

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast: 24/25 August 2024

No.: T1369

Speaker: Paul Callicott

Christ's gifts to His church Pastors

[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction

At work I have been in a number of meetings where everyone thought they knew what the purpose or subject of the meeting was. However, after a few minutes it became clear that people had very different opinions and often conflicting ideas about the subject matter as well. These occurrences were particularly amusing when a more senior member of staff believed they knew what was going on but then found that they were the only one in the room who thought this way. Usually after a bit of clarification, things were sorted out, but on the odd occasion, the meetings were abandoned following confusion and uncertainty.

I feel a little bit like this with my topic today on pastors. I am fairly certain that those listening or reading this will already have their own opinions on the subject, whether it be the role, the title or even if churches should have someone who is called a pastor at all! Things would have perhaps been made easier if the English Standard Version or Darby translations of the Bible had been used, as they use shepherd instead of pastor. To use a nautical term, I do feel that I am in 'shoaly waters', in a thick fog, but perhaps this is a good thing as it forces me to look at things from a purely biblical viewpoint rather than relying on my own ideas. Let's just read the NKJV verse that this term has originated from – Ephesians chapter 4 verse 11:

“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.”

This talk is the third in a series of four looking at these roles. My plan is to look at the definition of the word pastor in this verse, then use that to see what this particular role involves and how we are to be impacted by it today. How the role is provided in practice is always going to be different and is probably the more controversial part. I hope to avoid controversy by focussing on the biblical points. If these points are met by any local church arrangements, then there can't be too much said against whatever that provision might be. So, let's start with the definition of the term “pastor” from our verse.

Pastor – A Definition

The Greek word for pastor in this passage is *poinēn* and it has the following definition in a typical Bible concordance: A shepherd, one who tends herds or flocks (not merely one who feeds them).

There are only 18 occurrences of this Greek word in the New Testament. It is only in our verse in Ephesians that the English term “pastor” is used. The remaining 17 occurrences use the term “shepherd” and most of them are for the literal use of the term shepherd. Our verse in Ephesians is also the only time that a figurative use of shepherd is not referring to the Lord Himself. We can start to see why some translations use the term shepherd rather than pastor!

From the Bible concordance definition we are given an interesting point about the meaning of this term. This shepherd is not simply there to feed the sheep. There are numerous verses in the Bible that would point towards feeding as a reference to teaching. Such a statement therefore shows that this particular role goes beyond that of delivering sermons or correcting wrong doctrine. We are introduced here to an idea of someone who guides as well as feeds. My concordance goes on to state that the role also involves tender care and vigilant superintendence, or oversight.

We would therefore not be out of place to say that there is a correlation between this pastor role and the role of overseers or elders that are often spoken of in the epistles. If we look at two other passages of the Bible, we are given more of a basis to link these two roles together. The first is Acts 20 and the last section of the chapter from verse 17 where Paul speaks to the Ephesian elders. I only want to consider verses 17 and 28 for the context of this subject:

“From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. ... Therefore 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.”

The next is 1 Peter chapter 5, verses 1 to 4:

“The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.”

In these two passages we have that link made to elders and flocks which we have considered in our pastor definition. We can be confident that this is the idea behind it, and we could happily replace the word “pastor” for “elder”, “overseer” or “bishop” as they are all referring to the same type of role. For the sake of time and simplicity I will stick to “elder” rather than referring to multiple translations. Having followed this pathway we have the benefit now of opening up more of the Bible to understand what this pastor role is.

In addition to these, we can consider again that the Greek term we are looking at in Ephesians is the only time, when it is being used figuratively, that it is not referring to the Lord Jesus Himself. We know that the Lord Jesus is considered to be the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd, and the Chief Shepherd. As would be expected, He provides us with the best example as to the kind of role this is within the Church. His shepherding work, particularly when you consider His disciples, really provides us the best possible case study for what sort of additional care this role entails.

I would suggest that the example of the Lord Jesus is also the best case for whether such a role is still necessary in the Church today. I know that there are those who would argue that these roles are no longer needed because we are a more mature Church 2000 years later. We also have the Bible to provide us with the guidance we need. These are indeed good points and there is certainly some truth to them with various functions and gifts, especially when we consider apostles. However, I can't help but feel that the Church will always have a need to provide these levels of care and guidance. There are so many references to us being like sheep that it seems that there will always be a need for shepherds to guide us along the way. Perhaps that is why the subject is taken up so readily in the New Testament books.

Pastor – A job description

There are numerous verses of the New Testament that cover such a role of shepherd and elder. That is without even trying to look back to the Old Testament examples! But there are some general points I believe are still worth making – four to be precise. Let us then read Ephesians 4, verse 12, finishing at verse 16:

“For the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”

From the reading of this passage one of the clear tasks for the pastor role is the ability to teach. Now the next topic in this series is that of the teacher so we do have a bit of crossover. This is more to do with imparting understanding and knowledge. We have here the need to equip the saints for the work of service. We have mention of the need to guard against wrong doctrine. In 1 Timothy at the end of verse 2 of chapter 3 it says elders must be ‘able to teach.’ Verse 6 says they are not to be a novice or recent convert. Titus includes the need to give instruction in sound doctrine in verse 9 of chapter 1. There is a requirement to have a thorough understanding of the Word of God so that they can face the challenges of any attacks of the Word of God, whether it be from inside or outside of the Church. There may be better teachers of the word in terms of engaging people in the truths, but here we see that there is also a need for those who hold firm to what has been passed down from the apostles and prophets. How much this is needed in our day when attacks are being made on the truths of Christianity. I read in a commentary recently that many higher educated Christians are afraid to admit that they hold to the fundamentals such as Christ’s virgin birth and His resurrection through fear of being thought of as simple or stupid. Pastors are to blaze a trail against this with conviction about the fundamental truths of Christianity.

This is to be tied closely together with the godly example they are to give as guides. When we consider the passages in 1st Timothy and Titus regarding elders, we see that most of the criteria are regarding the behaviour and witness of the individuals who would fulfil this role. We see here that it is not just the doctrine and teaching but the guide by lifestyle that is so important. This is not surprising given that this is exactly what we see in the Lord Jesus. He not only spoke the words of God but fulfilled every detail of it in his walk as well. Pastors are to follow the example of the Lord in striving to live out their walk in accordance with the teaching of Scripture. The shepherds of Bible times would lead the sheep from the front, showing the way to go. This is the expectation for Pastors who seek to serve the Lord in this way. In the Epistles, we are warned of those who are looking only for their own promotion and benefit. 2nd Peter chapter 2 is a prime example of this. Linked with this self-serving attitude is a tendency to follow immoral practices and to lead others into that same immorality. This again highlights how important it is for Pastors to live a life which is in keeping with the Bible requirements.

A key part of the pastoral role is providing care for other believers. We see words such as gentle and hospitable in the description of elders in 1 Timothy chapter 3. Verse 5 of that chapter asks how an elder can care for the church if his household is not in order? If we were to think of a guide for a walking group across a difficult mountain range, how important is that aspect of care! Knowing those who need extra support, understanding when some need a rest for a while, or even reining in any who are being headstrong and potentially heading for disaster. Pastors, through

having this care for believers, will be more able to see the needs, even down to the teaching needed, for those in a local church.

Finally, we move to the idea of protecting and defending. This again is a clear aspect of the verses in Ephesians 4 we have looked at. There are so many warnings in the New Testament about the efforts from inside and outside of the church to undermine the truths of Christianity. Titus speaks of stopping the mouths of those who speak wrong things. There is to be active defending against all sorts of new ideas aimed at appealing to weaker believers and their protection from these things is clearly necessary. There is also the aspect of coming alongside those who are heading in the wrong direction which could lead to so much destruction in their lives. The shepherd in Psalm 23 had a rod and staff. In this sense the rod wards off the predators from the sheep, and the staff is used to keep them on the right pathway. Both are provided with that idea of protecting the sheep to ensure they follow the path to the pastures.

Looking at these four things, we get a picture of the work a pastor is involved with, and it is no small task! There are five roles given in verse 11 of Ephesians 4. It is very clear that it was never meant to be a one-man-fits-all thing and quite frankly it is impossible and perhaps unwise for one person to even try to achieve, save the Lord Himself. In the verse it uses the word some, so we know that it is not for everyone who becomes a believer, but neither does it say one. Such a role would suggest a plurality and given the things we have just looked at that plurality is necessary. Even those who are pastors need to be taught, guided, cared for and protected at times.

Pastor – A responsibility

The role of Pastor is a big responsibility as well as being a gift to the church. If we look back through the history of the Church – in terms of the presence of established churches in Christendom – we quickly see how this role has been changed from a gift to something of a hindrance and snare. Such roles have wrongfully been used for financial or political gain, as well as some appalling instances of abuse of power for sinful and deplorable actions against the very people that should have benefited from their ministry.

That is why it is so important to consider the real responsibility behind the role. I would bring out three key things from the passage we have read in Ephesians to help us understand the responsibility Pastors have:

1. For Christ – it is important for every person who is working for the Lord to remember who the primary Person is they are looking to please. I remember seeing a television programme about a mega church somewhere in the world. It was frightening to see that the children were singing more about the greatness of their pastor than anything to do with the Lord Jesus. The Spirit's role is very much to do with magnifying Christ Jesus. If that is the Spirit's role, it stands to reason that a Pastor should be doing the same.
2. For the growth of believers – the activities of Pastors are to bring to maturity the believers to whom a Pastor has been gifted. In those verses there is much said about equipping, edifying, growing, and working. None of it is really concerned about Pastors. If a pastor is working such that everyone reveres him and looks only to that person for all their guidance, then it is not in keeping with the idea of this passage of the Bible. All believers in a local church should be encouraged to be more like Christ in their lives, not just the one at the lectern.
3. For Christ's flock – this last point is similar to the first but more pointed at a problem that can sometimes occur, where a pastor forgets who the flock actually belongs to. It is a bit like the beginning of Corinthians where Paul speaks about those who were of Apollos, or Paul. Sometimes, pastors can get a following or desire a following, and people become keen to associate with one pastor or another. But a pastor does not own the flock to which

they are gifted. They are all part of the same flock. There is one Good Shepherd, and we all belong to Him.

A final thought on responsibilities before I move on is this – despite the gravity of taking up such a role within a local church – if people are called to these things, they should take them up wholeheartedly. This is the case for all these roles from Ephesians 4 verse 11. In a world where we are encouraged to look after number one, the life of service for the believer is often forgotten, and there are many who should have taken up a role who have decided it is too much hassle or work. But we must always bear in mind that it is also a sin not to do what you should be doing for God.

Pastor – Our Responsibility

It will be useful to spend some time considering our reaction to those who hold such a role. From the verses in Ephesians 4 there is a clear outcome expected in all of us who are subject to such believers – even those who are considered to be pastors themselves.

There is a response we should look to avoid. In our society today, we tend to expect things to be provided for us, and sadly this has crept into the Church. It may be then that having considered these things, there is a wish to march over to whomever may have such a role in our local church and ask that things change to match what we think should be provided. I have specifically avoided going into detail about how this role is to be implemented in a church, looking more at what is to be covered rather than the how. Just because that brother you thought was doing the role is not fulfilling it as you would like or expect, does not mean that they are not fulfilling one of the roles in our verse today. The full-time pastor may also actually be a full-time teacher or evangelist and that is perfectly fine. Your response should be first to give thanks to God for them as they are a gift from the Lord Jesus Himself – yet another gift that you have done nothing to deserve. It may be that some of these roles are missing from a local church, but this requires some prayerful consideration about how they could be provided, rather than criticising the area of gift that is being exercised. It may even be that those who are looking for someone else to do something, are actually those who should be filling that gap themselves!

But let us look to another point as this is more likely to help us avoid responding badly to pastors, and this is having the proper respect and honour towards them. The verses I go to for this are 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, verses 12 and 13.

“And we urge you, brethren, to recognise those who labour among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. Be at peace among yourselves.”

These verses are self-explanatory, but they are probably some of the hardest things to do. If we treat the local church we attend as some kind of service-provider we will inevitably begin to criticise those who provide these things for us, following the ever-prevailing attitude that we can demand things be provided just the way we want them. But pastors are not shop owners where you can provide a review at the end of their service. Naturally there is always room for improvement in any believer, but when we consider those things that a pastor is providing, then we should have a more thankful mindset towards those who are providing them for us.

In light of this, I would give a short mention to the notion of financial provision for those doing such a role. There is little said about such things in the Bible as far as I have seen, but the notion is there. 1 Timothy chapter 5, verse 17 speaks about double honour particularly for those who both rule and consider doctrine. This verse seems to be a consideration of a financial provision for them. We cannot just assume that because in many cases the apostle Paul did not accept any payment that his example is therefore the norm. He only did it to avoid any issues with his

preaching. But the fact is that there were times when he did lay aside his tent making work because he was being provided for. The role of pastor is hard work and takes time. It can also be done better if more time is available, and that can be achieved by financial support. There is no set way of how this is to be provided, but if this decision has been taken then we must continue to ensure that suitable arrangements are made to remove the burden of financial worry from pastors. Many pastors are likely to avoid asking for more when they are struggling, so if we are esteeming them and giving them double honour, let us ensure that financially supporting them is not just a one-off event.

This then brings me to the final point with regard to our responsibility and it is linked to those verses which we have read in Ephesians 4. We have to consider the purpose of a pastor's role. It is not there simply to provide us with someone who will do the work for us. Pastors are not there as a result of some popularity contest about how well they speak compared to others or perhaps even how amusing or well delivered their sermons may be. There is a purpose, and it is to bring us on so that we may all be living in a way pleasing to God. The ideal would be for there to be no need of a pastor because we are all so in tune with the Lord Jesus, living lives that emulate His. After all, those descriptions and expectations for elders in Timothy and Titus are worthwhile pursuits for all believers, not just the ones who may have a desire to take up that role.

We must therefore challenge ourselves on two fronts. The first is to allow pastors to bring us on to grow towards this aim of being more Christ like! If our time is spent criticising their performance and demanding a service, it is unlikely that this is being effected in our lives. But the other possibility is that we sit back and bask in the glow of 'our pastor' never worrying about how we are doing because he is doing a grand job of leading us from the front. There is likely to be something wrong if either of these things are the case. Let us change our attitudes towards this role to see these gifts from God are there to bring us on to be more like Christ.

Conclusion

I hope these thoughts have been helpful. I could never really have covered the whole subject of Pastors or all of the issues that come with it in the time available, but it is still worthwhile to look at some of the Scriptures that cover them, even if it is only to give thanks to God that we are given so much provision in our Christian lives here in this world. And may we all have that desire to be more like our precious Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Christ's Gifts to His Church - Pastors, talk number T1369.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.