

San Juan Church of Christ

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What does God's Word Say About...

What Is a Pastor?

A question often asked of the churches of Christ is "Why do you not call your preacher 'Pastor'?" Paul wrote in the letter to Timothy "Retain the standard [pattern] of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus," (2 Tim. 1:13). Paul also told Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry," (2 Tim 4:5). Paul defined Timothy's responsibility to the church as an evangelist. Paul further defined those who teach God's word to be a preacher (Rom. 1:15) and a minister (2 Cor. 6:4). This is the pattern that has been established in God's word.

There are three verses in the New Testament that include the word "pastor" in various forms: Eph. 4:11, Acts 20:28, and 1 Pet. 5:2. In Eph. 4:11, Paul discusses the various roles that Christ placed in the church. He intends for "pastors and teachers" to serve in the church. The expression "pastors and teachers" identifies a single group. In Acts 20:28, Paul again refers to "pastors." Here, however, he uses the verb form of the word, which is translated to "feed." Pastors feed, tend, and protect the church. They are to do all of the things a shepherd would do for a flock [church]. Similarly, in 1 Pet.5:2, Peter encourages these servants [pastors] by saying, "Tend the flock of God." The word "tend" is the Greek verb for poimen which is "to act as a shepherd, or to tend and feed.

From the above verses we learn that pastors are to be shepherds caring for the church, and includes teaching. Paul identifies those who are pastors to "take heed...to all the flock" as "bishops" [overseers or administrators]. Likewise, Peter instructs these men to "oversee" the flock of God. This exhortation is addressed to "the elders".

The terms elder, bishop, and pastor are used of the same service in the church. Notice that in God's word there are to be two or more [a plurality] of these men who serve together over a single, autonomous congregation. The modern day "pastor" system is as much a departure from the New Testament pattern of church organization as is an ecclesiastical hierarchy. No "one" man can assume the role of the "pastor", whether by title or by practice. Neither can a congregation delegate one man to be the sole church manager as defined by the plurality of "pastors" and "elders."

When other passages are considered, we learn that pastors, bishops, or elders must meet scriptural qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Ministers, preachers, and evangelists of the gospel, primarily work in the study and teaching of the Word (1 Tim. 4:15-16, 2 Tim. 4:2-5). All Christians should be "ministers" [servants] of the gospel (1 Cor. 3:5) as well as "preachers" of the Word (Heb. 5:12). The whole congregation of Christians should be working together under the oversight of their elders so that the seed of the Word may grow according to the Lord's plan.

Please send any comments, questions, or requests for a Bible study to:
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