

# Jot & Tittle

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## What Do Pastors Do?

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There's a well-worn adage that pastors work only one day a week. The corollary to this concept, in reference to sermons, is that they work too long on that day! These humorous quips raise the legitimate question, "What do pastors do?" While there is room for a variety of styles and personalities in the ways in which different pastors fulfill their pastoral calling, there are certain responsibilities of that calling that the New Testament clearly spells out. Based on the titles for pastors, the examples of pastoral ministry in the early church, and the New Testament commands to pastors, the pastor's "job description" is recorded in the pages of Scripture.

### *New Testament Titles for Pastors*

There are three distinct titles for pastors in the New Testament—"elder" (Greek *presbuteros*, also translated "presbyter"), overseer (Greek *episcopos*, also translated "bishop"), and shepherd (Greek *poimen*, also translated "pastor"). These three titles clearly refer to the same office in the New Testament. The apostle Paul gathered the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:17), referred to them as overseers and instructed them to serve faithfully as shepherds (Acts 20:28). He later uses the terms elder and overseer interchangeably when instructing Titus to appoint spiritual leaders in the church at

Crete (Titus 1:5-7). The apostle Peter challenged church elders to serve as shepherds and overseers (1 Peter 5:1-2). Elder, overseer, and pastor therefore refer to the same office in the church. It was only later in the church's history that these terms began to be attributed to distinct offices. "Although bishop and presbyter (elder) begin to be separated in the beginning of the second century, yet in the fourth century when the leaders of the church began to examine the apostolic records more critically, the identity of the two was asserted by such distinguished scholars as Hilary, Jerome, Chrysostom, and others."<sup>1</sup> These three terms shed light on the duties of pastors.

The term "elder" emphasizes spiritual maturity. As elders, pastors are to lead their churches with spiritual maturity and the wisdom that flows from that maturity. It is a term of dignity, responsibility, and authority. Elders are specifically instructed to provide sound teaching, maintaining the doctrinal strength of the church (1 Timothy 5:17). The term "overseer" indicates that pastors are to provide oversight and direction to the church. As overseers, they guard and guide the church. "The administrative position of the elder is clear from the title *overseer*."<sup>2</sup> The term "shepherd," more often referred to as "pastor" based on the Latin word for shepherd, emphasizes the leadership and care that pastors provide for their churches. Shepherds were responsible for leading, feeding, and protecting their flocks. As spiritual shepherds, pastors are to lead in the church's ministries, feed the church through the teaching and preaching of God's Word, and protect the church from influences both within and without that might bring harm to the flock.

### *New Testament Examples of Pastoral Ministry*

The New Testament records several instances of how pastors functioned in the early church. In Acts 15:6 the elders of the church in Jerusalem were instrumental in addressing the theological issue of legalism as it relates to salvation. Pastors are to guard theological truth within a local congregation. In Acts 15:22-27 the elders led the church in its decision making process and in selecting individuals to serve as messengers. Pastors are to guide their churches in regard to its ministry direction and the identification of ministry leaders within

the church. The elders in Acts 21:17-19 received Paul and his companions and listened to their report about God's work on the mission field. Pastors are to have a direct influence in the missions activities of the church and receive reports from those whom the church has sent out into the mission field. Ephesians 4:11-13 says that Jesus Christ has appointed pastors, among other leaders in the church, to equip God's people for service and guide the church to maturity and unity. First Timothy 5:17 describes elders as those who direct the affairs of the church and who preach and teach God's Word. James 5:14 says that elders are responsible for praying for the sick and anointing them with oil when requested.

In addition to these examples of pastoral functions in the New Testament, the list of qualifications for pastors provides insight into pastoral responsibilities. First Timothy 3:1-7 indicates that pastors must show hospitality, teach, and give careful attention to their marriage and children. Titus 1:6-9 reinforces these functional aspects of pastors as well as the character qualifications for this office.

### *New Testament Commands to Pastors*

The role of pastor in the church is clearly evident in the New Testament commands that are directed specifically to those who have been called to this office. "It is surprising to discover that throughout the whole New Testament there are only five passages containing commands to pastors. But these five passages come packed with pertinent data, making the pastor's responsibilities clear."<sup>3</sup>

The first command passage is Acts 20:28-32. Here, Paul instructs the elders from the church at Ephesus to "keep watch" over themselves and their flock (v. 28), and to "be on guard" (v. 31). These commands indicate that pastors are the primary human guardians of the church, protecting the church from doctrinal error, spiritual opposition, and disharmony in the flock.

First Timothy 4:11-16 contains a number of commands that Paul addressed to Timothy and, consequently, to pastors in general. Pastors are to command and teach spiritual truth. They are to set an example of godliness. Pastors are to be devoted to the public reading

and exposition of Scripture. They are also to guard their own spiritual lives and doctrine, taking time for personal spiritual nurture.

In 2 Timothy 4:1-5 Paul instructs Timothy and all pastors to "preach the Word." Through the ministry of the Word of God, pastors are responsible to "correct, rebuke and encourage" the church patiently and lovingly. In addition, pastors are to "endure hardship" and be involved in evangelistic activities.

Titus 2:15 simply commands pastors to teach God's truth as well as to encourage and rebuke God's people as necessary. Pastors, according to this verse, are to operate out of their God-given authority and to give no reason for anyone to despise them or their work.

Finally, 1 Peter 5:1-4 instructs pastors to "be shepherds of God's flock" that is under their care. Again, the idea of shepherding includes leading, feeding, and protecting the flock.

What do pastors do? Based on the New Testament terms, examples, and commands relating to pastors they carry a significant responsibility in the work of the church. They are to lead the church both by example and by instruction. They are to feed the flock, teaching, preaching, and defending the Word of God. They are to protect the church from harm, disharmony, doctrinal error, and personal impurity. They are to participate in the work of evangelism, missions, and prayer. These responsibilities can only be met by God's gracious working in the lives of those whom He has called to such service. "The work of the ministry is too demanding and difficult for a man to enter it without a sense of divine calling . . . . Nothing less than a definite call from God could ever give a man success in the ministry."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Saucy, Robert L. *The Church in God's Program*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, pp. 141-142.

<sup>2</sup> Saucy, p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> Goodnough, Dana L. "The Motivational Significance of New Testament Commands to Pastors." (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Sugden, Howard F. and Wiersbe, Warren W. *Confident Pastoral Leadership*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1973, p. 9.