

In Defense of Parity:

A presentation of the parity or equality of elders in the New Testament

CHAPTER FOUR

An Exegetical Defense of the Parity of the Eldership in the New Testament

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As we have seen, Poh Boon Sing teaches that there is a distinction between pastors and elders. To be specific, Poh teaches that *all pastors are elders, but that not all elders are pastors*. To put this yet another way Poh teaches that there are two types or classes of elders: teaching elders (also called pastors or ministers) and ruling elders. This might appear to mean that he is teaching the three-office view of church government. But to be scrupulously fair, Poh's view is not that simple. He would say rather that in one sense there are two offices and in another sense there are three offices.

He is not alone in holding or assuming this distinction. This distinction is held or at least assumed by many in their views of church government. It was, however, Poh's assertions that moved me to re-study the whole issue of whether any distinction exists in the Scriptures between pastors and elders. In this study I re-examined every occurrence of the roots of pastor and teacher in the New Testament. The results of this re-examination are presented in this chapter. The question which this paper addresses, then, is simply this: Is there a distinction made in the New Testament between the pastor-teacher and the other elders? To put the same question in other words, Are there two types or classes of elders: teaching and ruling elders?

The key text on this subject is Eph. 4:11. It is the only text in the New Testament where the noun, pastor or shepherd, is used of an office in the church. I do not disagree with Poh about the fact that there are four not five classes of ministry mentioned here. This is clear from the fact that the Greek leaves out the word some before the fifth description, teacher. There are only four classes distinguished here. The pastor and teacher are the same person or office. The correct translation to bring this out would be "pastors even teachers" or better yet "pastor-teachers." The Greek allows and even suggests such a translation.

Where we disagree about this text is with regard to the relation of these pastor-teachers to the elders of the church. Do these words describe a special class of elders in the church or are they simply a description of what are in other words, the elders of the church? Are these the teaching elders as opposed to the ruling elders? Or are they simply the elders of the church described here as pastor-teachers?

Before we attempt to display the New Testament answer to this question, there is a matter of clarification which must be addressed. There are three major Greek words related to this study:

Ποιμην, επισκοπος, πρεσβυτερος

The View defended here is that each of these three terms refer to the same office in the church. The confusing thing is that each of these three terms can be and have been translated in two distinct ways. Note the following diagram:

ENGLISH TRANSLATION: THE SAME GREEK WORDS FOR CHURCH OFFICERS ARE OFTEN TRANSLATED DIFFERENTLY IN TRANSLATIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.

OLDER ENGLISH = Pastor.....MODERN TRANSLATION = Shepherd

OLDER ENGLISH = Bishop.....MODERN TRANSLATION = Overseer

OLDER ENGLISH = Presbyter.....MODERN TRANSLATION = Elder

OFFICIAL DISTINCTION: ALL SIX OF THESE ENGLISH TERMS DESIGNATE ONE AND THE SAME OFFICE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Pastors=The Bishops=The Presbyters
The Shepherds=The Overseers=The Elders

The outline of our study is suggested by Eph. 4:11 itself. The meaning of two Greek words are disputed in Eph. 4:11: the word translated *pastor* and the word translated *teacher*. The most disputed and important is, of course, *pastor*, but we will double-check our study of this word by examining the relation of the office of teacher to the office of elder. We will examine the New Testament to see whether either one of them are used in such a way as to justify a distinction between pastors and elders or whether they are used in such a way as to indicate that elders and pastors hold one and the same office.

Section 1: The Ecclesiastical Significance of Ποιμην and Its Relatives in the New Testament

I. The Use of the Noun Meaning Shepherd

In Luke 2:8, 15, 18, 20 there are references to the literal shepherds who visited the baby Jesus the night He was born. In Matt. 9:36 and Mark 6:34 there are references to the multitudes who are like 'sheep having no shepherd'. This is probably a veiled reference to the Lord Jesus. All the other uses in the New Testament except one are references to the Lord Jesus as the Shepherd of His sheep (Matt. 25:32; 26:31; Luke 14:27; John 10:2,11, 12, 14, 16; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 2:25).

The only use of the term, shepherd, in the new Testament to refer to an ecclesiastical function or office is found in Eph. 4:11. In that passage pastor-teachers (the best way to translate the Greek here, since *teachers* is exegetical of *pastors*) are mentioned in a series with other positions of authority in the early church: apostles, prophets, and evangelists. Since these other positions were temporary, pastor-teachers are the only permanent office in the church referred to in the passage. There is clearly no explicit contrast instituted here between pastor-teachers and 'ruling elders' in this passage. This passage provides no evidence by itself for a distinction between pastor-teachers and other elders in the church. It cannot, therefore, be a proof-text for that position which posits such a distinction. Such a distinction must be justified or rejected from the teaching of the rest of the New Testament.

As we have seen, Poh argues that only the verb meaning to pastor or shepherd and not the noun meaning pastor or shepherd is found in Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter. 5:2. Thus, he wants us to assume that there is a clear and important distinction between the use of the noun and the verb in the New Testament. This is his defense against (the apparently obvious conclusion to be drawn from these passages) that in them elders and overseers are identified as pastors. When Poh makes such an important distinction between the noun and the verb meaning shepherd, the unwary might think that there are many uses of both the noun and the verb in the New Testament an examination of which would justify this crucial distinction of Poh's. The fact is that the only ecclesiastical use of the noun *shepherd* in the New Testament is found in Eph. 4:11. There are no other ecclesiastical uses of the noun from which to discern the meaning of the word or to justify a distinction between pastors and elders. We are not, therefore, wrong to inquire as to the ecclesiastical use or meaning of the verb meaning *to shepherd* in the New Testament. The meaning and use of the verb is, in fact, a critical part of the New Testament data relative to whether there is a distinction between pastors and elders.

II. The Use of the Verb Meaning To Shepherd

Matt. 2:6; Rev. 2:27; 7:17; 12:5; 19:15 are Messianic and refer to Jesus shepherding His people or the nations. John 21:16 is the admonition to Peter to shepherd Christ's sheep. The verb, shepherd, is used in parallel here with a verb (βοσκω) which means to tend or feed (notice John 21:15, 17). Jude 12 speaks of false teachers in the church who "shepherd themselves".

There are three uses of this verb in the New Testament of more direct ecclesiastical relevance and which may shed light on a distinction between pastors and elders in the New Testament: Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 9:7; 1 Pet. 5:2.

Acts 20:28 occurs in Paul's address to the leaders of the church in Ephesus. These leaders are described in Acts 20:17 as elders (or presbyters) and in Acts 20:28 as overseers (or bishops). Paul commands these elder-overseers to "shepherd" the church of God. Their position as shepherds in the midst of the church of God is emphasized by the twofold use of the related word (It is derived from the same root as *shepherd*.), flock, in vv. 28 and 29. According to verse 28 they are to be on guard for themselves and for all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. According to verse 29 they are to do this wary of the danger of savage wolves coming and not sparing the flock. Though Paul has not explicitly used the noun, shepherd, here to refer to the elderoverseers of this passage, it is patent that he would have had no difficulty in doing so. He tells all the elder-overseers to shepherd and to shepherd that which bears to them the relation of the flock which they are to guard. Clearly, this passage is completely opposed to any distinction between elders and pastors.

1 Cor. 9:7 is Paul's defense of his rights as one who labors in the ministry of the gospel to be remunerated for his labors. He uses the verb, to shepherd, once in this defense and the noun, flock, twice. The implication would appear to be that the work of shepherding is worthy of financial remuneration. We must remind ourselves, however, that in this context Paul is clearly thinking only of those who have been set aside to shepherd God's flock full-time (cf. 9:1-14). At any rate this passage says nothing about a supposed distinction between pastors and elders.

1 Pet. 5:2 contains an exhortation to the elders of the churches to which Peter the Apostle is writing. Peter identifies himself also as an elder thus intimating that he is not using the term, elder, to refer merely to an older and respected man, but to an office of the church. The elders are here commanded to do two things. They are, first, to oversee the church. The verb used is derived from the same root used in the New Testament to refer to the office of overseer or bishop. Thus, the plain implication of a number of other New Testament passages that elders are bishops (overseers) is confirmed.

The second command issued to these elders is that they are to shepherd the church. We must observe that the church is described twice here by means of the figurative use of the word, flock, (1 Pet. 5:2, 3). As before in Acts 20 both the verb related to *shepherd* and the noun related to *shepherd* meaning flock are used. Clearly, elders who are to oversee and shepherd that which is to be considered by them as the flock of God must here be regarded as shepherds or pastors. 1 Pet. 5:2 is also, therefore, utterly opposed to any distinction between elders and pastors or shepherds.

Section 2: The Ecclesiastical Significance of Διδασκαλος and Its Relatives in the New Testament

We found in the study of *shepherd* in the New Testament that in only one place was it used in its noun form to describe an office in the church. That place was Eph. 4:11. In Eph. 4:11 another noun is used (epexegetically) to further define the work of a pastor. It is the word, *teacher*. It is important, therefore, to examine this word as well.

We have found that there is no reason to distinguish in any way officially between elders, overseers, and pastors in the New Testament. Indeed, there is every reason simply to identify the office of elder (presbyter) with the office of overseer (bishop) with the office of shepherd (pastor). In itself this implies very clearly that no official distinction is to be made between an office of teacher in the church and the office of elder. Yet in order further to vindicate and clarify the biblical equation of the offices of pastor, bishop, and presbyter it will be well to look at the ecclesiastical significance of 'teacher' in the New Testament.

I. The Use of the Noun Meaning Teacher

Διδασκαλος is used approximately 58 times in the New Testament. The vast majority of these uses occur in the gospels (48 times) and are a title of the Lord Jesus Christ (38 times) or a reference to Him (4 times). The other uses in the gospels refer to the Jewish teachers of the law (Luke 2:46; John 3:10) or occur in the saying found in Matt. 10:24, 25 and Luke 6:40: "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master..."

None of the uses in the gospels are references to an ecclesiastical office in the church, but they are instructive in some other respects. Again-as with shepherd, overseer, and elder-the term, teacher, is first of all and preeminently a title of the Lord Jesus. There is then a sense in which the teacher in the church represents or stands in the place of Christ. The use of the term, teacher, to refer to the Jewish doctors of the law is also instructive. It tells us that inseparable from being a teacher is thorough knowledge of the teaching of the Scriptures. The uses in Matt. 10:24, 25 and Luke 6:40 indicate that a teacher occupies a position of authority over against his students (who are called his disciples). The use of teacher and disciples is suggestive when applied to the church.

The other ten references in the New Testament are more instructive. Rom. 2:20 refers to a Jew who regards himself as a teacher of the law. In 1 Tim. 2:7 and 2 Tim. 1:11 Paul describes himself as a teacher in his apostolate to the Gentiles. 2 Tim. 4:3 speaks of professing Christians who will heap to themselves teachers. Heb. 5:12 is the rebuke of those addressed in the epistle that "by this time you ought to be teachers". Yet instead of being capable of instructing others in the faith, they are still immature. This is clearly not a reference to an office in the church or a special gift to teach, since it is the generality of Christians (including women) who are addressed.

This last point is particularly plain when we come to the first of the passages which make more particular reference to what may be an office or special function in the church which we should try to imitate today. James 3:1 warns, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment." James is clearly thinking of a limited class of men within the church (of the gatherings of which he has just been speaking). This is clear from the fact that he identifies himself as a teacher, warns against many becoming teachers, and announces a stricter judgment for this class of men. It must be noticed that there is no distinction in this passage between teachers and other elders. The assumption, in fact, probably runs in the other direction.

Acts 13:1 speaks of the leadership of the church in Antioch as consisting of "prophets and teachers". The term, prophets, refers (as it does without exception in the New Testament) to those who are (or claim to be) the recipients of direct or supernatural revelation from God. In other words, it refers to those who have the extraordinary gift of prophecy and were

resident in the church at Antioch. The term, teachers, then, refers to those who possessed the ordinary gift of teaching the Word of God and labored officially in the ministry for the church at Antioch. Each of the leaders of the church at Antioch, then, was one who proclaimed the Word of God as a matter of gift and office. The only difference is that some were prophets, and others were teachers. It must be noticed that there is no distinction in this passage between teachers and other elders. These prophets and teachers may have constituted the whole leadership of the church in Antioch.

1 Cor. 12:28, 29 also mentions prophets in conjunction with teachers. Again the distinction is clearly between those with the extraordinary gift of prophecy and those with the ordinary gift of teaching. Here, however, the emphasis is not upon offices, but upon gifts or functions in the body of Christ. Many of the other gifts mentioned in these verses clearly do not refer to offices in the church. The body imagery of the context (1 Cor. 12:12-27) in which each member of the body is said to have a special function also makes this clear. Since the functions of all the members of the body are under discussion, the subject of offices in the church cannot be Paul's subject.

It is for this reason that nothing certain with regard to ecclesiastical offices can be deduced from the separate mention of the gift of "administrations" in v. 28. This is the only occurrence of the word in the New Testament. Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich give the translation "administrations" and says that the plural "indicates proofs of ability to hold a leading position in the church". A related word used twice in the New Testament (Acts 27:11; Rev. 18:17) means 'pilot' or 'shipmaster'. Thus, the idea of leadership is clearly contained in the word. It is clear from verse 28 that teaching and administration are two distinct gifts. It is certainly not clear that they represent two distinct offices or even two classes within one office. In fact, since both 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 mention both leadership and teaching ability as necessary for the office of overseer or elder, the assumption should rather be that some measure of both gifts is necessary to be an elder-overseer in the church. There is no indication, therefore, in this passage that any distinction exists between the office of teacher and the office of elder.

This discussion has included all the uses of the word translated, teacher, in Eph. 4:11. We must conclude from it that there is no reason in any of these passages to deduce a distinction between the offices of teacher and elder in the church. There are, in fact, good reasons to infer exactly the opposite.

II. The Use of Related Words Having to Do with Teaching in the New Testament

Of the many uses of relative words to Διδασκαλος in the New Testament the following have some relevance to the subject at hand.

A. Romans 12:7

Like 1 Cor. 12:28, 29, Rom. 12:7 is dealing with spiritual gifts and not directly with the subject of office in the church (Rom. 12:3, 6). The Apostle's exhortation is that the one with a teaching gift (ο διδασκων - a relative of the word we are considering) should be "in the teaching", that is to say, he should give himself to his teaching. Later in verse 8 the Apostle mentions the gift of leading (ο προισταμενος) and exhorts the one with this gift to lead with diligence.

The fact that Paul regards these two gifts as distinct is undeniable. This distinction has seemed to not a few to justify the idea of a distinction between a ruling elder and a teaching elder. Yet again we must insist on the fact that the distinction of the gifts does not require a distinction in the office. Office and gift as everyone must recognize-are two different things.

The conclusion that there is some sort of official or qualitative distinction between a pastor and an elder or a teaching elder and a ruling elder is, however, not simply unnecessary. It is in light of 1 Tim. 3:1-7 downright wrong. For the fact is that in the qualifications for the office of elder-overseer in that passage the elder as a part of the qualifications for the office is required to be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2--the same root used in Rom. 12:7) and able to rule (1 Tim. 3:4, 5 -the same root as is used in Rom. 12:8). Clearly, all elders must possess both the gifts of teaching and ruling. The only difference allowable is one of degree. A difference in degree of gift does not and cannot justify an official distinction between teaching and ruling elders.

B. 1 Tim. 3:2 (cf. 2 Tim. 2:24; Titus 1:9)

Amidst the qualifications for the overseership (or eldership) found in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 is found the qualification, able to teach (the translation of the NASB of the Greek word, διδασκαλικός. This word is used only twice in the New Testament: here and in 2 Tim. 2:24. It is, of course, derived from the same root as the word for teacher in Eph. 4:11. Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich defines it as 'skillful in teaching'. Louw and Nida define it as 'pertaining to being able to teach'. The parallel use in 2 Tim. 2:24 seems to emphasize that "the servant of the Lord" must have the proper spirit of a teacher and be full of patience and gentleness and not quarrelsome even when wronged and opposed. Also associated with being able to teach are two other traits. The first is the refusal to engage in the kind of speculations which only produce quarrels and divisions (v. 23). The true teacher has a sense of orthodoxy and priority. The other is the realization that God must be the great teacher or else human instruction will do no good (vv. 25, 26). The true teacher is a man of humility before God.

The description of "the servant of the Lord" as one who is able to teach is significant for our study. We suppose that it will be admitted on all hands that the servant of the Lord describes someone who, whatever in addition he may be, is certainly a pastor. The use of διδασκαλικός to describe such a one strengthens our conclusion that no distinction is to be made between the ordinary elder or overseer of 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and the pastor-teacher.

Also important in the interpretation of 1 Tim. 3 is the parallel listing of the qualifications of the eldership given in Titus 1:5-9. Three terms are used in parallel to describe the office under discussion in Titus 1: elder (v. 5), overseer (v. 7), steward (v. 7). The qualification 'able to teach' is not given explicitly in this list of the qualifications. Yet the idea or concept is clearly present in verses 9-11 where Paul insists that an elder must hold sound doctrine (a word with the same root as the Greek word, teacher) in such a way as to be able to use it both positively and polemically — "to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict". Clearly, the elder-overseer-steward of Titus 1 is and must be a teacher. Confirming this conclusion is the use of the term, steward. This term as it is elsewhere used in the New Testament clearly describes one who is charged to feed the people of God with instruction in the Word of God (Luke 12:42; 1 Cor. 4:1, 2; 1 Pet. 4:10).

C. 1 Tim. 5:17

This is perhaps the most important passage in the debate about teaching and ruling elders or the pastor/elder distinction. It deserves the expanded discussion that it will be given in the next chapter. Yet its major instruction is clear with regard to the issue at hand.

First, it clearly does not make a distinction between the office of pastor and other elders. This terminological distinction is absent from the passage. True, we may be used to calling the elder of the church who works hard at preaching and teaching a pastor and calling the other overseers just elders. Yes, we may easily read that understanding into this passage, but there is utterly no justification for that in this passage itself. Two obvious facts about the passage should wake us out of our dogmatic slumbers and into the realization that this passage does not teach the pastor/elder distinction to which we are accustomed. First, it is clear that more than one financially supported elder who labors in the Word and in doctrine is contemplated. Second, it is clear that other elders who do not labor full-time in the Word and in doctrine may also be financially supported.

Second, it does not make a distinction between two types of elders: teaching elders and ruling elders. Its distinction is between elders who rule well and those who additionally labor in the Word and doctrine. This is not the simplistic distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders. The passage does not assert that some of “the elders who rule well” do not teach. The fact is that 1 Tim. 3:2 and Titus 1:9 Paul makes abundantly clear that all elders must teach and do teach. Laboring in the Word and doctrine clearly denotes something more than merely being able to teach. It refers to an abundance of labor in the work of teaching— a degree of toil in the work of proclaiming the word—which surpasses that of even other well-ruling elders. The contrast is not between no teaching and teaching. It is between some teaching and a great degree of teaching. The teaching elder/ruling elder distinction so often deduced from this passage may be misleading in important respects.

Third, the passage does not say that all elders must work hard at preaching and teaching. It allows for elders who may work full-time at something else. This disallows the interpretation which would make all elders full-time preachers.

Fourth, the passage does say that the priority of the church in terms of supporting elders must be on “those who work hard at preaching and teaching”. This certainly teaches the primacy of the proclamation of the Word in the leadership of the church.

Fifth, the passage does assume that there are different degrees of the gifts of leading and teaching within the eldership and that these different degrees of gift may lead to differences of functions or roles within the eldership and to differences in regard to financial support.

The inevitable conclusion which must be reached on the basis of our study of the New Testament is this: There is no warrant for a distinction between the office of pastor and the office of elder in the New Testament. There is nothing in the New Testament or in 1 Tim. 5:17 which even remotely suggests such a distinction.

We must also conclude that the terminology which distinguishes teaching and ruling elders is liable to serious misunderstanding and often is not a good way of describing what the New Testament teaches with regard to the eldership. All elders are pastor-teachers. All elders must have the gifts of leadership and teaching. Because of these things the teaching elder/ruling elder distinction potentially misrepresents the teaching of the New Testament and leads to cloudy and even false understandings of biblical church government. It seems to impose a rigidity on church government and steal an element of holy flexibility from the

church of Christ by fitting the potential variations of the New Testament eldership into the rigid forms of evangelical or Reformed or Baptist tradition.

Let me, however, qualify these comments about the teaching elder—ruling elder distinction and terminology. Though this terminology tends to obscure certain important facets of the New Testament's teaching about the eldership, it must be admitted that if this distinction and terminology is well qualified, it may be acceptable occasionally to use it. As I have said, there is no absolute distinction between teaching and ruling elders. It is true, however, that such terminology is often intended not to stress absolute contrasts, but merely to emphasize prominent characteristics. If this is how it is intended and understood, then it may be said in defense of this terminology that it is true that some elders in terms of their overall ministry are prominently characterized as teachers, while other elders in terms of their overall ministry are prominently characterized as rulers. In this sense the teaching elder terminology is not intended to deny that teaching elders rule, and the ruling elder terminology is not intended to deny that ruling elders teach. The stress is simply on what prominently characterizes their public profile and ministry.