

The Pastor

by [Jon Zens](#)

(Below is Mr. Owen's article is printed with permission from the Western Recorder, C.R. Daley, Editor; Louisville, Kentucky. It is followed by John Zens' response).

The Old Testament had the prophet and the priest. The priests were general over-seers of the house of worship and administered its ceremonies. The prophets were less formal, free spokesmen-forthtellers and sometimes foretellers.

In Evangelical Christianity the church has merged the two Old Testament figures into one office called "pastor." From the beginning the church was a fellowship of people rather than a "temple." The fellowship was to have a holy place to meet but the church, itself, was "Ho Koinonia." This fellowship, like a flock, needed a leader like a shepherd.

Israel was a land of flocks and shepherds. From this pastoral setting and the ministry of Jesus, the shepherd and flock relationship became the pattern. That is how we acquired the term "pastor" in relation to the church.

Recent history has seen rapid growth of multiple specialized ministries, especially in larger churches. Assistant pastors, Ministers of Education, Music, Youth, etc., etc. Ministers have had to learn to serve together. Lay members have needed to understand the roles of the pastor and the auxiliary ministers.

An orderly church needs one overseer, one shepherd, one pastor. Specialized ministers have their own realms of distinct service but the pastor needs to have general oversight of the education, music, youth, activities and any other ministries in the flock. The church that fails to recognize and uphold the pastor in this role is apt to lack unity in its sense of direction and is risking serious personnel problems with an unsupervised staff.

I have heard a few argue that each ministry should be separate, parallel and independent of each other. Allow this old veteran to observe that chaos easily develops where no one is in charge. If the church is to be one flock, it needs one shepherd. Let him be first among equals. He must be wise to magnify his associates and their work--let them stand tall. He needs to be humble, gentle and loving with those whom he supervises, but he must not abdicate his Biblically-based assignment to oversee the church. Wise church members will encourage this.

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Every once and a while you come across something that gets to the heart of a matter and crisply expresses the thought patterns of many Christians. The above article, which appeared in a Kentucky Southern Baptist paper, does just that. It accurately summarizes the prevailing ideas about "the pastor."

I want to express my reactions to this article in the light of Scripture. Brethren, I believe that the ideas Mr. Owen sets forth are absolutely indefensible from God's Word. They express very well the tradition of men, but they utterly fail to reflect New Testament teaching.

Please think with me as we examine Mr. Owen's reasoning. I do not challenge these common notions to be a "troublemaker." Rather, I believe we are "peacemakers" by pursuing Biblical principles. Therefore, I challenge this article because if this position is wrong, it means that our practice is wrong. And if our practice is wrong in such a crucial area, then we are in disobedience to Christ's revealed will. But Christ's sheep are sensitive to His voice in Scripture (John 10:4-5,27). If our disobedience is uncovered by the light of the Word, we want to change. If we do not care what Christ says about local church life, or if we do not want to change when new understanding comes, there is something seriously wrong with our hearts. Brothers and sisters, I pray that our consciences will be sensitive to Christ's precious Word, and that we will find joy in doing what our Lord commands (John 14:17; 15:10-11).

Let us examine Mr. Owen's remarks.

(1) Mr. Owen asserts that "Evangelical Christianity . . . has merged the two Old Testament figures [of prophet and priest] into one office called 'pastor.'" On what Scriptural basis has this been done? First of all, Christ is the primary reference of the Old Testament figures of prophet, priest and king. He is the Prophet Moses spoke of who would be raised up (Deut. 18:15,18); He is the Priest who offered Himself for our sins (Heb. 5:5; 7:21,24); He is the King over His people (Heb. 7:2; Rev. 17:14). These Old Testament figures were first of all types of Christ. Also, the great leaders, like Moses, Joshua and Elijah, are not types of one-man leadership in the church, but, again, they are types of Christ.

Further, the "priest" figure in the Old Testament is, in the new age, fully realized in the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5,9), not in "the pastor." Only a few men were priests under the old covenant; now all believers--men, women, children--are priests before God and to one another.

Indeed, elders can be viewed as undershepherds (see 1 Pet. 5:4). However, Mr. Owen's point is that there is to be only one pastor--"the pastor." But the New Testament always views these undershepherds in the local church as plural ("pastors"), never as singular ("pastor") [see Acts 20:17; James 5:14]. Not one example can be shown from the New Testament where a church had 'one' pastor. On what Biblical basis, therefore, have we created the office of one pastor?

(2) Mr. Owen avers that each local church "like a flock, needed a leader like a shepherd." However, the New Testament teaches that the only singular Shepherd we have is Christ (John 10:11,14; see 1 Pet. 5:4). Christ is the Head of the church, and He gives a plurality of pastors to share in the oversight of each local church. There is absolutely no Scripture to support the idea (common everywhere) that Christ rules the local church through one pastor. If the doctrine of "the pastor" is right, why can no Scripture be ushered forth to support it?

(3) "An orderly church," says Mr. Owen, "needs one overseer, one shepherd, one pastor." That sounds nice and is everywhere accepted as true, but where is this notion taught in the New Testament?

Everywhere one turns in the New Testament, the church [singular] has pastors [plural]. There is no example in the New Testament of an orderly church having one overseer. The orderly church in Philippi consisted of "saints, bishops and deacons" (Phil. 1:1). James said that if one was sick, "let him call for the elders [plural] of the church [singular]" (James 5:14). Paul "called the elders [plural] of the church [singular]" at Ephesus (Acts 20:17). After their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas saw "elders [plural] in every church [singular]" set apart (Acts 14:23). Paul left Titus in Crete to "set in order the things that are lacking, and ordain elders [plural] in every city [singular]" (Titus 1:5). Thus, while Mr. Owen asserts that an "orderly" church needs one overseer, the fact is that a church without elders [plural] is designated as "lacking."

Certainly a church may have one elder for a time. But why do our churches go on for years without a plurality of leadership? One reason is because people mistakenly believe that there is to be only one pastor.

W.B. Johnson, the first President of the Southern Baptist Convention (1845), wrote in 1846: In a review of these Scriptures, we have these points clearly made out:

1. That over each church of Christ in the apostolic age, a plurality of rulers was ordained, who were designated by the terms elder, bishop, overseer, pastor, with authority in the government of the flock.
2. That this authority involved no legislative power or right, but that it was ministerial and executive only, and that, in its exercise, the rulers were not to lord it over God's heritage, but as examples to lead the flock to the performance of duty ...
6. That these rulers were all equal in rank and authority, no one having a preeminence over the rest. This satisfactorily appears from the fact, that the same qualifications were required of all, so that though some labored in word and doctrine, and others did not, the distinction between them was not in rank, but in the character of their service...
8. That the members of the flock were required to follow and imitate the faith of their rulers, in due consideration of the end of their conversation, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever...

It is worthy of particular attention, that each church had a plurality of elders, and although there was a difference in their respective departments of service, there was a perfect equality of rank among them ("The Gospel Developed Through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ," reprinted in Baptist Reformation Review, Vol. 4. Numbers 2 and 3. Summer/Autumn, 1975, pp. 29-30).

Southern Baptists as a whole--along with the bulk of Evangelicals--have departed from Mr. Johnson's summary of New Testament teaching on this matter.

(4) "Allow this old veteran," Mr. Owen continues, "to observe that chaos easily develops where no one is in charge. If the church is to be one flock, it needs one shepherd. Let him be the first among equals." The early churches had plural oversight, and they apparently did very well. Mr. Owen wrongly equates "order" with the rule of one man. But "chaos" was avoided in the New Testament churches through plural eldership.

The flock indeed is one because it is in union with its Shepherd, Christ. Mr. Owen sees order maintained through one man; the New Testament sees the Great Shepherd as caring for His churches (Rev. 1:18-20:2:2.11. etc.). In His singular rule as Head over the churches, Christ indeed uses a plurality of men to watch over each local church (Acts 20:28).

As most of you know, it rarely works out that "the pastor" is "first among equals." He is too often the first above subordinates. The very nature of the pastor's office gives leadership to one man that is meant to be shared by a plurality of elders (Heb. 13:17).

(5) Mr. Owen believes that "the pastor" must "not abdicate his Biblically-based assignment to oversee the church." There is no Biblical mandate anywhere for one man to oversee a local church. The charges Paul gave regarding oversight were directed to the group of pastors from the Ephesian church, not to one man (Acts 20:17-38).

(6) Mr. Owen states that "wise church members will encourage the advisability of one man overseeing the church. It seems to me that wise, Biblically-informed church members, and those who fill the niche of "the pastor," must challenge, not continue this notion. If "the pastor" idea cannot be substantiated from the pages of the New Testament, why should we continue it? Should we not rather orient ourselves around the goal of plural oversight?"

(7) Mr. Owen touches on something that I believe is significant. He says, "from the beginning the church was a fellowship of people... the church, itself, was 'Ho Koinonia' [the fellowship]." I am convinced that before the plurality of elders will make sense to believers, they must first see that they have responsibilities as priests. A functioning elder-ship is simply an extension of a functioning priesthood.

For example, all Christians are encouraged to "admonish one another" (Rom. 15:14; 1 Thess. 5:11-14). But elders have the specific responsibility--because of their proven maturity--to "admonish" the flock (1 Thess. 5:12).

All Christians are to watch over one another in a caring, loving way (Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25). But elders have a specific responsibility, for they must give account to God of their watch over the flock (Heb. 13:17). The First London Baptist Confession (1646) put it like this:

Christ, for the keeping of this church in holy and orderly communion, places some special men over the church; who by their office, are to govern, oversee, visit, watch; so likewise, for the

better keeping thereof, in all places by the members. He has given authority, and laid duty upon all to watch over one another (Article 44).

Our churches are so used to having one man, or a few people, do everything, that the idea of every member having something necessary to contribute (Eph. 4:16) is foreign to our practice. We have acted as though the body is one part instead of many parts (1 Cor. 12:14). Priests are to function, and elders are to watch over and equip the priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5; Eph. 4:1 1-12).

There is no evidence anywhere in the New Testament for the primacy of one man's gifts. There is evidence 58 times in the New Testament for the importance of mutual care and multiple gifts; "love one another... admonish one another ... edify one another... comfort one another... forgive one another... give to one another... pray for one another." Why are our churches marked by obvious emphasis on "the pastor," but very little--if any--concern for the cultivation of mutual relationships? We have exalted that for which there is no evidence, and neglected that for which there is abundant evidence. We are used to pawning off our responsibilities on someone else. We want the church to minister to us, but we think very little as to how we can minister to the needs of others.

This is not to downplay the vital teaching ministry of elders, who are charged to "feed the flock," and who "must be apt to teach" (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:2). But our practice focuses on "the pastor," and the ministry of the saints one to another is virtually non-existent. Are not our priorities mixed up?

Robert Girard captures the spirit of what I am getting at by saying:

Suburban America is a society of fences and private tract homes into which each family retreats, locks the door, pulls the drapes, and sits down to watch television for the next forty years, hoping no one interrupts.

The "New Society" (the kingdom community, Christ's New Testament dream of the church) contradicts and challenges this pattern... Too long the church has just gone along with the world's way of not relating to one another. The church has decided not to disturb the status quo for fear of offending people who want to keep their privacy and loneliness. But we have been called to reject that life-style--to move into Christ's New Society. To be a house for priests! A society of ministers! A family of new people who really care for each other!

When the church gathers, as the New Testament tells it, it is the happy gathering of a loving family at the supper table. Its ministry when gathered is described in Scripture like a smorgasbord, a potluck supper, what the church used to call a 'love feast' or 'agape.'

It is not one expert cook preparing one dish for everyone. It is each person bringing to the supper what he or she has prepared--the thing each does best... All share, all eat, all are fed (Brethren Hang Together, pp. 132-133).

Brethren, I have shared my heart with you in the fear of God. I have forthrightly challenged a prevailing viewpoint. Tradition says loudly: "an orderly church needs one overseer, one

shepherd, one pastor." The New Testament records repeatedly teach that church had a plurality of pastors. Am I right or wrong? Can you demonstrate from Scripture that Mr. Owen's one-pastor position is really the correct view? By stating a contrary position, I have become vulnerable. I am open to correction from Christ's Word.

Jesus said some fearful words to the Pharisees that I believe apply to us in this regard:

"This people honors me with their lips. But their heart is far away from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men. Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." He was also saying to them, "You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition" (Mark 7:6-9).

The heart far from God is connected here to disobedience of God's Word. If we keep "the pastor" tradition in order to avoid our duties as priests, and to avoid obedience to Christ's order for the churches, we become no better than a pack of Pharisees.

Jesus also said, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not the things that I say?" (Luke 6:46). We rightly claim Jesus as Lord; but will we evidence concern for specific obedience--for change--to God's Word? Or will we just go on in our vain (and harmful) traditions? Samuel told Saul that God is not interested in sacrifice without obedience: Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22).

Moses was admonished concerning the construction of the Tabernacle: "See, he says, that you make all things according to the pattern showed to you on the mount" (Heb. 8:5). Likewise, in the ordering of Christ's churches, we are not at liberty to construct as we please. We are given general principles as to "how to behave" in the churches--a "pattern" has been given to us in the New Testament (1 Tim. 3:15). If the "pattern" of the functioning priesthood of all believers, and the plurality of elders is clearly revealed, should we not get on the stick and practice the truth? What holds us back from obedience?

Mr. Owen says that "the fellowship was to have a holy place to meet." Brethren, there are no holy places in the new covenant. Rather, there is a holy people. And these people are all baptized by one Spirit into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). Their commitment to Christ brings with it a commitment to those in Christ's body. It seems to me that this is where the rub comes: we are hesitant to pursue the implications of what it means to "love one another" sacrificially. We like a private salvation that entails no extension of ourselves to others. "The pastor" is a convenient way to pass off our duties to one man. As James said, "Brethren, these things ought not to be" (3:10).

I submit these things to you as one concerned for the truth of Christ. I submit these things to your judgment as you search the Scriptures to see what is so (Acts 17:11). I ask us to proceed in obedience to these principles, or show cause from Scripture why these things are in error.

The letters to the seven churches (Rev. 2-3) indicate that Christ is not indifferent as to what goes on in His churches. He cares, and in areas of disobedience He calls the local church to

repentance (Rev. 2:5.16; 3:3). If there is indifference, coldness, and flagrant disregard for Christ's will, the Head of the churches promises to remove the candlestick from the local church (Rev. 2:5).

Do these considerations move your heart? Then let us obey Christ because we love Him, in response to the great love He manifested by laying down His life for us (John 14:15; 1 John 3:16; 4:10-11).

Jon Zens

Suggested Reading For Further Study

1. Banks, Robert. Paul's Idea of Community - The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting (Eerdmans, 1980), 208pp.
2. Concern, #17: (1) Walter Klaassen, "New Presbyter Is Old Priest Writ Large"; J. Lawrence Burkholder, "Theological Education for the Believers' Church"; John H. Yoder, "The Fullness of Christ." Available from Sojourners Book Service, 1309 L. St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

(These articles, especially Yoder's, provide much food for thought on the relationship of elders to the priesthood of believers).

3. Girard, Robert. "Reviving the Priesthood," Vol. 10, #3 (Autumn, 1981), Baptist Reformation Review, pp. 31-37.
4. Hufstetler, Greg. "The Support of Elders in the N.T.," Vol. 7, #2 (Summer, 1978), Baptist Reformation Review.
5. Miller, Paul. Leading the Family of God (Herald Press, 1981), 213pp.

(Even though the underlying theology is weak at points in this book [i.e., children "are 'safe' until they reach adult accountability," p.173], the thrust of its major points is extremely helpful for church leaders).

6. Parker, Mike. "The Basic Meaning of 'Elder' in the N.T.," Vol. 7, #2 (Summer, 1978), Baptist Reformation Review.

(This article has been helpful for many in sorting out the connection of maturity and elder).

7. Richards, Larry and Gene Getz. "A Biblical Style of Leadership?," Leadership, Spring Quarter, 1981, pp. 68-78.

(A friendly "debate" which focuses on two ways of looking at leadership in the church:

(1) the focus on the pastor as a source of leadership (Getz) and (2) the focus on elders as leaders within the decision-making process of the body [Richards]).

8. Richards, Larry and Clyde Hoeldtke. *A Theology of Church Leadership* (Zondervan, 1980), 399pp.

(A concrete, practical book which emphasizes the servant character of leaders in Christ's churches).

9. Schindler, Judy. "The Rise of One-Bishop-Rule in the Early Church:

A Study in the Writings of Ignatius and Cyprian." Vol. 10, #2 (Summer, 1981). *Baptist Reformation Review*, pp. 3-9.

10. *Sixteen Tests of an Authentic N.T. Church*, 62pp. Available from Hegg Bros. Printing, 2923 N. Stevens, Tacoma, Wa., 98407

11. Stabbert, Bruce. *Team Ministry: A Case for Plural Leadership in the Church*. 225pp.. Available from Hegg Bros. Printing, 2923 N. Stevens. Tacoma. Wa., 98407.

(This is an extremely well-done - almost exhaustive - treatment on the N.T. teaching concerning elder leadership).

12. Ward, Norbert. "Who Has Authority in the Church?," Vol. 5, #2 (Summer, 1976). *Baptist Reformation Review*, pp. 23-33. Xerox copy available from BRR for \$1.00.

(I believe that this article is most timely, for it wrestles with a commonly reoccurring problem: is "authority" primarily attached to Christ and His Word, or to the "pastor"?)

13. Zens, Jon. "Building Up the Body: One Man or One Another?," Vol. 10, #2 (Summer, 1981), BRR, pp. 10-33.

(Interacting with the Reformed/Puritan view of the ministry, this article seeks to understand the function of elders against the broader backdrop of the priesthood of all believers).

14. Zens, Jon. "The Major Concepts of Eldership in the N.T.," Vol. 7. #2 (Summer, 1978), BRR.

"We must observe that in 17th century treatises on church life, two clear trends emerge. These trends can be seen in two of the major works on church government by John Owen and Thomas Goodwin.

The first trend was an exaltation of 'officers.' Owen saw 'the due performance of the duties' Christ required 'brought into this estate by the setting, fixing, or placing officers in it' (True

Nature of a Gospel Church, p.41; cf. p.99 where a thriving church life is connected to 'a multiplication of elders'). Thomas Goodwin identifies officers as the 'furniture' of a house, and thus 'when you have officers and ordinances dispensed by them, then you have a further presence [of Christ], He will come down oftener amongst you. The more of ordinances, the more of Christ; the more officers, the more of ordinances' (Works, Vol. 11, p. 311, emphasis mine). This focus on officers, as Ainslie observed, has 'largely persisted to the present day' (The Doctrines of Ministerial Order in the Reformed Churches of the 16th and 17th Centuries, p.15; cf. p.34).

Of course, there is an importance placed on leaders in the N.T. But in light of all the emphasis we have seen on mutual ministry in the Epistles, the space given to 'officers' in Reformed treatises must be designated as inordinate.

This brings us to the second discernible trend. With all the emphasis on 'officers,' the 17th century books on the church have virtually nothing on the 'each of you/ 'one another' ministries in the local church. Out of 546 pages on church order, Goodwin has six pages on 'communion of the saints.' In John Owen's True Nature of a Gospel Church, he alludes to mutual ministry just a few times (pp. 45,93; elsewhere in his Works he has a 4-page sermon on "The Mutual Care of Believers Over One Another," where he begins by seeing the church as 'compacted together by officers and ordinances' (Vol. 16, pp. 477-480), and in Vol. 13, pp. 19-49, he carefully delimits what 'ordinary,' 'uncalled [to the ministry]' believers may do as priests).

I think it is proper to make the general observation that the post-Reformation tradition, with its almost exclusive emphasis on 'officers,' had the practical effect of stifling a functioning priesthood of believers. It is important for us to realize, therefore, that we have been heavily influenced by this 'officer'-oriented tradition, and that the N.T. data calls for a close scrutiny of that tradition."

"Building Up the Body: One Man or One Another?" Baptist Reformation Review, Vol. 10, #2, pp. 18-19.

"The problem of the traditional Protestant conception of the professional ministry is that it expects the minister to take on the world and the devil alone, while the congregation watches in the bleachers. Occasionally, one of the members would get out there and help him, but the professional is 'the ministry.' Not only does he play the game alone, but he is supposed to gather together within himself all of the graces and gifts of the church. He is, therefore, not only supposed to be the leader of the church, but also a religious man; indeed, he is prophet, priest, teacher, ruler, and ideal family man as well. The error of the Protestant concept lies not only in its exaggerated demands for technical and spiritual competence, but it is a basically wrong understanding of the ministry. The ministry, properly speaking, belongs to all the people, of whom certain especially gifted ones may be ordained, and to whom may be called a professional leader who will teach them what can be taught from books, and who will give them the kind of undivided service which full-time employment makes possible."

J. Lawrence Burkholder
