

The Invisible Pastor

by Greg Stiekes¹

It is a curious irony of the NT church that, though the office of the pastor is given such a prominent place in the growth and development of the Lord's people, it is nearly impossible to identify clearly from the Scripture a single pastor by name. Local ministers and their ordination are ubiquitous in the Book of Acts, and the prominent subject matter of three of Paul's letters, typically referred to as "the pastoral epistles," is the qualification and establishment of pastors and their churches. We may also deduce based on the number of churches mentioned from Acts to Revelation the ordination of hundreds of pastors who oversaw these local assemblies. Besides the ten cities with churches to whom Paul wrote and those seven whom the Lord addresses personally in Revelation 2–3, the NT mentions in particular the church at Syrian Antioch (Acts 13:1) and Cenchreae (Rom 16:1). Beyond these, there are at least twelve identifiable cities where it is implied that a church had been established.² Sometimes numbers of churches are mentioned according to regions, such as Judea, Galilee, Samaria, Phoenicia, Asia, Macedonia, Crete, Pontus, Cappadocia, and Bithynia (Acts 9:31; 15:3, 41; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Cor 8:1; Titus 1:5; Jas 5:14; 1 Pet 1:1).³ We must also bear in mind that in these cities there could have been any number of local congregations or house churches present, each requiring pastoral leadership.⁴ Furthermore, though no specific number of pastors was required for each congregation, it would not have been unusual for a single local assembly to have more than one pastor.⁵

With all the attention the NT gives to the office we commonly refer to as "the pastor," one would expect to see several pastors clearly identified in its pages. Yet, the reader of the NT is hard put to

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² For example, Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Jesus and the Twelve* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 2:1231, says that Paul's meeting with the Ephesian elders at Miletus (Acts 20:17–38) implies that a church had already been established there. Likewise, other established congregations are implied when the text indicates that significant ministry or numbers of believers are already present in these locations: Damascus (Acts 9:1–2), Lydda, Sharon, and Joppa (Acts 9:35–36, 42), Caesarea (Acts 8:40; 10:48), Cyprus and Cyrene (Acts 11:20), Tyre (Acts 21:3–4), Puteoli (Acts 28:13–14), Troas (2 Cor 2:12–13), and Hierapolis (Col 4:13).

³ The ministry of Paul alone no doubt produced numbers of churches that are never mentioned by name, including those that may have been planted before his first missionary journey. David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 449.

⁴ Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (2004; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 86–87, analyzes the reality of the earliest Christian communities gathering in villas for worship and the number of house churches that must have been represented in Jerusalem after 3,000 were converted.

⁵ Most of the references to "pastors" in the NT could refer to more than one pastor in a single congregation, or a single pastor in multiple congregations in an urban area. For example, when Paul writes to the Philippians addressing "the bishops and deacons," the likelihood that there was more than one house church in Philippi renders untenable any serious conclusion discerning how many "bishops" served each congregation. However, Luke's report that Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders for them in every church" (Acts 14:23) and James's instruction to "call for the elders of the church" (Jas 5:14) demonstrate that some congregations had more than one local pastor.

identify a single pastor by name. Shepherds of local churches dot the landscape of the early church in every part of the empire, but they are virtually invisible in the text. This observation is even more extraordinary when we compare the anonymous nature of the NT pastor with the culture of the high-profile pastor today. In the modern West, churches are known by their pastors, whose names often appear on the signs in front of their buildings. Pastors with large churches are celebrated as successful ministers of the gospel, and some pastors even enjoy household name recognition. This does not, however, appear to be the way pastors were regarded in the days of the early church.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the virtual invisibility of the pastor in the NT and to briefly explore the implications of the “invisible pastor” for local church ministry. We will begin by establishing the criteria that would allow us to identify pastors, and then we will use those criteria to see if we can find any.

The Identifying Marks of a Pastor in the NT

The Marks of Pastoral Terminology

In order to identify those who serve as pastors in the NT, we must first determine how to recognize them. But such a project is more complicated than it might seem, for no single person is actually called a “pastor,” literally a “shepherd” (ποιμήν), of the Lord’s people except the Lord himself. Jesus is “the good shepherd” (John 10:11), “the great shepherd” (Heb 13:20), and “the chief Shepherd” (ἀρχιποίμην, 1 Pet 5:4).⁶ Otherwise, the only place the term *shepherd* is used to describe those who lead the church is Ephesians 4:11, where Paul refers to them as “pastors and teachers.” But even here there is a perennial discussion about whether Paul’s phrase, καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν . . . ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους (“and he gave . . . pastors and teachers”), should be interpreted as referring to a single office (“pastor-teachers”) or two.⁷ In other words, Paul may not have intended to use the term as a formal title but only as an illustrative reference to the pastor’s task. This observation coincides with the way various NT authors use the verb form (ποιμαίνω) to refer to the caring activity of the one who leads the church (John 21:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2; Jude 1:12). In fact, Paul may have used the term *shepherd* in Ephesians 4:11 precisely because he had encouraged the Ephesians elders in particular to shepherd their “flock” (Acts 20:28).

Two other terms are used more prominently in the NT to refer to the office of the pastor, bearing in mind that in the early days of the church there had not been enough time for these terms to become standardized. Accordingly, the terms *overseer* (ἐπίσκοπος) and *elder* (πρεσβύτερος) refer

⁶ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright ©2016 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁷ Whether the two terms should be combined or not, both refer to ongoing ministry within the local assembly. Excellent treatments of this interpretive issue appear in the commentary literature: Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 249–50; Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 542–47; Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 275–76; and Constantine R. Campbell, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 178–79.

interchangeably to the pastoral role, the former being of Greek origin and the latter of Jewish.⁸ The term *overseer* (sometimes translated “bishop”) as a church office is found only in the speech or letters of Paul (Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1, 2; Titus 1:7) and was used in the sense of one who superintends or presides over the affairs of the Christian community.⁹ In fact, in one of the earliest noncanonical Christian writings, the *Didache* (c. 100), the term *overseer* is still used to refer to the pastoral office. The author appears to channel Paul’s words from 1 Timothy 3 when he instructs, “elect for yourselves bishops [“overseers”] and deacons who are worthy of the Lord, gentle men who are not fond of money, who are true and approved” (*Did* 15.1).¹⁰

Nevertheless, the term *elder* is clearly the preferred NT term, appropriated intuitively from its Jewish use during the earliest days of the church that sprang from Jewish soil.¹¹ The role of the elder in the Christian community followed naturally as the growth of the church outpaced the apostles’ number and abilities to manage it. First, deacons were elected to assist with the daily needs of believers (Acts 6:1–7), and sometime later elders were obviously ordained.¹² By the time Barnabas and Saul carried relief funds to the church in Jerusalem in Acts 11:27–30, elders had already been established there, serving alongside the apostles to care for the church (e.g., Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4). Indeed, the very early, Jewish letter of James already assumes the leadership of elders in the church (Jas 5:14). Also, after Paul had established churches in the Galatian region on his first missionary journey, it was a matter of course for him, requiring no comment by Luke, to appoint elders “in every church” (Acts 14:23).

Furthermore, the term *elder* appears to be the dominant term among the three. In Acts 20:17, Luke says that Paul called to Miletus the “elders” of the Ephesian church, though he tells them that the Holy Spirit has made them “overseers” over the “flock” that they must shepherd (20:28). Paul instructs Titus to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). Also, Peter addresses the leaders of the church primarily as “elders,” though he also instructs them to “shepherd the flock of God” (ποιμαίνω) by “exercising oversight” (ἐπισκοπέω) (1 Pet 5:1–2).

⁸ See, for example, Titus 1:5 and 7, where Paul refers to “elders,” then calls them “overseers” with no distinction. Though not a unanimous opinion, especially in the past few decades, the broad, scholarly understanding of the use of these terms “indifferently” in the NT is defended as far back as J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians*, 4th ed. (London: MacMillan, 1878), 95–96. This understanding has been more recently defended by Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, SBL 57 (New York: Lang, 2003), who analyzes the two terms in their Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts respectively and then demonstrates how they are used interchangeably in the early church.

⁹ *TDNT* 2:615–617; *NIDNTT* 1:190–92. Significantly, Peter refers to Jesus as “the Shepherd (ποιμήν) and Overseer (ἐπίσκοπος) of your souls” (1 Pet 2:25).

¹⁰ Not only are overseers and deacons the two offices Paul speaks of in 1 Timothy 3:1–12, but also the four qualifications mentioned here seem to correspond in the same order, though randomly, with Paul’s list of qualifications.

¹¹ The “elders” of the Jewish community served as spiritual leaders in various capacities, often serving alongside priests and scribes (Matt 16:21; 21:23; 26:57; 27:41; Mark 14:43; Luke 7:3; Acts 4:5, 8, 23; 6:12; etc.). For an excellent treatment of the church’s appropriation of the role of the Jewish elder in the Christian community, see Timothy Willis, “Elders in the Old Testament Community,” *Leaven* 2, no. 1 (1992): 8–12, available at <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol2/iss1/4>.

¹² A helpful and insightful history of this progression can be seen in Schnabel, 1:426–35.

It should come as no surprise, then, that as the terminology of church leadership became standardized the term *elder* became the primary nomenclature to refer to the person we now commonly call the “pastor.” In the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (early second century), we can clearly see that the terms *ἐπίσκοπος* (“overseer,” or “bishop”) and *πρεσβύτερος* (“elder”) had developed to refer exclusively to two distinct offices. In Ignatius, the term *overseer* (*ἐπίσκοπος*) consistently refers to a regional bishop who oversees the “elders” (*πρεσβύτεροι*) in various urban centers. For example, Ignatius writes to the church at Magnesia, “I urge you to hasten to do all things in the harmony of God, with the bishop [*ἐπίσκοπος*] presiding in the place of God and the presbyters [*πρεσβύτεροι*] in the place of the council of the apostles” (Ign. *Magn.* 6.1).¹³

By the end of the second century, this hierarchy of church governance reflected in Ignatius and his contemporaries began to open the way for sacerdotalism. Nevertheless, the post-apostolic church was merely continuing the form of church leadership modeled for them through the work of the apostles and their co-laborers, especially seen in the ministry of Paul. For example, the apostle Paul established churches (1 Cor 3:10; Rom 15:20) but depended upon his associates to oversee the proper establishment of those churches, including the ordination of pastors. Thus, he reminds Titus, “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” (Titus 1:5). Paul charged Timothy with the same set of responsibilities, including the ordination of “elders” (1 Tim 5:17–22). Though Paul refers to these elders as “overseers” when he begins to list their qualifications (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:7), there is no instance where Paul instructs Timothy or Titus to ordain “overseers.” Furthermore, this succession of church leadership is reflected in Paul’s instruction to Timothy, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2).

The Marks of Pastoral Responsibility

Because the terminology for the pastoral office had not been standardized in the first century, we must also attempt to identify pastors by their ministerial tasks. This approach can also seem complicated, for while pastors are called to perform certain ministry tasks, not all who performed those tasks in the NT church held the pastoral office. For example, Paul says that a pastor must have an unusual ability to teach and defend sound doctrine (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9). Yet the apostles and their co-laborers also taught and preached (Acts 2:42; 5:42; 15:35; 1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 4:1–5; Titus 2:1). Likewise, the pastor who shepherds his people according to the example of the chief Shepherd, Jesus, should feed and tend the flock with great compassion and sacrifice. Yet it is Paul the Apostle who offers us one of the best examples of this kind of service in his ministry to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:1–12). So, while there are ministers in the NT who are not “pastors,” they may from time to time fulfill a pastoral role.

¹³ This distinction of the office of “bishop” overseeing the local “elders” is consistent throughout Ignatius’s letters. E.g., *Ignat Trall* 2.2; 3.1; 13.2; *Mag* 13.1; *Eph* 2.2; 4.1; 20.2; *Rom* 9.1; *Smyrn* 8.1, 2; 12.2; *Phil* 1.1–3.1. Intriguingly, Ignatius also uses the terminology of the pastor (shepherd), but only metaphorically to encourage the church to follow its regional bishop as sheep follow their shepherd (*Ignat Rom* 9.1; *Phil* 2.1).

Nevertheless, at least one quality of a pastor sets him apart from other offices. While many teachers and preachers of the gospel are mobile, the pastor, by design, remains local, ministering on a long-term basis to a single flock. This distinction may be seen in the list of “gifts” that Christ gave to the church in Ephesians 4:11. “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.” Though these offices each share in proclamation of truth for the building up of the body of Christ (Eph 4:12–16), they were given by the Lord to fulfill different ministries for the birth and growth of the church. In the same letter, Paul has already referred to apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20) as being the “primary and authoritative recipients and proclaimers of revelation.”¹⁴ Their ministries laid the foundation for truth from the Lord himself all across the empire. The evangelists were itinerant proclaimers of this truth like Philip, who preached in various locations for the advancement of the gospel and the establishment of churches (Acts 8:4–40).

Though we may see apostles, prophets, and evangelists staying in a single location for some time, the office of pastor-teacher is a local gift by design.¹⁵ This is the reason Peter encourages pastors to “shepherd the flock of God *that is among you*” (1 Pet 5:2, ποιμάνατε τὸ ἐν ὑμῖν ποίμνιον τοῦ θεοῦ), and to be living examples to those in their charge (5:3).¹⁶ When Paul meets with the Ephesians elders, he reminds them that the Holy Spirit himself made them overseers to shepherd a particular flock, and charges them to remain and defend their people (Acts 20:28–29). Titus is stationed in Crete, yet only for the time needed to fulfill the mission of appointing (local) elders in every town, men who will remain (Titus 1:5). And Paul is able to encourage the Thessalonian church to “respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thess 5:12–13). So, pastors may be recognized by the fact that they discharge spiritual gifts of preaching, teaching, and overseeing at the day-to-day, congregational level, with the understanding that they are ordained to serve for the long haul in a single location.

In Search of NT Pastors

Searching by Way of Pastoral Terminology

Based on the ways pastors are identified in the NT, the search for pastors should follow upon the lines of both pastoral terminology and pastoral responsibility. Beginning with terminology, we noted earlier that no specific church leader is called a “pastor” in the NT. What about the other terms?

In Philippians 1:1, Paul addresses his letter to the Philippian church “with the overseers and deacons.” When Paul summons the Ephesians elders in Acts 20, he also identifies them as “overseers” (v. 28). But these two groups of unnumbered men are as close as the NT comes to identifying specific

¹⁴ Lincoln, 153. He also remarks, “The apostles were those with special authority from their commissioning by the risen Lord, while the prophets were those with charismatic authority.”

¹⁵ Hermann W. Beyer, *TDNT* 2:615, observes that the overseer “never refers to the wandering or charismatic preacher, but only to one who is localized.”

¹⁶ The pastoral qualifications themselves assume that the church is able to observe their pastors for an indefinite period of time, noting, for instance, how they manage their households and their children and how they are perceived by others in the community at large (1 Tim 3:4, 7; Titus 1:6).

“overseers.” There is a possibility that among the group of elders who came to see Paul at Miletus are Aquila and Prisca, who followed Paul to Ephesus in Acts 18, hosted a church in their home (1 Cor 16:19) and are greeted by Paul in his final letter to Timothy in Ephesus, along with the household of Onesiphorus (2 Tim 4:19). But whether they were considered pastors will be touched on below.

In searching for those who are called “elders,” however, we find two men in the NT who self-identify as elders and another who may be counted among the elders of the Jerusalem church. The first self-proclaimed elder is Peter, who writes (1 Pet 5:1–3),

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

It is somewhat surprising that Peter the apostle should identify himself as an “elder.”¹⁷ So, in what sense does Peter, who is first and foremost an apostle of Christ, refer to himself as a “fellow elder” (συμπρεσβύτερος)? There is some consensus in the commentary literature that Peter is not counting himself as an elder of the church in the same sense as the elders to whom he is writing. Rather, with true humility, not desiring to magnify his authority, Peter is encouraging the elders by identifying with them as one who had himself received a shepherding commission from Jesus Christ (John 21:15–17).¹⁸ This understanding coincides perfectly with Peter’s admonishment to lead in an undomineering way (1 Pet 5:3). Thus, Peter is simply saying, “Your task in your local congregation is the same in essence as mine in caring for the church more widely.”¹⁹ Peter, then, is not claiming to be the pastor of a local assembly.²⁰

Another example of a self-proclaimed elder is the author of 2 and 3 John, which begin, respectively, with the words, “The elder to the elect lady and her children” (2 John 1:1) and “The elder to the beloved Gaius” (3 John 1:1). The reference to himself as “the elder” could mean that the author of these letters is an elder in the sense of leading a local church.²¹ Given the traditional view that the

¹⁷ In fact, Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 300, says that the self-designation of the author as an “elder” has caused some scholars to reject Petrine authorship of the letter.

¹⁸ For example, Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 232; Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 176.

¹⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 161.

²⁰ Agreement on this point is not universal, however. Jobes, 300, believes that during the first century an apostle could still be considered an “elder” in his church and “throughout the church at large.” However, we have already noted that various offices may share pastoral responsibilities. And being an elder in the church at large is a different kind of leadership than serving as a pastor in a single location. Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 323, surmises that the term *elder* at this point in the history of the church may also have been used as a general reference to leadership and not to any formal office. He finds affirmation for this view in the fact that the word *elders* in the admonition that follows in 1 Peter 5:5, “You who are younger, be subject to the elders,” seems to refer merely to older people.

²¹ So Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, WBC (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1984), 317.

author is John the Apostle, however, there are several reasons to believe that he, like Peter, is styling himself as an “elder” in a non-official sense.²² It could be that John, by calling himself “the” elder (ὁ πρεσβύτερος), is writing simply in a tender and fatherly manner as the last living apostle, an aged man who refers affectionately to the church as his “little children” (1 John 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21; cf. 2 John 1:1).²³ It could also be that John is pointing to the fact that he is an elder over other elders in the same sense as “overseer.”²⁴ Either way, we should not take an apostle’s reference to himself as an “elder” to mean that he is the pastor of a single local church.

One final example is a possible allusion to the eldership of James, the brother of Jesus, who appears in Acts 15 to preside among other elders over the Jerusalem church. James is not called an “elder,” but he is among the group identified as “the apostles and the elders” who convene to discuss the matter of Gentile inclusion in the churches (Acts 15:4–6). At the climax of the deliberations, James appears to have the final word (Acts 15:13–18). Because James was not a disciple of Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry and was not, therefore, numbered among the original apostles, it would appear that James must be numbered with the elders here. In fact, Eusebius reports that James was chosen by the other apostles to hold the “throne” (θρόνος) of the office of (regional) bishop (ἐπισκοπή) of the church of Jerusalem (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 2.1.2).

However, Wayne Grudem makes a convincing case on textual grounds that James is actually to be counted not among the elders but among the apostles.²⁵ Paul states in Galatians 1:19 that when he went to Jerusalem he “saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother.” And when Paul recounts the resurrection appearances of Jesus, he includes James among the apostles: “⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles” (1 Cor 15:7–9a). Eckhard Schnabel concurs with the observation that James was actually an apostle, for it is the only explanation for James’s prominence in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13–21; 21:18–23).²⁶ Most likely, James was not numbered among the elders of the church but oversaw the elders as an apostle of Christ.

In summary, when we follow the trail of NT terminology for the pastoral office, our search yields only three high-profile ministers of Christ: two original apostles and another who had, it appears,

²² For a basic scholarly defense of the Johannine authorship of the Letters of John, see D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 670–75.

²³ Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 204. Also, Eusebius refers to John as “John the elder,” with reference to his advanced years (*Ecc. Hist.* 3.39).

²⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 60. Marshall admits that we have no other example of “elder” used in the sense of regional bishop. But there is no reason why the aged John would not have used this term to refer to his fatherly care over the churches in the Ephesus region. Smalley, 344, reasons that the term *elder* indicates the author’s leadership over several congregations.

²⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 1118–19. Grudem argues that once we recognize that the number of apostles could be expanded, evidenced by Paul’s repeated claim to have been added to the apostolic number, we recognize that the NT actually names others as apostles, such as James and Barnabas (Acts 14:14). Grudem also says that recognizing James as an apostle offers full apostolic authority to his letter, though he makes no mention of Jude in this respect.

²⁶ *Early Christian Mission*, 1:433–35.

become an apostle. Needless to say, these men were not the typical NT pastors helping to lead a single assembly. Rather, they were shepherds of such pastors.

Searching by Way of Pastoral Responsibility

We must turn now from our search for the pastor based on terminology to a search based on analysis of pastoral responsibility. We are looking for those who not only exercise pastoral gifts (preaching, teaching, overseeing) but who also remain stationed in a single place, ministering to a local congregation.

These criteria immediately rule out several candidates who exercise pastoral gifts but whose role is to move from place to place, especially serving as co-laborers with or assistants to the apostles.²⁷ Timothy and Titus are prime examples. It is common for people to assume that these two men are pastors because they are the recipients of what the church has come to call the “pastoral epistles.” But as we have seen, the mission of these two men was to expand the ministry of the apostle Paul by establishing pastors and churches.²⁸ As such, they moved from place to place where Paul had need of them. Timothy joined Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:1–3), was sent back to Thessalonica before rejoining Paul in Corinth (1 Thess 3:1–6), ended up in Ephesus with Paul (Acts 19:22), was sent to Macedonia (Acts 18:5), and to Corinth (1 Cor 4:17; 16:10, 11), and eventually ended up with Paul in his Roman imprisonment (Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; Phlm 1:1) before being stationed in Ephesus where he receives 1 and 2 Timothy. We know far less about Titus’s assignments, but Paul used him to deal with the difficult situation with the Corinthian church (2 Cor 8:23; 12:18) and to minister among the Cretans where Paul wrote to him.

Some lesser-known associates of Paul appear to exercise pastoral gifts. But they all appear to be mobile, relocating from time to time, consciously placed by Paul to assist him in various circumstances. For example, Paul commends Epaphras to the Colossian church as one who taught them, one who “is a faithful minister of Christ” on their behalf (Col 1:7). In fact, Paul tells the Colossians that Epaphras is “always struggling” in his prayers for their spiritual maturity (Col 4:12). This sounds like pastoral ministry. But Paul himself also taught and prayed for his churches (e.g., Col 1:3–4). And when Paul writes to the Colossian church, Epaphras does not return to Colossae when the letter is dispatched but remains with Paul, who refers to him as “my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus” (Phlm 1:23). Besides this, it is clear that Epaphras has more than one church he is overseeing, for Paul says that Epaphras has worked hard for the Colossian church as well as for the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col 4:13). Epaphras, then, is not a local pastor but one of Paul’s co-laborers.

²⁷ Margaret M. Mitchell, “New Testament Envoys in the Context of Greco-Roman Diplomatic and Epistolary Conventions: The Example of Timothy and Titus,” *SBL* 111, no. 4 (1992): 641–62, helpfully explores the essential mission of the apostolic co-laborers. Mitchell demonstrates that these representatives of Paul were no mere assistants, but those who represented the apostle’s presence all over the empire, fulfilling intermediary roles to accomplish tasks that even Paul himself could not have achieved.

²⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Commentary on 1–2 Timothy & Titus*, BTCP (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2017), 5–6, discusses the problematic nature of referring to the letters to Timothy and Titus as the “pastoral epistles,” noting that, “technically, Timothy and Titus were apostolic delegates, not local pastors.” Grudem, 1130, places Timothy and Titus in a special category of “apostolic assistants.”

Similar observations can be made about Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (1 Cor 16:15–18), and about Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25; 4:18), Archippus (Phlm 1:2; Col 4:17), Tychicus (Eph 6:21; Col 4:7), Onesiphorus (2 Tim 1:16–18), and Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:2). All appear to exercise some measure of responsibility one could construe as pastoral, but a careful reading of the text reveals that they are most likely part of Paul’s mobile co-workers. Of these, a few deserve special mention.

The question of identifying Archippus as a local pastor arises for two reasons. First, Paul includes Archippus alongside Philemon and Apphia as one of the recipients of the Philemon letter, referring to him as “fellow soldier” (συστρατιώτης) followed by the words, “and the church in your house” (Phlm 1:2). Second, he calls out Archippus by name in Colossians 4:17 when he instructs the church, “And say to Archippus, ‘See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.’” However, the host of the house church that Paul speaks of in Philemon 1:2 is clearly Philemon, the first addressee of the letter and therefore its primary recipient.²⁹ Also, though Archippus’s ministry must be somewhat urgent for Paul to mention it, the nature of that ministry is unclear. The general word “ministry” (διακονία) could refer to any activity from collecting relief funds for the poor to any form of teaching or preaching ministry, whether evangelistic or pastoral.³⁰

Even though the references to Archippus are brief and lacking in specific context, we may be able to at least rule out Archippus as fulfilling the role of a local pastor with three observations. First, the expression “fulfill one’s ministry” is used by Paul only two other times but each in the context of his apostolic mission, not the context of local church ministry.³¹ Second, Paul uses the term *συστρατιώτης* (“fellow-soldier”) in his letters to identify only one other person, namely Epaphroditus, who is clearly one of Paul’s co-workers and one who “nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life” (Phil 2:25–30). Based on the normal use of the term *συστρατιώτης* in a military context and the way Paul uses military language, it is not likely that Paul would apply the term to Archippus unless there was some way in which he, like Paul, behaved or had been asked to behave as a soldier, sharing in Paul’s suffering (2 Tim 2:3), or risking his life for the sake of the gospel (2 Cor 1:9; Phil 1:21; 2 Tim 4:6).³² This ministry would appear to go beyond that of a normal, local pastor. Third, it seems strange that Paul would admonish the church as a body to charge Archippus with the fulfillment of his ministry if he were the pastor of the congregation. What seems more likely is that Archippus is a young co-worker

²⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 381–82. Moo says that, notably, John Knox argued that Archippus was the main recipient of the letter, that he was the owner of Onesimus, and that the church met in his house. But few have followed this reading.

³⁰ Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Colossians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 397, prefers the view that Archippus is being urged to fulfill an assignment to collect funds, with reference to 2 Cor 8:4; 9:1, 12–13; 11:8; Rom 15:31).

³¹ Paul writes directly to his co-worker, Timothy, to urge him to “fulfill” his “ministry” (2 Tim 4:5). He also uses the expression to speak of his own fulfilled ministry (Rom 15:19).

³² Nathan Leach, “Epaphroditus and Archippus, Paul’s Fellow Soldiers: Reexamining Paul’s Rhetorical Use of *συστρατιώτης*,” *JBL* 140, no. 1 (2021): 187–206, demonstrates that Paul is not using this terminology loosely to simply refer to a “co-worker.” Most likely, Archippus has done or is being asked to do something risky in the fulfillment of his ministry.

with Paul, possibly Philemon and Apphia's son, making it more natural for Paul to encourage this young man in the presence of the congregation.³³

Priscilla and Aquila also deserve special mention. They help educate Apollos (Acts 18:24–26), and they host a church in their home (1 Cor 16:19). However, Paul refers to them as his “fellow workers in Christ Jesus” (Rom 16:3), and they travel with him from Corinth to Ephesus (Acts 18:18).

Nevertheless, the fact that Priscilla and Aquila have a church in their house (1 Cor 16:19) raises a question about the spiritual leadership of that house church. Roger Gehring, relying in part on Alastair Campbell, suggests that the family structure of the ancient household would have helped to determine the leadership of the nascent church. The head of the household, for instance, would naturally assume the leadership of the congregation.³⁴ This idea makes sense on some level, for Paul refers to the church at the “household of God” (1 Tim 3:15), and the qualifications for a pastor suggest that he must be a good father, managing his household well (1 Tim 3:4–5). This theory implies, then, that Aquila, alongside Priscilla, would under normal circumstances have served as the pastor of the church that was in his home. This also indicates that Philemon would have overseen the church in his house (Phlm 1:2) and even, as some argue, that Nympha would have overseen the church in her house (Col 4:15).³⁵

We cannot assume, however, that the head of the home naturally provided the leadership for the church that met there. To begin with, the apostles would not have been so indiscriminate as to ordain pastoral leadership on the basis of owning property alone. Second, offering one's home as a matter of hospitality was common in that day. For this reason, Lydia insisted that Paul and his co-workers live with her during the Philippian mission (Acts 16:14–15). Consequently, the young church gathered in her home (Acts 16:40). Lydia would have therefore shown hospitality to those coming under her roof, but there is no implication that she would have provided any measure of church leadership.³⁶ Likewise, when Paul writes from Corinth to Rome, “Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you” (Rom 16:23), we know nothing more than that Gaius was hosting part of the Roman congregation.

There is another line of inquiry that we find in the Lord's messages to the seven churches of Revelation 2–3. Each message is addressed to “the angel of the church.” Could Jesus be using the word “angel” (ἄγγελος, messenger), as some have interpreted, to refer to a human pastor?³⁷ Most modern interpreters answer no, taking the use of ἄγγελος here to refer in some sense to a literal angel or to the

³³ G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 362, and F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 186, who sees the potential for Archippus's embarrassment.

³⁴ Gehring, 103.

³⁵ McKnight, 394–95.

³⁶ The same could be said for Phoebe, “a servant of the church at Cenchreae,” whom Paul calls a “patron” (προστάτις) of himself and other believers. It is likely, then, that Phoebe was a woman of means who used her home to provide a place for believers to stay or even meet regularly. See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 915–16.

³⁷ These are typically older commentators such as Zahn, Brownlee, Lenski, Walvoord, and Hendrickson, according to Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 99; though also Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, NAC 39 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2012), 78–80, with some reserve.

personification of the church in angelic form.³⁸ These interpretations not only correspond with the way angels are presented in the remainder of the Book of Revelation, but they also make better sense logistically. It is implausible that Jesus would address his message to a single “messenger” (i.e., pastor), when there were many house churches and pastors represented by each of the seven cities he names. But even if one could demonstrate conclusively that these angels are, in fact, human pastors, it still leaves the identity of these unnamed recipients shrouded in mystery.

Finally, in scouring the NT to consider the names of men and women who were known to Paul or to other apostles, who were servants to them and to the churches, we may surmise that a few served as pastors in their congregations. Two texts point us in this direction. The first, Acts 13:1–3, reads,

¹ Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Clearly, these five men are identified as “prophets and teachers,” two of the offices that Christ gave to the church in Ephesians 4:11. Prior to this event, Barnabas had brought Saul to Antioch from Tarsus where, Luke says, “For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people” (Acts 11:26). Sometime during that year, prophets had arrived from Jerusalem (11:27), though we cannot know whether the other three men mentioned in Acts 13:1 were among them. Neither is it possible to decide which of the three remaining are “prophets” and which are “teachers.” Likely, it is best to follow John Polhill’s suggestion that Luke is simply using these two words to refer to the men who provided leadership for the congregation, i.e., “prophet-teachers” or “prophetic teachers.”³⁹ Still, it is striking that Luke does not refer to any of these men as “elders,” even though he has already used the term to describe the leadership in the Jerusalem church (11:30), and that Saul already knew to establish elders in the churches he would soon launch (14:23). Perhaps Luke refers to the leadership of this entire group in terms of their giftedness rather than their position because Saul and Barnabas are considered apostles. Nevertheless, at least three of these men may embody what we would call a local pastor.

The second text where we find evidence for local pastors is John’s third letter, addressed to “the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth” (3 John 1:1). Might Gaius have been one of the elders of a congregation over which John the Apostle exercised oversight? Stephen Smalley concludes that Gaius was “an unknown Christian leader, perhaps ordained.”⁴⁰ Evidence that Gaius was a church leader in

³⁸ Osborne, 98–99; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 217–19; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 63.

³⁹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 288–89.

⁴⁰ Smalley, 344.

some capacity is suggested by a church tradition that says he became the bishop of Pergamum.⁴¹ I. Howard Marshall, on the other hand, states that Gaius is simply a member of one of John's churches and there is no indication that he holds any official position in that church.⁴² It is difficult to come to a strong conclusion regarding Gaius.

However, John informs Gaius about the negative example of another man, Diotrephes, who had been troubling another one of the churches. John says (3 John 1:9–10),

⁹ I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. ¹⁰ So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.

Identifying the formal position of Diotrephes in the church centers on the statement that he “likes to put himself first,” a translation of the verb φιλοπρωτεύω, to love the chief place or to desire prominence. The question, then, is whether Diotrephes is a regular member of the church who aspires to take control of the congregation, or an elder whose position has gone to his head. Smalley takes Diotrephes to be a “powerful leader,” though still a “layman.”⁴³ Yet it is difficult to think that a layman in the church would have the ability to excommunicate people from the assembly, especially one who was speaking out harshly against an apostle such as John (v. 10). Surely the elders would have handled such a situation. Here is a man, then, who appears to exercise pastoral authority, however wrongfully, who is stationed at a single location. We cannot conclude with certainty, but it is not without irony that, in the entire NT, the single name that is most definitely associated with local pastoral ministry may be none other than Diotrephes.

Our search for named pastors in the NT, therefore, has yielded scant results. We may believe that Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen of Acts 13:1 functioned as local pastors in the church. There is also a slight probability that the addressee of John's third letter, Gaius, was a pastor, and that even more probably, with some irony, the villain of John's letter, Diotrephes, exercised pastoral authority. Nevertheless, none of these men are specifically identified by the leading terminology used to identify such leadership (pastor, overseer, elder). We discover their possible identities only by a careful analysis of the text in a pastoral context.

Additional Factors in the Search for NT Pastors

The virtual invisibility of the local pastor within the pages of the NT must be considered within the context of additional factors that make this observation even more peculiar. The point was already made in the introduction that there must have been hundreds of functioning local pastors in multiple

⁴¹ According to *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.46.9 (fourth century), John installed Gaius as the regional bishop at Pergamum.

⁴² Marshall, 81. Likewise, Kruse, 220, says that “there is no indication that [Gaius] is the head of a house church or holds any position of authority in the church.”

⁴³ Smalley, 356.

regions and cities in the days of the early church. We may add to this the sheer importance of the pastor to the life of the local church. The pastoral office is the only one in the NT that is given two lists of qualifications, not to mention numerous instructions through Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus that relate directly to the responsibilities of the pastor's calling and oversight. Furthermore, the church is called upon in several locations to imitate pastors and submit to their authority (1 Thess 5:12–13; 1 Thess 5:17–18; Heb 13:7, 17; 1 Pet 5:5).

Also, there does not appear to be any hesitation on the part of NT authors to identify and even commend those who fellowship in the church and serve in various capacities. We read the names of apostles, prophets, evangelists, deacons, servants, co-laborers, fellow-prisoners, letter-bearers, brothers and sisters, disciples, and so on. In the pages of the NT, we meet “the apostles, Barnabas and Paul” (Acts 14:14), “Phoebe, a servant” (Rom 16:1),⁴⁴ “Philip, the evangelist” (Acts 21:8), “a disciple named Tabitha” (Acts 9:36), “a prophet named Agabus” (Acts 21:10), “James, a servant” (Jas 1:1), and so forth. It is therefore all the more curious that we do not find even one reference to a specific person who is explicitly named a pastor, overseer, or elder.⁴⁵

Moreover, the fact that there are no examples of a person explicitly given a pastoral title in the NT does not appear to be because their names were not widely known. Eusebius, for example, is aware of several names of pastors from the first century, especially names of those who were martyred. Furthermore, Schnabel, citing Richard Bauckham, believes that Eusebius may have unwittingly supplied the names of the elders who served in the Jerusalem church under James.⁴⁶ Eusebius lists fifteen men he identifies as bishops who succeeded James until the siege of Hadrian in 132: Simeon, Justus, Zacchaeus, Tobias, Benjamin, John, Matthias, Philip, Seneca, Justus, Levi, Ephres, Joseph, and Judas (*Ecc. Hist.* 4.5.1–3). Historians have puzzled over Eusebius's list because of the necessary brevity of each bishop's tenure if indeed all fifteen men served in the seventy years between James and Hadrian.⁴⁷ But a solution is suggested by the *Epistle of James to Quadratus*, an apocryphal writing independent of Eusebius, where James ostensibly writes, “Philip, Senicus, Justus, Levi, Aphre, and

⁴⁴ Some translations such as the NIV and the NLT refer to Phoebe as a “deacon” of the church at Cenchreae, rendering the word *διάκονος* as if it refers here to the formal office. But this is a matter of interpretation. Of the one hundred appearances of *διάκονος* or its cognates in the NT, only five are commonly translated using the word “deacon” (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8, 10, 12, 13). Most other occurrences are translated using derivatives of “servant” or “minister.” *Διάκονος* can refer in context to any person who serves others beneficially, such as a household servant (Matt 22:13; John 2:5, 9), apostles and other ministers of the gospel (1 Cor 3:5, 6; Eph 3:7; 6:21; Col 1:23), and even pagan rulers (Rom 13:4). I have chosen to say with the ESV translation, “servant.” However, if, in fact, the translation should be “deacon” here, then Phoebe is the only named deacon in the NT.

⁴⁵ It is not until Ignatius's letter to the Magnesians that we finally see a clear example of pastors being addressed in a letter. Ignatius writes, “Since, then, I have been found worthy to see you through Damas, your bishop who is worthy of God, through your worthy presbyters Bassus and Apollonius . . .” (*Ignat Mag* 3.1).

⁴⁶ Schnabel, 1:431–32, citing Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 73–76.

⁴⁷ J. Edward Walters, “The Epistle of James to Quadratus,” trans. Brent Landau, Bradley Rice, and J. Edward Walters, in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Sources*, vol. 3, ed. by Tony Burke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 528, citing Roelof van den Broek, “Der Brief des Jakobus an Quadratus und das Problem des judenchristlichen Bischöfe von Jerusalem (Eusebius, HE IV, 5, 1–3),” in *Text and Testimony: Essays on New Testament and Apocryphal Literature in Honour of A. F. J. Klijn*, ed. Tjitze Baarda and A. F. J. Klijn (Kampen: Kok, 1988), 56–65.

Juda, renowned scribes of the Jews, came to me with their companions and confessed Christ, and they received baptism. And behold, they are disputing with their kindred over the writings of the prophets” (*Epist. Jas. Quad.*, 10). Because these servants of the church under James are identical both in name and order to some of Eusebius’s list of bishops, Bauckham believes that Eusebius is mistaken about the true identity of these men. It is entirely feasible that the first few men in Eusebius’s list served as bishops over the church in Jerusalem but that the other men on his list are actually the names of the elders who served under James, some if not all of whom were even present at the council in Acts 15.

Finally, we must consider the fact that references to pastors are absent from contexts where we would expect to find them. For example, it seems that Paul could easily have commended pastors or encouraged them in general for their faithful work in one of the conclusions of his letters to the churches, especially in those letters where he knew the people so well. But, as far as we can determine, he does not. More strikingly, Paul does not even address his letters to the pastors of these churches, but always or primarily to the church in general, and to “brothers” and “saints” (e.g., Rom 1:7, 13; 1 Cor 1:2, 10, 11; 2 Cor 1:2, 8; Gal 1:11; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1, 12; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1, 4; 2 Thess 1:1, 3). The only exception to this observation is Paul’s greeting to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons” (Phil 1:1). But even here, the church is the primary recipient, while the nameless church leadership is merely included “with” (σύν) the rest.

The fact that Paul even addresses important matters of church life and policy not to the church leadership but to the people in general throws the invisibility of pastors into even greater relief. Examples abound, but taking only the letter of 1 Corinthians, Paul lays before his “children” as their “father” (1 Cor 4:14–15) all the important and sometimes highly sensitive matters that were causing the church to be torn apart: their divisions (chs. 1–4), the high-profile instance of immorality (ch. 5), the issue of pagan courts (ch. 6), questions pertaining to marriage and divorce (ch. 7), eating food offered to idols (chs. 8–10), head coverings and the misuse of the Lord’s Table (ch. 11), the use and misuse of spiritual gifts (chs. 12–14), the doctrine of the Resurrection (ch. 15), and the collection for the suffering believers in Jerusalem (ch. 16). The way Paul addresses each of these matters puts the pastors on the same level as the other brothers and sisters in the community, as those of Paul’s children receiving instruction. Finally, at the end of the letter, Paul comes nearest to encouraging the church to follow its pastoral leadership, yet the identification of that leadership is characteristically vague. Paul commends the entire household of Stephanas for their example of devotion to the church and then instructs the church to “be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer” (1 Cor 16:15–16). Thus, Paul encourages the Corinthians to be subject to “the such” (τοῖς τοιούτοις). But who those laborers are among them will be up to them to determine.

The Implications of the Invisible Pastor for Local Church Ministry

Modern Christian authors who have an intriguing ability to take the EKG of the church and discern its health have been warning for some time now about the tendency pastors have to become the local attraction of their churches, even ministerial superstars. Pastors who are winsome speakers and world-class organizers can become the CEOs of their own kingdoms, the rock stars of their own venues. Some become recognized names in Christian households. Some even travel the world as

celebrated Christian personalities. But this picture is the antithesis of pastoral leadership in the NT, where we can scarcely discern in its pages a specific, local pastor, faithfully serving his congregation.

This foreign image of pastoral ministry is one of the reasons that John Piper (himself a household name among believers) seeks to encourage his fellow pastors in his book, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*. In no less than thirty-six passionate mini-sermons, Piper urges pastors not to professionalize their calling but to be purposefully and singularly devoted to Jesus Christ. He also warns that the temptation to be “professional” is not only for the CEO-types with their “three-piece suit and the stuffy upper floors,” but the pop-culture types also, “the understated professionalism of torn blue jeans and the savvy inner ring.” The former is learned by “pursing an MBA” but the latter by “being in the know about the ever-changing entertainment and media world” and learning to have a certain “ambiance, and tone, and idiom, and timing, and banter.”⁴⁸

Howard Snyder addressed this very issue nearly fifty years ago when he asked the question, “Must the pastor be a superstar?” Snyder writes,

I confess my admiration, perhaps slightly tinged with envy. Not because of the talent, really, the sheer ability. But for the success, the accomplishment. Here is a man who faithfully preaches the Word, sees lives transformed by Christ, sees his church growing. What sincere evangelical minister would not like to be in his shoes? Not to mention his parsonage.

But then he continues,

I think of all the struggling, mediocre pastors, looking on with holy envy (if there be such), measuring their own performance by Pastor Jones’s success and dropping another notch into discouragement or, perhaps, self-condemnation.

For after all, the problem is plain, isn’t it? The church needs more qualified pastors, better training. More alertness to guiding those talented young men God may be calling into the ministry. Better talent scouting to find the superstars.⁴⁹

No one is going to suggest that pastors perform their ministries incognito. To the contrary, we need strong examples of biblical pastoral ministry. But the mood of contemporary church leadership where pastors are promoted and celebrated and become the center of attention in their churches is far afield from the way the NT portrays pastoral ministry.

What should we take away from the observation that pastors in the NT are virtually invisible? First, we need to reflect seriously upon Piper’s criticism that the pastoral office has become “professionalized.” The office itself is certainly honored in the NT. But pastors are called by the Lord to humbly fill that office. They can be rebuked and removed (1 Tim 5:17–20). They serve alongside

⁴⁸ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013), viii–ix.

⁴⁹ Howard A. Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins: Church Structure in a Technological Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1975), 20–21.

their congregations (1 Cor 12:4–30). They are not called to be the center of attention in the church but are called to serve the Lord and their congregations sacrificially, after the example of Christ (1 Pet 5:1–4).

Second, the virtual invisibility of pastors should encourage the congregation to identify their own giftedness to serve one another in the body of Christ. It is common to hear the criticism that the church is not the pastor, that the body has to be engaged with one another, that the pastor should not be doing all the work of the ministry himself. Yet pastors themselves can create this problem. They can easily become the face of their church, the dominant presence on their church website, or worse, the main attraction in the worship services. Thus, they can invite upon themselves the kind of culture where they “run the show” because they have become the personality at the center of their church, rather than making themselves dependent on the congregation as all are dependent on Christ. The teaching of the apostle Paul in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12–14 about the use of believers’ gifts is addressed to the entire congregation, the pastor included. Church members will shy away from offering their gifts in service to Christ if pastors are always pushing ahead to perform ministry works in the sight of their congregations.

Third, the invisible pastor creates a shared-leadership approach to pastoral ministry that ought to be intuitive for a church that does not revolve around a single leader. As stated earlier, it seems evident that there was often more than one elder serving in any given congregation in the NT. A multiplicity of pastors encourages the unenvious and gracious sharing of the burdens of pastoral ministry among several men whom the Lord has called, while it also models the sharing of ministry for the entire church.

Fourth, the virtual invisibility of the NT pastor encourages pastors to focus primarily on the work that God has called them to do. They should be satisfied with ministering to their own congregations, performing the thankless tasks of a servant, even if no one will ever see, or know, or care. In today’s world of social media, it is all too tempting and too easy for pastors to seek recognition for their accomplishments by putting their lives on display, spending so much of their time blogging, becoming embroiled in meaningless online debates, or in other ways seeking recognition that they lack from merely pastoring their churches faithfully. May God give us pastors the grace to be satisfied with the invisible ministry to which he has called us, and to seek after recognition only from our meek and exalted Savior.

Finally, and most obviously, pastors need to be invisible so that they do not upstage the Lord himself. After all, the church should never love and follow their pastor more than they love and follow Christ. He must increase, and the pastor must decrease. This does not mean that the pastor is practically “invisible” to his congregation. But it means that, when people look at the church from the outside, they should not particularly notice him first. Instead, they should first see a body of people devoted to the Lord, each of them exercising his or her gifts, worshiping and serving together for the glory of the chief Shepherd.