A Blessing on Our Pastor's Head

James Montgomery (1771–1854)

A blessing on our pastor's head,
Lord God, we fervently implore;
On him this day a blessing shed,
For life, for death, for evermore.

For all that Thou in him hast wrought,
For all that Thou by him hast done,
Our warmest, purest thanks be brought,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Thy Son.

To Thee he gave his flower of youth,
To Thee his manhood's fruit he gave,
The herald of life-giving truth,
Dead souls from deathless death to save.

Forsake him not in his old age,
But while his Master's Cross he bears,
Faith be his staff on pilgrimage,
A crown of glory his grey hairs.

With holier zeal his heart enlarge,
Though strength decay, and sight grow dim,
That we, the people of his charge,
May glorify Thy grace in him.

So, when his warfare here shall cease,
By suffering perfected in love,
His ransom'd soul shall join in peace
The Church of the first-born above.

In the Nick of Time is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.
Permission is granted to duplicate for personal and church use.
www.centralseminary.edu | info@centralseminary.edu

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

What Shall We Call Them?

Kevin T. Bauder

The New Testament specifies a threefold division within the local church (Phil 1:1). First are the saints, the members of the church. Then are the bishops or overseers. Then are the deacons or servants. Almost all churches understand bishops and deacons to be offices of the church. Without these offices a church cannot be fully ordered.

Some churches also introduce a third office, the office of elder. In those churches, all bishops are generally recognized as elders, but not all elders are bishops. Bishops are thought of as teaching elders or ministers of the Word. The elders who are not bishops are sometimes designated as *ruling elders*, and they occupy a station midway between bishops and deacons.

Churches that have ruling elders usually consider their office to be a "lay" office. In other words, the elders are not considered to be ordained ministers. But they constitute a higher office than that of deacon. In such churches, ruling elders care for the business of the church while deacons maintain the properties and exercise the ministry of mercy to the impoverished or infirm. In some of those churches, elders also represent the local assembly at higher judicatories or levels of church government. Meanwhile, bishops exercise spiritual oversight over the congregation.

The bishop is sometimes called the *pastor* of the church. In certain church structures, a bishop may be assigned to pastor more than one congregation. In those cases, his churches together are called his *see*, his *diocese*, or his *district*. In other church structures, individual churches are pastored by elders while the bishop functions as a kind of district superintendent over multiple congregations. Some church structures even divide bishop, pastor, and elder into three distinct offices.

In thinking through the relationship between bishops, pastors, and elders, it is worth noting that the noun *pastor* only occurs once in connection with local church order. The occurrence is in Ephesians 4:11, where Paul specifies certain individuals whom the ascended Christ gave to humanity. These include apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors-teachers. The word *pastor* means *shepherd*, and its close connection with *teacher* indicates the importance of the ministry of the Word.

The word *pastor* also shows up as the verb *to pastor* or *to shepherd* in multiple texts. In some of these texts, it functions alongside the labels *bishop* and *elder*. These texts are worth a quick review.

In Acts 20, Paul is bound for Jerusalem. His ship puts in at the seaport town of Miletus, near Ephesus (15). Paul sends word to the elders of the church at Ephesus (17), who join him in Miletus (18). Paul delivers an important speech, in which he says that God has appointed these elders as overseers or bishops (28). Their work is to pastor or feed the church of God (28).

In other words, the men who meet Paul in Acts 20 are called both elders and bishops. They are also said to pastor the church of God. In this instance, bishops, pastors, and elders are all the same persons. The three titles apply equally to all the men who are assembled.

A second text that applies all three labels is 1 Peter 5:1–2. Here, Peter claims to write as an elder to other elders. He tells them to feed or pastor the flock of God. He also tells them to oversee it. In these verses, the word *elder* is a noun, while both *pastor* and *bishop* (or *overseer*) occur as verbs. The point is that the function of elders is to pastor and bishop (oversee) God's flock. These two tasks are both performed by the men whom Peter calls *elders*.

Neither Acts 20 nor 1 Peter 5 draws any distinction between bishops, pastors, and elders. Both texts speak as if all three functions and all three titles belong to the same men. But do any other texts distinguish some elders from other elders?

The answer is a clear *yes*. 1 Timothy 5:17 says, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine" [AV]. Here the term *honor* includes financial compensation, as the next verse makes clear. The point of the verse is that some elders are to be treated better than other elders. This uneven treatment is based upon some distinction among the elders themselves.

But what is that distinction? Some Christians insist that the difference is between elders who rule and elders who labor in the Word and doctrine (preaching and teaching). The former are supposed to be ruling elders, while the latter are teaching elders or ministers of the Word.

Other Christians note that such a distinction of office is not necessary in the text. Just as plausibly, all elders rule or lead by their teaching and preaching. Some simply perform this task adequately, while others give themselves to the work and truly excel. The latter are to be rewarded with double honor.

The difference between these two views is not one of grammar, syntax, or definition. It is one of emphasis. The first view emphasizes that the superior elders labor *in preaching and teaching*. The second view emphasizes that the superior elders *labor* in preaching and teaching.

If these two readings of the text are equally plausible, then how should it be understood? The answer is that an ambiguous text should always be understood in the light of texts that are more clear. In this case, both Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5 clearly identify bishops, pastors, and elders as the same individuals. Every bishop is also a pastor and an elder. Every pastor is also a bishop and an elder. Every elder is also a bishop and a pastor. There are no bishops who are not also pastors and elders. There are no pastors who are not also bishops and elders. There are no elders who are not also pastors and bishops.

The ambiguity of 1 Timothy 5:17 must not be used to set aside the clarity of Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5. Consequently, the best way of understanding the New Testament teaching is to see the terms *bishop*, *pastor*, and *elder* functioning as three labels for the very same office. The New Testament does not authorize today's churches to divide the office of pastor-bishop-elder into multiple offices. They must not create an office of bishop or elder that is separate from the office of pastor.

Of course, important questions remain about the office of pastor-bishop-elder. How many of these individuals does the New Testament require for each congregation? How are they supposed to function within the congregation? Clearly, they are supposed to lead, but how? Does the New Testament assign any structure among the pastor-bishop-elders within a single church? Is the church obligated to remunerate all of them?

These questions have answers that I will not explore here. But the present study yields an important principle for finding those answers. Since the office of pastor-bishop-elder is a single office, then any reference to any of the three titles constitutes evidence for the whole office. We can call these men pastors, bishops, or elders. The titles are interchangeable.

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.