

## Question: "Bishops, Elders, and Pastors: What is the difference?"

To have a correct understanding of these terms, we must clear our minds of the modern concepts of church government. Once we do that, then we can search the scriptures to see how these terms were used in the early days of the Lord's church.

"Bishop," "elder" and "pastor" are only different designations for the same office or service. Paul "sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church" (Acts 20:17), and he referred to them as "bishops" or "overseers" (depending on your translation, Acts 20:28).

Paul addressed the Philippian epistle to "all the saints in Christ Jesus...with the bishops and deacons" (Ph 1:1). To the evangelist Timothy, Paul sent an epistle listing the qualifications of a "bishop" (1Ti 3:1-7).

Paul commanded the evangelist Titus to "appoint elders in every city" (implying more than one elder in every church), and in defining their qualifications he begins by saying, "the bishop must be..." (Ti 1:5, 7).

The term "pastors" is found in Ephesians 4:11. It refers to shepherds or herdsmen over a flock. The verb form of the word "pastor" is used metaphorically and translated "shepherd" to refer to the work of elders or bishops/overseers in the following passages:

- "Take heed to yourselves and to 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. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock" (Ac 20:28-29).
- "The elders who are among you I exhort...shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers..." (1Pe 5:1-3).
- A form of the word translated "pastor" also describes Jesus Christ, "the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls...the Chief Shepherd" (1Pe 2:25; 5:4).

In New Testament times, the term "pastor" did not refer to a single ruling preacher in a congregation, but to one of the overseers or elders in a church. Preachers or evangelists were responsible for teaching the gospel of Christ and building the local church from the apostles' blueprint (Ro 10:15; Ti 1:5).

There was a time when churches of Christ, in this country, understood and uniformly practiced these principles. Lately, however, we hear reports of congregations referring to their preacher as the "pastor." Now if he is qualified, and serves in that capacity with other qualified men, then there is no problem. But if he lacks even one of the qualifications, and if he serves as the single ruling authority in a congregation, then there is a problem, because it breaches the scriptural pattern.

Shortly after the revelation of God's word was complete, a period of departure began (Ac 20:30; 2Th 2:1-12). Men deviated from the apostles' divine pattern and set up their own order for the church. Bishops began to extend their authority beyond their own congregations. This resulted in a single bishop over each group, with regional bishops ruling over them. The final step in this departure from the divine pattern was to appoint a single mortal head for the church.

Such departures from the faith did not happen all at once, but slowly and over a period of many years (1Ti 4:1-4; Jd 3). But they would not happen at all if people would study their Bibles, search the Truth and honestly apply what they learn from that source (2Ti 3:16-17). Thanks for reading. Write us today for a free Bible correspondence course.