

“Are You The Pastor?”

by Bill Crews

Many people know that the churches of Christ do not refer to their preachers as “pastors” (most do not know this), but among those who do know, very few know why. Since the overwhelming majority of both Catholic and Protestant congregations have “a pastor,” and most people automatically identify a preacher who is working with a church as “the pastor” of that church, and since a Webster’s dictionary defines a pastor as “a clergyman or priest in charge of a church or congregation,” it may seem to both the religious and the non-religious public that we are both out-of-step and stubborn. But churches of Christ do not identify their preachers working with local churches as pastors, nor do they ever have just one pastor in a church. We rather make a distinction between preacher and pastor and always have a plurality of pastors in a church. Our reasons for this are very simple: This is what we find in the New Testament, our standard.

The Greek word **POIMEN** is used eighteen times in the original language (Koine or Common Greek) of the New Testament. Seventeen of those times it is translated in our English versions as “shepherd” or “shepherds.” One time (why, I don’t know) it is translated “pastors.” That one time (in the King James Version, English Revised Version, American Standard Version, Revised Standard Version, New English Bible, New American Standard Bible, New International Version, and others) is found in Ephesians 4:11 which reads: “*And he gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers*” (underlining mine --BC). “Shepherds” would have been the easier word to understand and identify, and consistent with other passages using the same word, but “pastors” is not an objectionable word. We do not object to the word, but we do object to the use now made of it by the denominations. A good English dictionary will also tell us that our word “pastor” was derived from a Latin noun meaning “shepherd” or a Latin verb meaning “to feed” or “to shepherd.” *Webster’s New World Dictionary* says: “1. Originally, a shepherd.”

Can a student of the Bible identify from other New Testament passages these “pastors” of Ephesians 4:11? Surely so. Let us ask: “Who are these ‘pastors’ or ‘shepherds?’” What men are called upon to shepherd, to feed, to tend? What men have “shepherd” duties? In connection with what men is a local church referred to under the figure of “a flock”? In 1 Peter 5:1-4 the apostle Peter, addresses “*the elders ... among you,*” identifies himself as “*a fellow-elder,*” calls upon “*elders*” to “*tend* (POIMAINO, a cognate verb) *the flock* (POIMNE, a cognate noun) *of God which is among you*” and to make themselves “*examples to the flock*” (POIMNE again), and reminds them of the coming of “the chief Shepherd” (the same word translated “pastors” in Eph. 4: 11). In Acts 20:17 the apostle Paul, from Miletus sent to Ephesus for “the elders of the church.” In verse 28 he referred to them as “*bishops*” or “*overseers*” (men have trouble with these words, also) and told them to take heed “*to all the flock*” (POIMNE) in which they were made bishops or overseers and “*to feed* (POIMAINO) *the church.*” One who would have the duty of overseeing, of being an example to, of feeding, tending, or shepherding a flock would be a pastor or shepherd. The duties of preachers or evangelists are presented elsewhere in the New Testament.

Obviously, then, the men who are referred to as both elders and bishops or overseers are the pastors or shepherds of the New Testament and not those men who are referred to as preachers or evangelists. You can read of the appointment of such men in Acts 14:23. You can read of their qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Among those qualifications: “*husbands of one wife.*” Paul was an apostle and a preacher, but, not having a wife, he could not have served as a “pastor.” Peter, however, was an apostle and preacher, but, having a wife (1 Cor. 9:5) and being otherwise qualified, he also served as a “pastor,” “overseer,” or “elder” (1 Peter 5:1-4).

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