

“Pastor”

“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it does.”

- Inigo Montoya

Take the word “Pastor.” Close your eyes. What picture comes into your mind when you think on that word? If a picture of a man standing in front of and speaking to a congregation of sitting people came to mind then you are like the vast majority in the US, and actually, in the world, for that is precisely what “Pastor” has come to mean.

But what does the word actually mean? Well in English – that is actually what it means.

Here is Wikipedia - A ***pastor*** is an ordained leader of a Christian congregation.

And here is Google’s Dictionary result for pastor:

/ˈpastər/

noun

noun: **pastor**; plural noun: **pastors**

1.

a minister in charge of a Christian church or congregation.

synonyms: priest, minister (of

religion), parson, clergyman, cleric, chaplain, padre, father, ecclesiastic, man of God, man of the cloth, churchman, preacher; More

But what did the writers of the Bible mean when they wrote it? In fact, what word did they write? What happened to that word? And what has happened to its meaning over the years? And how has the change of its meaning impacted the way we view church?

Let’s start by playing a game of “telephone.” You know the game you played as a kid where one person whispers something into another’s ear and then that person does the same into another’s. What comes out at the end of a long line is remarkably different than what went in. Let’s play this game with three people who all speak different languages.

The first person to hear the word is you, and you are Greek. The word whispered in your ear is ***poimen***. Immediately an image of a *lowly, rather funny dressed man in a robe with a staff in his hands watching over and guiding a flock of sheep* comes to mind. Why? Because that is precisely what the word means.

So, you turn to whisper the word to the next person in the telephone line. But wait.... this person is Roman and does not speak your “Greek” but speaks Latin instead. But you grew up amongst Romans and are bilingual, so this is no problem, so you use the Latin word - ***pastor***. Your Roman friend smiles, for immediately an image of a *lowly, rather funny dressed man in a*

robe with a staff in his hands watching over and guiding a flock of sheep comes to this person's mind. Easy enough.

Now this Latin speaker turns to the person next to him. Oh no! An American. Mono lingual. This Roman cannot speak this person's American language. So, he pauses.... thinks....is not sure what to do...., so just gives up and uses the Latin word "pastor." But this confuses the American for this is another language – a completely foreign word. No image whatsoever comes to mind. The definition of this word is therefore left entirely to the American's imagination. So he envisions not a lowly position, but an honorable position of a leader of the people not unlike a King over a small city (with either a steeple or a cross on top) who is dressed in the finest fashion of his subjects, and this honorable king stands above and in front of his sitting subjects of this small kingdom delivering eloquent speeches persuading them to give to the city/state and to carry out the king's will. And this is the definition passed onto the next American – who then travels the world passing on this same definition through his missionary activities. (Now this is not exactly how it happened – but you get the point)

So *poimen* is now the "ordained leader over a believing group of people and in charge of a "Church"" (which is another word that got mangled as it went through the telephone game). So really not at all unlike a King over a small city state (a church), or like some in America today - the King over a small empire of city states and he delivers his speeches to influence the thousands to believe the things he believes and to do the things he wants them to. It has become rather a prestigious title that means a man ordained and chosen above the rest so as to lead them.

Outside of Latin-based languages, nowhere on this planet does this word "Pastor" still conjure up the image that came to mind when the Greek word *poimen* was used amongst those speaking Greek. The word "pastor" in English simply does not mean "shepherd" anymore, nor do most Christians really want it to. If we really wanted it to, we would simply use the word "shepherd" but we don't. Why? Because the word "shepherd" conjures up images of a rather *lowly, funny dressed man watching over and guiding a flock of sheep*. Who wants that?

In all my years of pastoring no one once called me ***Shepherd Jonathan*** or ***Shepherd Martin***. Why? Because that would really not be a term of respect at all. But "Pastor Jonathan." "Pastor Martin." Now there is respect! Pure music to my ears!

I once actually told a young man to simply call me Jonathan rather than Pastor Martin (the music was bit too loud), and he said he had to call me Pastor "out of respect." It was the way he was raised, he said. You see, it has indeed become a *title of respect* – not unlike rabbi, father, leader.

I can't help but here Jesus say something at this point: "*But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is,*

Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.” (Matthew 23:1-12)

In fact, it could be argued that the term “Pastor” has actually come to be a title meaning all three of these – Teacher, Father, and Leader.

Let’s go back to poimen and see how it is actually used in the scriptures.

How “Poimen” is used:

Pastor as Verb. To Shepherd. There are so many people in any congregation that do this – they shepherd people. They care for and nurture people. They are skilled in how to love the flock. This is not confined to male or female, young or old. Someone who shepherds people wants their best and like Jesus lays down his life for them. The elders of the church are commanded to “shepherd” the flock.

1 Peter 5 says:

Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

Pastor as a Noun. Shepherd. In Ephesians this word is seen in combination with the word teacher. *He gives some as prophets, some as prophets, some as evangelists and some as shepherds/teachers to equip the saints.* It seems as though these two roles of Shepherd and teacher are actually to be conjoined. Teachers who don’t shepherd can hurt people by blasting them from the pulpit thinking that is their God given right as a teacher. And shepherds who can’t teach at all have a hard time directing the people for they can’t give directions very well. I have done and had a lot of observation on this point. There are many who love to teach the Bible but do not “Shepherd” well. I have watched them hurt their staff, and push people away by using the pulpit to “take them on” from up front, instead of talking to them personally, kindly, and gently (gentleness – a fruit of the Spirit and a condition for elders). I really have come to believe this is why Paul puts the word *pastor* (shepherd) and *teacher* together. It is like Paul says, *“If I speak with the tongues of men and angels ... but have not love, I am nothing.”* I have watched too many gifted teachers who are not restrained by love and the desire to shepherd, and it never is good.

I really have come to believe that when James says - *“Let not many of you be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly”* - that James is

talking about the teacher being judged more strictly for his actions, not merely or even primarily for his teaching. Just from watching churches for more than 50 years – teachers who don't shepherd, needlessly and often hurt people, and often seek to control the flock with fear and intimidation – all the while loving the title "Pastor." The church cannot, nor should it try to ever endure a teacher who is also not a loving example. So, pastor/teacher – shepherd/teacher – Paul put them together for a very good reason.

Several things "pastor" never is in scripture, but often is in our culture.

Pastor never as a Title or Office. It might surprise many to find out that Pastor is neither an office nor a title in the scripture. It is simply a person who does the work of shepherding the flock. Someone who loves, cares for, and sacrifices on behalf of the people.

Pastor never as a first name. Today Pastor sometimes serves as a first name. Leaders of churches answer often answer the phone "Pastor Dave, Can I help you." I try to imagine a CEO's of company answering the phone "CEO Prescott" can I help you?" Or a school teacher answering the phone at home, "Teacher Jones,...." But for some reason "Pastor" has become a title and first name that church leaders love and train their congregations to use when referring to them. Let's change the name back to the original "Shepherd Martin .. can I help you." It just does not seem it was originally intended to be a first name. It seems ironic that some of the least "shepherd-like" church leaders - I have personally observed - love to sign their signature with the name *Pastor* out in front.

Pastor never with a "The" in front of it. Remember every church has many people who shepherd others, so therefore there are many "pastors." The bible never uses the phrase, **The Pastor** of the Church in Corinth, or **The Pastor** of the Ephesian Church, or says "Titus, the pastor of the church in Crete..."

Pastor simply does not mean: the leader of a church. We often say he is the pastor of Grace Church, or of First Lutheran. This concept of "the pastor" or for that matter "the single or dominant leader" of a particular church is simply not found in the New Testament. We read our current leadership back into the scriptures rather than the other way around. Yep, never do we see "Senior" or "Lead" or any other word in front of the word. Wait I repent, Jesus put the word "the" in front of it and another word as well, He said "I am the Good Shepherd." And Peter calls Jesus the "The Chief Shepherd." He alone is "the" and he is "the good" and "the Chief (Senior, Lead)" - and apart from Jesus, we simply never see it used this way.

Pastor never with an "of" following it. I often hear "I am the pastor of worship", or worship pastor. "I am the pastor of outreach" or outreach pastor. Now I am not saying this is wrong or dangerous, it is just that there is really only one kind of pastor, a pastor "of people." A shepherd "of sheep." If the "worship pastor" lords it over his people – he is not a pastor at all, no matter how well he sings or plays guitar. There are many who claim this title, that was never intended to be a title, who never do the loving work of a shepherd. Hey, if you are going to claim this as a title, then at least do what a Shepherd does!

Pastor never meaning “the guy who gets paid.” Shepherding is something many do, and not just the guy who gets paid to do so.

Never a “Divine Right of Pastor” I once heard a pastor say, “do you think it is me who is leading this church? No, it is God!” This sounds good. Humble. “Not me - but God.” But it is a way of saying “Don’t you dare disagree with the decisions around here, for they are God’s decisions.” The only problem is, countless times in the last year in the last year, I have heard about one elder board after another who have resigned for having propped up bullying, sexually unethical, fiscally lawless “pastors.” And why? Because these leaders were so successful at preaching and bringing in huge crowds and tithes.

I have heard the word “pulpit” used almost synonymously with “throne” – the place of authority and power. The word “pulpit” is not even in the scriptures, yet it seems men invented a word and place for authority to sit in the church – the “pastor in his pulpit.” We just don’t see such things in scripture.

True shepherds don’t demand obedience. They earn trust. Real life shepherds know this. Sheep are naturally fearful, skittish, and shy. By gentleness and kindness, and over much time of living with the flock, the shepherd wins the trust of the sheep. Any shepherd who rules the sheep with fear and intimidation - demanding to be followed because God has appointed him to the position of shepherd - scatters the sheep. And it will be a long time before they can be wooed back again. We see this in Paul’s writing even as an apostle. He reminded the Ephesians how he lived and loved among them and shepherded them. He did not demand submission because of the divine right of apostleship.

Acts 20:31 says:

So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

And to the Thessalonians, Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:9:

Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

Just as it is not a husband’s job to demand that his wife submit, but rather for him to live in such a way that makes submission easy and safe, so too is the one who shepherds. Shepherds are called to serve, not demand subservience. It is not an “on top” position, but one who is followed because of his or her humble self-sacrificing love. If people are having a hard time trusting us enough to follow us, we must first look at ourselves – not simply demand divine allegiance.

And again, Paul spends a huge chunk of his second letter to Corinth reminding them not of his “divine right” but of the right he earned by suffering for their sakes and by pouring himself out for them. By serving them through his suffering! His authority grew out of his service, not by his shaming into submission. As 2 Corinthians 4:5 sums this view of leadership developed in Chapter 3:

For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.

Paul argues not that he is apostle, but that he is and has been their servant! Wow. And this was something they could not deny.

Some have argued that the role of “Pastor” is God’s chosen person, and it shows God’s anointing to lead and take charge. Again, this is saying the role of pastor is like that of King in the Old Testament. The problem with saying such things is the fact that ***all believers are anointed*** for ministry and not just those in senior leadership. The shepherd has a role - not a title, not a throne, not a power position, not a divine right to rule - but a position of humility and service. And from that position he earns trust and people willingly follow his gentle voice.

Proper Biblical Shepherding

Pastoring/shepherding as a requirement for elders and teachers.

Elders and teachers are required to pastor/shepherd others. It is not OK to be called Pastor or Elder and to not be willing or capable of shepherding others. Many know how to stand in front of the masses and deliver amazing speeches, convicting sermons, or mesmerizing talks, but are also incapable of modeling Jesus by the simple shepherding of the staff or people they most closely work with. These people should not be leading the flocks of God. Instead, let them record podcasts, write motivational books, or get on the radio to express their ideas. They may even be great at coming alongside true shepherds to help train them to communicate or cast vision. Let them onto a team of visionaries in the church – but they should not be leading the flock. Why? Simply because they are not shepherds.

Instead of leading the flock with joy even through the valley of the shadow of death, these men create cultures that are “valleys of fear.” Instead of leading the sheep to pasture where the flock can feed themselves, they create a dependency, and the flock stays spiritual infantile and is kept on the bottle and grain fed only. People are not allowed to grow and flourish and use their gifts. They are kept tightly under control and never let off such a leader tether.

The Shepherd serves the flock, and not the other way around.

Because of what our culture has made the word “pastor” to mean, the church is tragically attracting narcissists who want to be kings over their own small city state, rather than men and women who are motivated by love who lay down their lives for the sheep that they serve.

Here is a startling find that haunts me. Narcissism Personality Disorder (NPD) occurs at a rate 500% to 600% higher in the pastorate than in the general population. How could this possibly be true among those who are called to humbly shepherd the flock?

In the West, our church’s search committees and elders look for the strongman from outside the church. This was not quite the way of Jesus. Jesus looked for lowly and weak and then broke them by humbling them further. Like the fisherman Peter who denied Jesus three times – and the others who were even more cowardly and went to hide rather than follow Jesus to his trial. It was these broken and weak men who launched the church of Jesus.

But we look for gifted educated visionaries with Ph.Ds. and a string of unbroken success. We search for those who look good and perform well in front of the sitting masses who awe the subjects with their human gifts and talents. Paul – the most amazing church planter – was not impressive in front of crowds. Jesus looked for people who would be Pastors / Shepherds – who would care for the flock. But many churches seek Pastor/kings).

A seminary’s best advertisement is its graduates. If a graduate goes on to have not only one mega-church (city-state) but a whole network of churches (a small kingdom of city state) that pipe in his face and his sermons and is producing podcasts that go everywhere – Wow! What a great advertisement for the seminary he graduated from! That is exactly where the many young aspiring pastor/kings want to go. Why? I hate to ask, but is it so they can become famous and have their own subjects to reign over. Is our system attracting many of the wrong kind of people who want the title “pastor” but who have not even the slightest capacity to shepherd? Instead of producing lowly humble shepherds who will lay down their lives, are we are attracting those who would be king. In a day and age that we see church after church firing their bully pastors, we must really stop and ask ourselves how we came to hire such a person in the first place. The people still cry out for a king!

So not too long after hiring a person for their natural teaching and preaching gifts, many churches realize, that people in the church are being hurt by the lack the character and capacity of this talented individual to love others. But instead of asking this uncaring person to leave, the decision then is sometimes made to hire another - someone more loving so they can pad the uncaring but talented “pastor” with a real “shepherd” who is a gentle and caring person who will give himself up for the sheep. ***This padding simply does not work.*** A loving person – whose job it is to pick up the beat-up pieces of the people just mown over – will eventually have to confront the powerful and talented “people-mowing machine.” Such a person should never be padded. If a person is leading a church with eloquence and charisma but does not love others – he is nothing. It is time to act on behalf of the sheep. It does not matter the color of his woolen suit. So says the word of God.

So, you who teach - learn to shepherd! Do not simply hire someone who is relational and “pastoral” so they can pad you sharp edges. *Let not many of you be teachers, knowing that as such you will incur a stricter judgement.*

Those with narcissistic tendencies don’t flock to being “shepherds”, but for many reasons they flocking to being “pastor.” The position of “shepherd” rarely goes to one’s head and produces narcissists, but the position or “pastor” does. Something is broken in the church. This brokenness is both in those who are leading, and in any institution that would recruit such leaders.

Our seminaries are good for training teachers and eloquent preachers who stand in front of the masses with their oratory prowess, but are they teaching men and women to shepherd? I am not so sure.

So please, before you call someone “Pastor.” Think. Before you go by the title. Think! Words mean things. Titles have meaning. Jesus warned us against the use of titles because they are loaded with meaning we were never meant to ascribe to ourselves nor have others ascribe to us. Titles can make us think too highly of ourselves, have others think too highly of us, or they can make us the target of all criticism – none of which is good.

So Be careful of the title you take.