

Text: Ac 20.28

Proposition: Through the proper function of the pastoral office, God means to protect His flock.

What do you think of when you hear the term, “bishop”?

- Most likely, you don’t automatically think of one of the pieces in a chess set.
- More likely, you think of it as a church term, one used in more liturgical churches.

“one having spiritual or ecclesiastical supervision: as

“**a:** an Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, or Roman Catholic clergyman ranking above a priest, having authority to ordain and confirm, and typically governing a diocese

“**b:** any of various Protestant clerical officials who superintend other clergy...”¹

The term shows up in four KJV passages, twice in 1 Timothy, once in Titus, once in 1 Peter, and two more times in the “postscripts” to 2 Timothy and Titus (not likely original).

The term doesn’t occur in the NAU or ESV. The NEW KING JAMES uses it in the same passages as the KJV.

The most famous passage where it occurs is 1 Tim 3.1:

¹Ti 3:1 ¶ This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a **bishop**, he desireth a good work.

In the Baptist churches, we don’t traditionally hold to the notion of any “superintending” clergy, as that would usurp the autonomy of the local church. Most evangelical churches pick up on at least that much of Baptist polity to likewise refrain from calling any of their clergy a “bishop” or even allowing a clergyman to hold a superintending authority over a group of clergymen under their charge.

¹ Frederick C. Mish, ed., *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

Nevertheless, we find the term translated *bishop* in 1 Tim 3.1 in our text today in Acts 20. Paul applies it to the elders he is addressing, as if it serves as a title of their office.

Our message today focuses on the position these leaders occupied in their local church, what that position means, who put these men in their position, and what it means for us today.

Read Ac 20.17-21, 28 (text 28)

I. Discerning the office through the names

A. Elder (17)

1. The term originates (possibly) in the Jewish synagogue

a. Hellenistic society uses the term as well, but the organizations in Hellenism too different

b. The Jews used the term in different ways

1) Historically, described a kind of “nobility” among Israel, a kind of hierarchy in the nation

2) The Sanhedrin sometimes described as elders, but essentially exercised a judicial function

3) Elders served in the synagogues, but held limited responsibilities

a) But other officers:

i) Ruler of synagogue (or rulers)

ii) Caretaker (Hassan) – paid employee responsible for upkeep of building, furniture, and scrolls

iii) Messenger

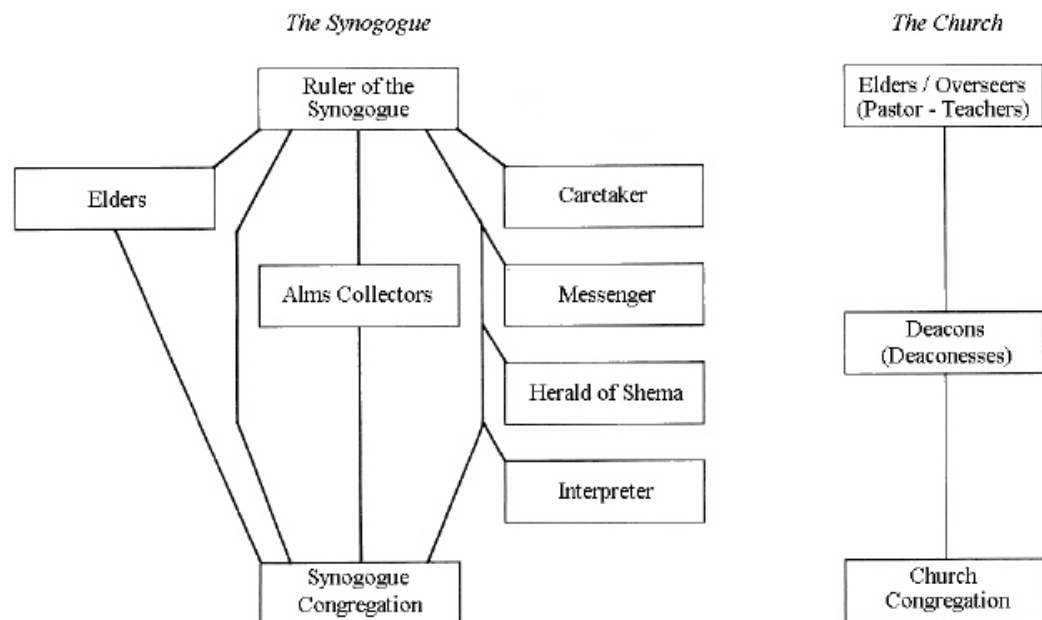
iv) Herald of the Shema

v) Interpreter

vi) Alms Collectors

b) Elders responsible for “administrative and disciplinary functions. ... The elders had special seats of honor in the synagogue but were not responsible for the worship.”²

c. Studying the structure of the synagogue shows no clear parallel to Christian church organization



2. Thus, though the source of the term may be the synagogue, the function of the Christian elder quite different

a. “The term ‘elder’ (v. 17) came from Judaism and emphasized the dignity of the leader of God’s people.”³

b. The Christian elder was responsible for ruling [administration] and teaching in the church

1 Tim 5.17 ¶ The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

² David W. Miller, “The Uniqueness of New Testament Church Eldership,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1985): 321.

³ Constable, Ac 20.28.

B. Overseer [bishop] (28)

1. The elders are the body addressed by our text: “yourselves, you”
2. Yet Paul designates them as “overseers” in our text

- a. The word translated “bishop” 1 Tim 3.1
- b. Here in the plural, all of them are “bishops,” or “overseers”

It is quite clear that both terms apply to the same men.

- c. The term is a Greek term, “overseer” is etymological: episkopos (epi = upon, over; skopos [scope] = seeing)

- 1) Used of the Greek gods who “oversee” men’s affairs
- 2) Used of people in positions of oversight, supervisors

3. The duties of a “bishop”

- a. Their duties are limited to their own settled congregation

“the wandering, charismatic preachers of the Gospel, the apostles, prophets and teachers, are never called ἐπίσκοποι. This title arises only where there are settled local congregations in which regular acts are performed.”⁴

- b. Beyer’s comments on our text

- 1) All the elders without exception called overseers
- 2) Elders in status (position of respect); overseers in function (position of responsibility)
- 3) Their function described in terms of “shepherding” (compare 1 Pt 5.2)⁵

^{1 Pt 5.2} shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

⁴ Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, “Ἐπισκέπτομαι, Ἐπισκοπέω, Ἐπισκοπή, Ἐπίσκοπος, Ἄλλοτριεπίσκοπος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 615–16.

⁵ Beyer, 616.

C. Pastor (28, cf. Eph 4.11)

1. Our passage uses a verb form, “to shepherd the flock,” describing the way the elder/bishop functions
 - a. Same word used in 1 Pt 5.2, “shepherd the flock”
 - b. The noun form appears in Eph 4.11

Ep 4.11 And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* **pastors** and teachers,

2. The function of the pastor/shepherd
 - a. Here: the way the elder/bishop “takes heed to themselves and the flock” is “to shepherd the Church of God”
 - b. The KJV uses this phrase “to feed the church of God”
 - c. The flock metaphor common for the people of God in the NT
 - d. The pastor is the shepherd of the flock
 - e. Constable lists the duties as “feeding, guiding, and guarding”⁶
3. In the service of Christ, the Good Shepherd
 - a. Peter calls Jesus “the Chief Shepherd” in 1 Pt 5.4
 - b. Peter describes the service of “undershepherds” (elders/overseers) in terms of selfless care

1 Pt 5.1-4 ¶ Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,² shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

⁶ Constable, *Expository Notes*, Ac 20.28.

All of this comes from three words in our text: “elders” (17), “overseers” (28), “to shepherd” (28).

The first thing I want to establish from these words is the office and duty of the men who fill it in the local church. Some churches have more than one man in this office, a church without a man in this office lacks one of God’s true gifts to the local church.

II. Discovering the appointments to the office from the NT

A. The means described in the New Testament

1. We see Paul and Barnabas “appointing” elders (Ac 14.21-23)
2. We see Paul sending Titus to Crete to “appoint elders” (Tit 1.5)

We certainly acknowledge the authority vested in an apostle for making appointments, but we wonder what happened in subsequent ages, or in churches not planted by apostles.

3. A clue from the appointment of deacons (Ac 6.3)

Ac 6.3 “Therefore, brethren, **select from among you** seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom **we may put in charge** of this task.

- a. The apostles called the congregation to select worthy men
- b. The apostles would then *appoint* them to their task

In this case, we see congregational input in the selection process.

It is not unreasonable to think that the apostles followed such practices in appointing elders as well. They likely consulted with the congregations in some way when making the choices.

B. The means mentioned in our text (Ac 20.28)

Ac 20.28 “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.

1. Who made the elders “overseers”? The Holy Spirit

2. The flock of God (church of God) has such value to God (purchased with His own blood) that he makes men elders/overseers

“The role as overseer came from appointment by the Spirit, either by prophetic naming and/or recognition by the church.”⁷

3. Notion of Divine involvement supported by other passages
- a. The prayers of Paul and Barnabas when selecting elders

Ac 14.23 When they had appointed elders for them in every church, **having prayed with fasting**, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

- b. The “gift language” of Eph 4

Ep 4.8 Therefore it says, “WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES, AND HE GAVE **GIFTS** TO MEN.”

Ep 4.11 And He **gave** some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* **pastors** and teachers,

- C. Divine involvement doesn’t elevate the servant status, but point to a serious responsibility

1. A faithful, Bible-believing pastor is a great gift to any church

I am so thankful for the good pastors I had through the years of my development and training.

2. Our text calls on such pastors to be on guard (Ac 20.28)
- a. Be on guard for yourselves
- b. Be on guard for the flock

⁷ Bock, 630.

3. Why? Verse 29-30

Ac 20.29-30 "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;³⁰ and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Conclusion:

Proposition: Through the proper function of the pastoral office, God means to protect His flock.

We all can probably tell stories of men who failed in this function, one way or another.

Some men, called to protect the flock, were instead predators.

Some men, called to take oversight, instead ignored their responsibility, and served themselves.

What are we to do? If we want to be faithful to God, we have to look out for the needs of the flock, feed them faithfully from the word, and do diligence to guard from predators within and without.