts), “teaching shepherds,” continues in the pastoral office of elder/overseer.¹⁶ Paul and Peter get at the heart of what it means to shepherd God’s flock. Elders must demonstrate an aptitude to teach in order to exhort in sound doctrine. This explains what it means to be “teaching shepherds” (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–2; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). “The functional talk about eldership,” Derek Tidball rightly states, “is cast in the metaphor of shepherding.”¹⁷ Shepherds teach the flock.

The phrase “He gave gifts to men” followed by “And He gave some . . . as pastors and teachers” indicates the pastoral office as the divinely appointed instrument to serve the church throughout the ages (Eph. 4:8, 11). Paul places pastors in the context of God’s gifts to mature and care for the church. He considered the necessity of pastoral leaders when we see him *appointing* elders in the new churches on his first missionary journey (Acts 14:23). He reconfirmed the responsibility of elders to shepherd the Ephesian church (Acts 20:28). Then he left Titus in Crete to appoint elders in communities where churches had been established (Titus 1:5). Since the Lord of the church appointed pastors to care for the flock, Paul insisted on pastoral care for churches he planted.

Pastors as Undershepherds to the Chief Shepherd

Before the ascension, Jesus called for Simon Peter to care for his flock (John 21:15–17). Jesus asked three times if he loved him. With each probing question, Peter affirmed his love for the Lord Jesus Christ. With each affirmation, Jesus followed with the call to shepherd the church: “Tend My lambs. . . . Shepherd My sheep. . . . Tend My sheep.” The first term, *tend* (*boske*), was the activity of herdsmen feeding and tending their sheep. *Shepherd* (*poimaine*), similarly, means to tend or give care to the flock.¹⁸ “Tend My sheep” (*boske*) reinforces the feeding, shepherding, and nurturing Jesus called Peter to regularly engage in with the church.

Thirty or more years later, as a seasoned church leader and apostle, Peter humbly wrote the elders of the scattered churches (1 Peter 5:1–5). He called himself a “fellow elder,” thus identifying with the shepherding and leadership

15. Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 723–24.

16. Merkle, *Forty Questions About Elders and Deacons*, 46–53.

17. Derek Tidball, *Ministry by the Book: New Testament Patterns for Pastoral Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 189.

18. BDAG, βόσκω, 181; NIDNTTE, ποιμαίνω, 4:81–87. Each verb is a present active imperative.

responsibilities of those caring for churches throughout ancient Asia Minor (1 Peter 1:1). With this identity, he also looked *back* as a “witness of the sufferings of Christ” and *ahead* as “a partaker of the glory that is to be revealed.” In doing so, he anchored his exhortations for pastoring in the cross, resurrection, reign, return, and hope of Christ, modeling the same anchor for these pastors as they served the church. He spoke to them eye to eye as fellow shepherds of the purchased flock.

How were these elders to see their responsibilities? They were to actively shepherd the flock. Peter had no need to list every shepherding detail. These early elders understood Jesus was their model for shepherding: pursuing wandering sheep, showing compassion, teaching the Scriptures, feeding and providing for the needy, healing the broken, nurturing the lambs with tenderness, calling his own by name, and laying down his life for the sheep. Yahweh provided the same kind of protection, provision, compassion, guidance, and nurturing for Israel.

In contrast to Israel’s wicked shepherds, the elders were to exercise oversight “not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness, nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2–3). Peter pictures men eager to humbly serve God’s flock, not mistaking it for *their own flock* that they could do with as they pleased, but exercising oversight “according to God.” As Laniak puts it, “Humility is the distinguishing mark of their service (1 Pet. 5:5–6).”¹⁹ They could only be examples (*tupoi*) if they were fellow members of the flock, participating fully in the life of the local church. Laniak wisely reminds us, “He is a follower *before* he is a leader. He is a leader *because* he is a follower.”²⁰ These elders came face to face with the reality that they were pastors only as they sought to care for the flock in the way Jesus modeled shepherding. They, and all faithful pastors with them, recognize that undershepherds join the Chief Shepherd in caring for his flock (1 Cor. 3:5–9).

Summary

What is a *pastor*? A shepherd of God’s flock, certainly, but the Bible freights the metaphor with meaning by how it uses the term.

(1) Pastors are those who *reflect* the model the Lord God gave in shepherding Israel: namely, prioritizing living among the flock, protecting spiritually, providing rich food from God’s Word, and leading toward holiness, maturity, and unity.

19. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 234.

20. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 22 (emphasis original). He adds, “Israel’s kings had to understand that being a member of the flock of God was more fundamental than being an appointed shepherd over the flock” (114).

(2) Pastors are those whom the Lord *promised* through the prophets he would raise up to care for his people—the church—in contrast to the many bad shepherds in Israel.

(3) Pastors are those *appointed* by the Lord Jesus as instruments to serve his church in equipping, building up, teaching sound doctrine, speaking the truth in love, and leading toward unity and maturity.

(4) Pastors are those recognized as *undershepherds* with responsibility to faithfully carry out shepherding responsibilities, conscious that they will give an account to the Chief Shepherd.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How does the OT model of the Lord as Shepherd inform and shape understanding of the question, “What is a pastor?”
2. How does the rebuke and judgment leveled against false, unfaithful shepherds in Israel (civil and religious) affect your thinking about God’s call to shepherd his flock?
3. In what way is the office of pastor (elder) an appointed instrument of Christ for the church?
4. How did Peter’s experience in John 21:15–17 transform his future view of pastoring?
5. In what ways does seeing oneself as being a member of a church *first* affect the way a man should view his office as pastor?

