



# TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

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FROM SOLA SCRIPTURA PUBLICATIONS

ISSUE 108 (Sep./Oct. 2017)

## WHAT IS A PASTOR?

### SELECTED TEXTS

**C**ONSIDERED BY MOST AS THE GREATEST OF THE Puritan theologians, John Owen (1616–1683) wrote: “The first officer or elder of the church is the pastor. A pastor is the elder that feeds and rules the flock, 1 Peter 5:2; that is, who is its teacher and its bishop: ‘Feed, taking the oversight.’”<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere Owen also wrote the following concerning the pastor’s principal duties:

To be examples unto the flock in faith, love, knowledge, meekness, patience, readiness to suffer for the name and gospel of Christ, with constancy therein (1 Tim. 3:1–7; 4:12; 2 Tim. 2:3; Col. 1:24; Phil. 2:17; 3:17); to watch for the souls and take care of all the spiritual concerns of the whole flock committed to them (Heb. 13:17; Acts 20:28); to preach the Word diligently, dividing it aright (2 Tim. 2:15; 4:2; Rom 12:6–8); to preserve and contend for the truth (1 Tim. 6:20; Acts 20:28; Jude 1:3); to administer all the ordinances of the gospel duly and orderly (1 Cor. 4:1–2; 1 Tim. 3:15); to stir up and exercise the gifts they have received in the discharge of their whole work and administration of all ordinances (1 Tim. 4:14–16); to instruct, admonish, cherish, and comfort all the members of the church, as their conditions, occasions, and necessities do require (Acts 20:18–20, 25, 27; 1 Thes. 3:5; 2 Tim. 2:24–25); to attend with diligence, skill, and wisdom unto the discharge of the authority that in the rule of the church is committed unto them (Rom. 12:7–8; 1 Tim. 5:17).<sup>2</sup>

That obviously says much, being at the same time both succinct and comprehensive. Every pastor, the present one first and foremost, would do well to meditate and reflect on all of it. After nearly 44 years of ministry, 36 of which have been in the pastorate, Owen speaks directly to my own heart. He challenges me afresh with these principles, several of which are in dramatic contrast to modern thinking about what a pastor is actually supposed to be.

I would, therefore, dare to try to encourage my fellow pastors with the following reminders. For the non-pastors, please read on, for I hope it will encourage you to pray for your pastor or help your search for a pastor if that is a need. Let us examine five principles concerning what a pastor is biblically: his person, position, purpose, progress, and people.

### The Pastor’s Person

First and foundationally, we must consider the pastor as a person, that is, a unique human being who, like every other Christian, is a sinner saved by grace. Further, like every human, he has his own strengths and shortcomings, fortes and faults, and triumphs and tragedies.

It is for that very reality, in fact, that the qualifications for being a pastor are so high. There are no less than 24 such qualifications, in four categories, listed in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–8. The most striking observation here, however, is that while there is one “vocational” qualification (his calling, 1 Tim. 3:1), five “social” (husband of one wife, hospitality, ruling his house, good report, faithful children), and five “spiritual” (able to teach, not a novice, lover of good men, holy, holding fast the Word), the other 13 are all personal, that is, having to do with his “character.” He must be: blameless, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, not addicted to wine, not violent, not contentious, patient, not greedy or covetous, a good steward, not self-willed, not soon angry, and just.

While a discussion of all those is obviously beyond the scope of a single article (I have considered a book several times), it simply cannot be overemphasized that they all must exist in such leaders. Some interpreters view these qualifications as “the ideal”; that is, no one can measure up to all of them so we must simply find as many as possible in each candidate. But the text neither *says* nor even *implies* such an idea. That is, in fact, a catastrophic error, as has been demonstrated countless times in unqualified leaders. What Paul does here is place God’s standards against what the Ephesians had allowed the leadership to degenerate into in the approximately six years since he had written the Ephesian letter to them. As is true in our own day, some of those leaders were teaching false doctrine (1 Tim. 1:3; 4:1–3, 7; 6:3–5), engaging in “fruitless discussion” (1:6), misusing the law, and misunderstanding the gospel (1:7–11). Still others were guilty of sin and needed public rebuke (5:20). There were also some women in leadership (2:12) even though this was forbidden by God’s Word (which Paul also notes in verse 11).

So, I would submit, the pastor’s person forms the footer and foundation of his ministry. All he will be and do will spring from who he is in his character. His subsequent train-

ing will certainly mold his thinking in many aspects of ministry, but it is his character that will first and foremost define him, and it is upon that that he will rise or fall.

### The Pastor's Position

As we have observed in this publication before,<sup>3</sup> there is not the slightest ambiguity in the fact that the three terms "elder," "bishop," and "pastor" all refer to the same person: *elder* refers to the man's *character*, *bishop* refers to his *position*, and *pastor* (and "pastor-teacher") refers to his *duty* (or *function*). All this is also historical fact that simply cannot be denied. While I will not repeat the data in that previous article, writers are virtually unanimous on this point. Ones I have quoted before include: Church historians Philip Schaff and E. De Pressense; theologian and professor of homiletics at Yale J. M. Hoppin; 17<sup>th</sup>-century theologian Francis Turretin; Reformer John Calvin; 4<sup>th</sup>-century Roman scholar Jerome; Church Father Hilary; and there are others. In his book, *Biblical Eldership*, however, Alexander Strauch, is dead on target with this concise historical summary of what happened:

At the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, the overseer (bishop) presides over one local church, not a group of churches. Thus he is called the monarchical bishop. Through the centuries, inordinate authority became concentrated in the bishop. *Unchecked by the New Testament Scriptures*, his role continued to expand. The bishop became a ruler over a group of churches. Some bishops emerged as supreme over other bishops. Eventually they formed councils of bishops. Finally, in the West, one bishop emerged as head over every Christian and every church. But in the churches of the New Testament period, there was no clearly defined, three office system. Instead, there were only two offices as found in Philippians 1:1 . . . elders and deacons.<sup>4</sup>

What has not been previously addressed in this publication in any depth, however, is church government itself and the pastor's specific position in it. Based upon the fact that an "elder" (*presbuteros*) is mature and has blameless character, he takes on the role of a "bishop," *episkopos*, "overseer, guardian." Unlike *presbuteros*, which is rooted in Jewish culture (Hebrew, *zaqen*; e.g., Ex. 19:7, Num. 11:16, Deut. 27:1, 31:9), *episkopos* is rooted in Greek culture. Emperors appointed bishops to oversee captured or newly-formed cities. Coupled, with that, then, is "pastor." This is *poimēn*, which means "shepherd" and in Classical Greek referred to the herdsman who tended and cared for the sheep. It was also used metaphorically to refer to a leader, a ruler, or a commander.

What does all this tell us of church government and the pastor's position? It has amazed me for many years how something so clear could be in any way misunderstood. The shepherd/sheep analogy, coupled with the idea of an overseer, unambiguously speaks of pastoral leadership. Anything else is simply unbiblical. This not only rules out the so-called Episcopal (or Hierarchal) Government that arose in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century, but also the Presbyterian Government (also called Representative or Federal). This is rule by "presbyters" (lay-elders) who are appointed by the congregation. More or less a "representative" form of government, people govern indirectly through their representatives. In some circles repre-

sentatives of one church come under the authority of a larger group (Synod), which then comes under a large body (General Association), so churches are usually grouped geographically. This is rooted, of course, in the Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century.

One other form of church government is what has been dubbed Congregationalism. As the name implies, this insists that the local church is answerable directly to God, not some man or organization. Congregational government is found in many Baptist and non-denominational churches. Arising from the independent Puritans in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, such as John Cotton (1585–1652), among the most beloved and preeminent pastors and theologians of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, each local congregation is independent and self-supporting, governed by its own members. (Interestingly, John Owen himself was persuaded by Cotton's writings to change his position from Presbyterian to Congregational.)

Now, while there are several aspects of Congregationalism that are thoroughly biblical, one that clearly is not is the idea that the people "vote," with the "majority" often having the "final say" on what and how things are done. It is argued that what makes Congregationalism unique (and good) is its system of checks and balances, which constrains the authority of the clergy, the lay officers, and the members. But if I may submit, while that is fine in a constitutional republic such as America (wrongly called a democracy), that is not what the church is. Let's be honest here. In light of the shepherd/sheep analogy, is it up to the sheep to vote and rule themselves? Does this analogy ultimately mean nothing?

In my research, I came across the following very troubling statement by a well-known church historian: "The church of today [1895] is at liberty to vary from the form of church government prevalent in the first centuries."<sup>5</sup> My dear reader, do you agree with that? Where in Scripture do we see that idea stated or even implied? What does that say about biblical authority and sufficiency? Does that not give us *carte blanc* to do just about anything we want to do, which is pretty much what's going on nowadays?

I would humbly submit, therefore, that what we see in Scripture is pastors who lead and feed (Acts 20:28). Now, it is here, of course, that we hear the very vocal objection: "That is the same as a dictatorship!" Actually, if I may lovingly respond, it is the exact opposite because *dictatorship is an attitude, not a position*. A dictator disqualifies himself from being a biblical elder. He violates at least seven qualifications: he's no longer blameless; he's quarrelsome and contentious; he's no longer patient (gentle); he's not acting like a good steward; he's self-willed (self-pleasing); he's not just; and he is acting like a novice (spiritually immature).

The "not self-willed" (Titus 1:7) qualification is especially critical. The Greek is *authadēs*, to be self-complacent, self-satisfied, arrogant, dogmatic, unyielding, or dictatorial. As one authority puts it: "A person who obstinately maintains his own opinion or asserts his own rights but is reckless of the rights, feelings, and interests of others. He regulates his life with no respect to others."<sup>6</sup> In its only other NT occurrence, in fact, it is again used of leaders who are exposed to the danger of succumbing to this temptation (2 Pet. 2:10; cf. Septuagint: Gen. 49:7; Prov. 21:24). So, in contrast, the godly leader is dedicated solely to and motivated by the Word of God.

But can't such leadership lead to a dictator? Of course, it

can, just like every other church government approach can be abused (and have been horrendously!). But this is where prayer, study, and humility must rule the pastor's life. He must never *drive* the sheep—he must *lead* them. He must also *listen* to the sheep as did the apostles in Acts 6:1–6. Through this there is “mutual approval” within the body. That doesn't mean you vote. On the contrary, you don't have to because “your spirits bear witness with one another.” You communicate with each other and “submit to one another” (Eph. 5:21). The godly pastor is always aware of the needs of his people. Again, he is there to *patiently lead* them not *patently drive* them. So, what happens if a pastor does become a dictator? The godly men of the church begin disciplinary procedures as with any Christian in the church (Matt. 18:15–17; cf. 1 Tim. 5:19–20). *Oh, how we need pastors today who will lead.*

### The Pastor's Purpose

The foregoing prepares us for the main emphasis of this article. There is today an enormous misunderstanding of “the pastor's job.” What is he? What is he supposed to do?

### Popular Views

*First*, among the most prevalent views of the pastor today is that of a CEO, the Chief Executive Officer of a corporation. Richard Halverson, former Chaplain of the US Senate in the 1980s and early 1990s, well said:

In the beginning the church was a fellowship of men and women centered on the living Christ. Then the Church moved to Greece, where it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome, where it became an institution. Next, it moved to Europe where it became a culture. And, finally it moved to America, where it became an enterprise.<sup>7</sup>

And, indeed, the CEO of the enterprise, it is insisted, is the pastor. His job is to treat the church like a business and to make it “a success” by intuition, ingenuity, and innovation. Finally discerning the error of all this, however, I read one pastor who related this concerning this view:

I bought into a consumer-driven philosophy of ministry that promised: “If you can dream it and plan it, then you could build it!” Building “it” meant setting numeric goals to reach at certain intervals to measure success, which I sadly defined by the total number of participants.

To say the least, I was troubled by a blog post I recently read titled, “Why You Should Be Thankful If Your Pastor Behaves Like a CEO,” by Carey Nieuwhof, blogger and teaching pastor of Connexus Church north of Toronto Canada. In it he writes: “If all we do is recruit pastors who love to care for people until they die, the church will die.”<sup>8</sup> To be fair, his main emphasis is that pastors should lead, and he is correct, but to use the CEO model is inappropriate to say the least and a disparagement on the biblical shepherd *who most certainly did lead*. The church is not a *business*; it is a *body*.

*Second*, another view of the pastor today is that of an entertainer. By this I do not necessarily mean that he is a stand-up comedian (although we do have those), but rather those who do whatever it takes to “appeal to seekers.” This bait, which many pastors have swallow hook, line, and sinker,

views the church as a place that must appeal to the “unchurched” even though not a single verse of Scripture supports such an idea. In fact, all this is the very antithesis of Scripture. The local church is where God's people meet for corporate worship. By its very nature it does *not* appeal to the unbeliever. If your church appeals to lost people, I would lovingly submit that you need to take a very serious look at your ministry.

*Third*, still another view of the pastor is that of a social worker and/or political commentator, or even activist. But neither are these the pastor's purpose. For example, in the town in which I pastor, there is a “ministerial alliance” of all denominations that meets for prayer and “unity of purpose in the community.” While I have struggled several times of whether or not to attend, I just can't do it. How can there be “unity” (so-called) among some who do not even hold to the biblical Gospel? Neither should our emphasis be on politics, for what can that possibly accomplish for eternity?

### The Biblical View

What, then, *is* the pastor's purpose? Once again, the shepherd/sheep analogy could not be clearer. It provides us with at least seven principles about church leadership.

(1) The shepherd leads the sheep. No other livestock requires more careful attention and more detailed direction. On their own they will blindly and foolishly follow one another. They will also unknowingly walk right into danger. Further, left on their own they will overgraze and gnaw the grass right down to the roots. Likewise, they follow the same trails until they become gullies that erode the fields. The result is that they can actually devastate the land. So, the shepherd must knowingly and carefully lead.

(2) The shepherd feeds the sheep. Some of the greatest sheep countries of the world are dry and, semi-arid. But most breeds of sheep do best in this kind of terrain. A drier climate has fewer hazards, such as parasites. So, green pastures weren't often found, rather they were made. This took great toil. The land was cleared, plowed, and planted. What a picture of the pastor toiling to give his people food!

(3) The shepherd waters the sheep. Left to themselves sheep will drink polluted water and will therefore pick up parasites. But the shepherd knows where the pure water is. So, while food produces growth, water provides refreshment. Sheep will often feed just before dawn or by moonlight. This is when vegetation is drenched with dew. What a picture of refreshment! Likewise, the shepherd rises early to take advantage of this natural “watering hole.” Again, what a picture of the pastor! Not only should his preaching promote growth, but it also refreshes and satisfies.

(4) The shepherd helps and encourages the sheep. Often a sheep will become “cast.” A heavy, fat, or long fleeced sheep will lay down comfortably in a depression in the ground. It will roll onto its side to relax, but suddenly the center of gravity changes and the animal rolls over so far that its feet can no longer touch the ground. As it lies there, gases build up in the rumen (part of the stomach), expand, and cut off blood circulation to the legs. It is now totally helpless and vulnerable to any attack, and in the hot sun it will die within a few hours. So, the shepherd must be aware of sheep who wander off for this can easily happen. When it does, he will find them, roll

them onto their side (relieving the pressure of gases in the rumen), lift them up, rub the legs to restore circulation and send them on their way. But often it will stagger and fall. He continues to work with it and, combining tenderness and rebuke, talks to it: "I'm glad I found you in time. When are you going to learn to stand on your feet?" What a picture! The pastor must be there to help. But he shouldn't just "pat you on the head" but should also lovingly rebuke.

(5) The shepherd protects the sheep. Again, sheep are totally helpless. Two dogs have been known to kill more than 200 sheep in one night. Their only defense is to run. At the slightest suspicion of a dog, coyote, wolf, or any other enemy, they are near panic. Even insects and parasites are a threat. They are often tormented by nasal flies, bot flies, warble flies, and ticks, making it impossible for them to rest. The shepherd applies various kinds of insect repellent to protect them. This is what a pastor is to do: nurture, protect, and guard against false teaching and other dangers.

(6) The shepherd promotes unity among the sheep. As in other animal groups, there is an order, or dominance and status, with sheep. Chickens have a "pecking order," cattle have a "horning order," and sheep have the "butting order." Often a cunning, domineering old ewe will be the boss of a whole group. She butts and drives other ewes and lambs away from the best grazing or bed-grounds. Likewise, the other sheep will do the same with one another. All this causes friction and unrest in the flock. They all become edgy, tense, discontent, restless, irritable, and even lose weight. But amazingly, when the shepherd comes into view, their attention is diverted to him and away from their foolish rivalries. The pastor likewise will sometimes have a domineering force in the church, so he must address it to maintain godly unity.

(7) The shepherd disciplines the sheep. Occasionally, a shepherd will have "a fence crawler" that searches along the fence looking for a place to get through to feed on the other side, even if it is inferior pasture. Often no matter what the shepherd does, the sheep persists. It is all the more serious because others start following and learning the same trick, which endangers the whole flock. Quite often the only solution is the killing knife. Sadly, our churches sometimes have "fleshly fence crawlers." Of course, the pastor doesn't kill them, but he must *remove* them. As we have noted before, sin must be disciplined else the whole church be endangered.<sup>9</sup>

We could go on, but that should be enough to show us the picture. The parallels God gave here are not only amazing but instructive. The pastor (the shepherd) is to lead. If done God's way, it is a beautiful picture, indeed.

### The Pastor's Progress

I am absolutely certain that there is not a single godly pastor who has ever said, "I am the same fellow now after 20 years of ministry that I was when I graduated from seminary." (I hope that generates a chuckle in my fellow pastors.) Oh, how much each of us has "grow[n] in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:15)!

That thought underscores another: *we are still progressing*. I am often reminded of Paul himself, who wrote, "That I may know him" (Phil. 3:10). What should amaze us most about Paul's statement is the point in his life when he utters it. He was not a new convert or even new to ministry. He

penned this statement after 30 years of service. Think of it! He had spent three years with Christ in Nabatean Arabia being trained (Gal. 1:16–18), and then for three decades he grew in spiritual depth, preached throughout most of the known world, founded numerous churches, and penned half of the New Testament. But *still* he wrote, "That I may know him." What does that say about our progression?

But even further, Paul continues in verses 13–14: "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." In this context, "apprehended" (*katalambanō*) means "to lay hold of with the mind, to understand, perceive, learn, comprehend." In other words, Paul says, in effect, "Even though I do not fully comprehend God, or ever can for that matter, I continue to pursue knowing Him, I continue to look to the things of heaven as my all-consuming desire."

What a challenge that is! If Paul was still progressing after 30 years, should not we be also? How, indeed, can we expect any growth in the people in the pew if we are not leading in that progression? That thought, in fact, leads us to one other.

### The Pastor's People

I will never forget (at least I pray I never forget) what another preacher said to me some 40 years ago in my early days of pastoring: "The people will reflect the pastor." Wow, no pressure there, right? Think about it. If the pastor is the CEO type, the people will reflect the marketing model. If the pastor is seeker-sensitive, the people will reflect that same fleshly emphasis. If the pastor is the social worker type, the people will reflect the idea that doctrine is secondary. If the pastor majors on politics, the people will reflect the common idea that patriotism is synonymous with spirituality.

So, we had better pastor according to the biblical model. In today's atmosphere of post-modern tolerance, we pastors need to be reminded *daily* that we have not been called to be popular, prestigious, pitchmen, publicists, or political pundits.

We have been called to be *preachers*.

Dr. J. D. Watson, Pastor-Teacher  
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### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Works of John Owen* (Ages Software, 2000), Vol. 16, 70.
- <sup>2</sup> From "A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God and Discipline of the Churches of the New Testament" catechism, Question 27, in *Works of John Owen* (Ages Software, 2000), Vol. 15, 636.
- <sup>3</sup> See TOTT #19 & 20 (Feb./Mar., 2007), "Pastor, Bishop, and Elder," or chapter 15 in the book, *Truth On Tough Texts*, 157–170.
- <sup>4</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), p. 310, Note 26 (emphasis added).
- <sup>5</sup> Henry Sheldon, *History of the Christian Church* (Hendrickson, 1988, originally published in 1895), Vol. 1, 283.
- <sup>6</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* (AMG Publishers), entry #G829.
- <sup>7</sup> Cited in Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity: Discovering a Faith Beyond Consumer Christianity* (Zondervan, 2009).
- <sup>8</sup> <https://careynieuwhof.com/thankful-pastor-behaves-like-ceo/>.
- <sup>9</sup> See TOTT #101 (July/Aug. 2016), "Principles of Church Discipline."

# ANNOUNCING OUR EPHESIANS EXPOSITION

One of the greatest periods in Pastor Watson's nearly 44 years of ministry was the three-and-one-half years he invested in expositing the Epistle to the Ephesians from February 2003 through August 2006. It has been one of his passions for some 25 years. Originally recorded on "old fashioned" cassette tapes, a dear ministry supporter, Dorothy Obenski, bought the equipment and converted all 171 messages to MP3 files so they could be posted online. We pray these will be a blessing to many. We also hope to publish the two-volume exposition early next year.

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Our *Seek Him Early* podcast is now up and running on our website, featuring *Daily Devotional Studies on Knowing, Loving, and Serving Our Lord Jesus Christ*. Each weekly program is from Pastor Watson's book of that same title (see below). It is also available on iTunes, Google Play, and Stitcher. A new episode will be posted each Monday. We pray that this additional way of presenting the book will be a blessing to God's people. We also hope you will collect them and listen whenever you can and wherever you are: [www.thescripturealone.com/home/podcast-2](http://www.thescripturealone.com/home/podcast-2).

### *Seek Him Early*

#### ***Daily Devotional Studies on Knowing, Loving, and Serving Our Lord Jesus Christ***

Pastor Watson's publishing endeavors began with his two daily devotionals, published by AMG Publishers: *A Word for the Day* and *A Hebrew Word for the Day*. This new daily devotional truly comes from the depths of his heart. Endorsed by Phil Johnson, Joel Beeke, Paige Patterson, and others, it is divided into the three distinct parts specified in the sub-title (each encompassing four months of devotional/theological studies). The reader is first encouraged to know the Lord in a personal way, then to love Him like never before, and finally to be driven to more passionately serve Him. Each daily reading is between 450-500 words in length, meaty, theological, and homiletical. Like its predecessors, each day also includes a "Scriptures for Study" section, which lists other related verses for you to explore and lends itself to personal journaling. See samples (and other available books) at <http://SolaScripturaPublications.blogspot.com/>. [Single Copy, \$15.00; 2-3 copies, \$14.00 ea.; 4-5 copies, \$13.00; 6+, \$12.00 ea. Also available on Amazon.com and for Kindle Reader.]

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so we might address it either in a full length article or in a "Reader Questions" issue. Other comments are also warmly welcomed, and letters to the editor will be published.

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