

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Can Women be Pastors but Not Elders?

DENNY BURK, PHD\*

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Can women be pastors? Obviously, egalitarians have long contended that they can. But did you know that there is a “complementarian” case for women serving as pastors? The argument goes like this: Yes, it is true that the office of elder is reserved for men as qualified by Scripture. But rightly understood, *pastor* is not an office in the New Testament but a gift. Since the Holy Spirit gifts both men and women for service and since one of the gifts is *pastoring*, we should expect to see women serving as pastors. Again, serving as pastor is different from serving in the office of elder. While all elders will have the gift of *pastoring* not all who have the gift of pastoring will be elders. Thus, women can be pastors.

This is a novel understanding of the terms for *pastor* in the New Testament, but it is nevertheless a viewpoint held by some evangelicals. One of my own seminary professors, the late Harold Hoehner, made a case for this view a little over a decade ago in the *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, where he writes:

A woman, then, may have the gift of pastor-teacher, apostle, evangelist, and prophetess (as Philip’s four daughters—Acts 21:9), while, scripturally speaking, she cannot hold the office of an elder or bishop. The aforementioned gifts are sovereignly bestowed on her, and it is her duty and privilege to exercise them. This is completely different from appointment to the office of elder, which the Scriptures specify only for men who meet the qualifications for that office. Where a woman uses her gift may be limited by other factors. The limitations may be governed by 1 Tim 2:12, which states: “But I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.”

By making this distinction between office and gift, it allows our local churches to recognize fully the gifts that women have received from God. All too often this has not been the *modus operandi* in evangelical churches. It is imperative that gifted women should and must be encouraged to minister inside and outside the local church. For example, women who have the gift of pastor-teacher could utilize their gifts in parachurch situations such as mission organizations, colleges, or seminaries. Male

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\* Denny Burk is a Professor of Biblical Studies at Boyce College, the undergraduate school of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He also serves as an Associate Pastor at Kenwood Baptist Church, which is in Louisville as well.

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overseers should encourage all in the body of Christ to develop and use the gifts that God has given to them. This includes women.<sup>17</sup>

Sam Storms has recently made a similar complementarian argument that would allow women to serve as pastors.<sup>18</sup> He contends that pastoring is a gift not an authoritative office in the church. While all elders need to have the gift of pastoring, it does not follow that all “pastors” must be elders. After doing a brief survey of biblical texts that employ “pastor” terminology, he surmises:

It stands to reason that all Elders must, in some sense, be pastors. But nothing in the way this verb is used should lead us to believe that all pastors must be Elders. No text asserts the latter.<sup>19</sup>

Because a pastor is not the same thing as an elder, and because pastor is not an authoritative office, Storms argue that women can be gifted as pastors who serve in the local church. Storms concludes:

In sum, there is no indication in the NT that the spiritual gift of pastoring, unlike the office of Elder, is gender specific. The Holy Spirit may well grant this gift to both men and women. Therefore, I believe that one may continue to embrace a biblically based complementarianism while speaking of certain women as “pastors” in the local church.<sup>20</sup>

What are we to make of this argument? Let me say up front that I have a deep love and affection for both Hoehner and Storms and regard them as brothers in the Lord. So the disagreement that I am about to register should be understood in the context of my love and respect for them.

Nevertheless, I believe their argument for women as pastors hits really wide of the mark. They have misunderstood Scripture in at least three ways.

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<sup>17</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, “Can a Woman Be a Pastor-Teacher,” *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 4 (2007): 769, 771. Against Hoehner’s view, see James Hamilton, “Pastors Are Not Elders: A Middle Way,” *The Journal for Biblical Manhood & Womanhood* 13, no. 1 (2008): 53–55.

<sup>18</sup> Sam Storms, “Is It Biblically Permissible for a Woman to Be Called a ‘Pastor’?,” *Sam Storms: Enjoying God* (blog), October 28, 2019, <https://www.samstorms.com/enjoying-god-blog/post/is-it-biblically-permissible-for-a-woman-to-be-called-a-pastor>.

<sup>19</sup> Storms.

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## MISUNDERSTANDING GIFTS VS. OFFICES

Both Hoehner and Storms argue that *pastoring* is a gift not an office, and they do so on the basis of Ephesians 4:11: “And he gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers.”

Notice that the text does not actually give a list of *gifts* but a list of gifted *persons*. The *gifts* in this text are not Spirit-given ministries. The gifts are the persons themselves. All of the persons in the list fulfill *offices* in the church—some of them *extraordinary* offices (apostles, prophets, and evangelists) and some of them *ordinary* offices (pastor-teachers).<sup>21</sup> God gives these office-holders to the church to build it up and to strengthen it in the faith. In that sense, the office-holders *themselves* are the gifts to the church.

## MISUNDERSTANDING THE INTERCHANGEABILITY OF TERMS

Hoehner and Storms both argue that the term for “pastor” in the New Testament describes a function, not an office. When they make this case, they fail to see that the terms for pastor/elder/overseer are used interchangeably in the New Testament. That means that we have at least three terms that refer to the same office of leadership in the church.<sup>22</sup> Consider, for example, the apostle Paul’s words in Titus 1:5–7:

Titus 1:5–7 “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.... For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach ...”

Clearly, “elder” and “overseer” are used interchangeably here. Likewise, in 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul uses the term “elder” where readers would expect him to say “overseer” based on his earlier usage in 1 Timothy 3:1–2. In doing so, Paul shows again that “overseer” and “elder” are two ways of referring to the same office.

Paul is not the only New Testament author who speaks this way. Peter exhorts “elders” to “shepherd” the church by “exercising oversight” (1 Pet. 5:1–2). He says that the job of the elder in verse 2 is to “exercise oversight” (*episkopeō*). It’s the verb form of the term “overseer” (*episkopos*). Peter also draws in a third concept—*shepherd* (*poimainō*), which is the verb form of the noun for “pastor” (*poimēn*, cf. Eph. 4:11). In two verses, Peter draws

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<sup>21</sup> For the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary offices, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, New Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 584–87.

<sup>22</sup> The following analysis comes from my commentary on the Pastoral Epistles. See Denny Burk, “1-2 Timothy and Titus,” in *ESV Expository Commentary: Ephesians-Philemon*, 2017.

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together three different word-groups in reference to the one office of church leadership—*overseer, pastor, and elder.*

In another text, Peter applies the terms *pastor* and *overseer* to Jesus himself: “For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd (*poimēn*) and Overseer (*episkopos*) of your souls.” Notice that even Peter uses “shepherd” and “overseer” interchangeably. Peter is reflecting what is true in all of the New Testament. The authors of Scripture use these three terms to refer to the one office.

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One other text confirms that these terms are used interchangeably. Consider Luke’s account of Paul’s final meeting with the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17–38. Luke says that Paul gathers together the “elders,” calls them “overseers,” and exhorts them to “shepherd” the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17, 28). Thus Luke also has all three word-groups appearing in this one chapter to refer to the one office.

The bottom line is that three different biblical authors make use of the pastor/elder/overseer language, and they do so in a way that suggests the terms are interchangeable. We are on firm exegetical ground to regard pastor/elder/overseer as three ways of referring to the same office. It is this exegesis that leads Ben Merkle to conclude, “Because pastors and elders/overseers have the same function (i.e., shepherding and teaching), the two terms should be viewed as referring to the same office.”<sup>23</sup>

It’s worth noting that this exegesis is not obscure. It’s a common interpretation of these texts, especially among those who hold to two scriptural offices in the church.<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, for example, writes, “In indiscriminately calling those who rule the church ‘bishops,’ ‘presbyters,’ ‘pastors,’ and ‘ministers,’ I did so according to Scriptural usage, which interchanges these terms.”<sup>25</sup>

Colin Smothers has created a helpful Venn diagram to summarize the biblical data and the overlap of the key terms. The overlapping areas of the diagram show where a single

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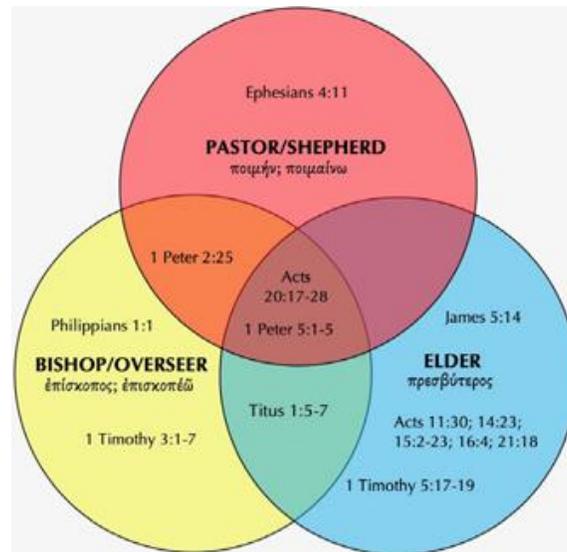
<sup>23</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 40 Questions Series (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 56.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 211–12.

<sup>25</sup> *Institutes* 4.3.8. See John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2, The Library of Christian Classics, XXI (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1060. Likewise, Louis Berkhof also sees the terms being used interchangeably. See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, New Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 586.

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text appears to use the relevant terms interchangeably. Note in particular the texts where all three circles overlap.



It is possible for *pastor* to be both gift and office, and in fact that does seem to be what Ephesians 4:11 indicates. The pastor is one who performs functions that are otherwise exclusive to the office of elder/overseer.

## MISUNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTION OF A PASTOR

God has given us clear instructions about the *function* of a pastor and about whether a woman is permitted to exercise those functions. By good and necessary inference, we have more than enough revelation from God's Word to know that God does not approve of women serving as pastors (whether or not one conceives of *pastor* as an office).

What does the Bible say about the function of a pastor? Hoehner and Storms claim that there are functions of the pastoral gift that should be open to women. And it is here that I think we may have our sharpest disagreement. In Scripture, the primary role of the pastor is leading and teaching *the entire flock*. And it's these two activities that the Bible explicitly forbids to women (1 Tim. 2:12).

How do we know that a pastor's primary function involves leading and teaching a local congregation? Remember, *pastor* is simply another word for *shepherd*. The *shepherd* terminology in Scripture serves as a metaphor, and that metaphor has deep roots in both the Old and New Testaments. To understand the pastor's function, you must understand the shepherd metaphor.

The Old Testament speaks of God himself as a Shepherd who goes before his flock and guides it (Psalm 23:3; 68:7; 80:1; Is. 40:11; 49:10), who leads it to pastures (Jer. 50:19) and

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to places where it may rest by the waters (Ps. 23:2), who protects the flock with his staff (Ps. 23:4), who whistles (Zech. 10:8) to the dispersed and gathers them (Isa. 56:8), who carries the lambs in his bosom and leads the mother-sheep (Is. 40:11).

The Old Testament also uses “shepherd” to refer to political and military leaders (e.g., 2 Sam. 7:7; 1 Chron. 17:6; Jer. 2:8; 3:15; 10:21; 22:22; 23:1–4; 25:34–36; 50:6; Eze. 34:2–10; Is. 56:11; Mic. 5:4; Zech. 10:3; 11:5f., 16f). Most importantly, “shepherd” is the title given to the future Messiah from the House of David:

Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken. (Eze. 34:23–24)

Indeed, Israel and Judah will become one people under one shepherd (Eze. 37:22, 24).

The New Testament applies the shepherd metaphor to Jesus:

I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hireling, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, beholds the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep, and flees, and the wolf snatches them, and scatters *them*. *He flees* because he is a hireling, and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock *with* one shepherd.

Notice that Jesus as the good shepherd *leads* and *protects* his flock by *speaking* to his flock. They hear his voice, and they follow him. In this way, Jesus appears as the “Shepherd (*poimēn*) and Overseer (*episkopos*)” over our souls (1 Pet. 2:25). Jesus applies the very same metaphor to the apostles’ ministries. For example, Jesus tells Peter twice to feed the flock and once to shepherd them (John 21:15–17). The “feeding” obviously has to do with Peter’s teaching and preaching, and the “shepherding” has to do with Peter’s leadership over the flock.

That’s why it’s no accident that the New Testament applies the shepherd metaphor to the office of elder/overseer. Jesus is a shepherd who leads and teaches. The apostles are shepherds who lead and teach. And now elders/overseers are undershepherds who also lead and teach (1 Pet. 5:4). The elder/overseer must be apt not only to teach but also to refute those who contradict (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). In short, shepherds must lead and protect the flock by teaching them and warning them against false teaching. The sheep

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are supposed to hear their Chief Shepherd's voice in the teaching of his undershepherds (i.e., elders/overseers).

In Acts 20, Paul commands the Ephesian elders to “be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). How are shepherds to “be on guard” for “all the flock”? What is the shepherd's method of protecting the flock? Paul offers himself as an example of how to protect the flock. It's through teaching: “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:20–21). Again, the shepherd's primary method of protecting the flock is through leading and teaching the Word.

It's this precise function that is given to the shepherds of the church. And again, it's these very tasks that the Bible explicitly forbids women from undertaking. Paul writes, “I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet” (1 Tim. 2:12). How is a woman going to teach and lead the flock as a pastor when those two functions have been prohibited to her in God's Word? This is the question that the “women-as-pastor” view cannot answer.

Perhaps proponents of the “women-as-pastor” view would respond by arguing that gifted women might *pastor* other women (or perhaps children) without running afoul of 1 Timothy 2:12. The problem with this reading is that the shepherd/pastor metaphor has reference to *the entire flock*, not parts of it. This is why I conclude that the Bible would not allow women to be pastors even if *pastor* were not construed as an office.

None of what I have written above should be construed to suggest that I'm conceding the point about *pastor* as an office. I still believe that proponents of this view are misreading the biblical evidence that indicates *pastor* as an office of the church. Nevertheless, even if we were to accept the argument that *pastor* is a gift not an office, a woman would still be prohibited from exercising the functions of the pastoral gift. This is a weakness in Hoehener's view in particular who argues for a number of situations in which a woman might actually do what 1 Timothy 2:12 seems to forbid – women teaching men.

## CONCLUSION

I love and respect both Hoehner and Storms and am grateful for their complementarian commitments. But I believe them to be mistaken about the Bible's teaching on pastoral leadership. The New Testament uses three terms to refer to one office – pastor/overseer/elder. That one office of leadership is limited to men as qualified by Scripture. This is a good and necessary boundary.

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A friend recently said to me that complementarians often run the risk of minding the fences while ignoring the field. What she meant was that we can be so focused on boundaries that we forget the wide places in between. And it's in those spaces that there is great freedom and opportunity for both men and women to have meaningful ministries within the church.

Yes, there are clear boundaries in Scripture for men and women in ministry, but this does not negate the opportunities for ministry that God gives to us all. No person should ever feel they are without a ministry. There's plenty of room to roam in the field, and the boundaries help us to see that.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Burk, D. (2019). [Can Women Be Pastors but Not Elders?](#) *9Marks Journal, Winter-Fall, 4*, 55-59.