

Are growth group leaders pastors?

Richard Sweatman •27 April 2017

Are growth group leaders pastors? If so, should we start calling them pastors? If you're a growth group leader, how would you feel about being called, or calling yourself, a pastor? If you're a growth group member, would you call your leader your pastor?

This is an important question. Terminology matters because terminology about a role shapes our expectations on what that role involves. This happens whether we're in the role or not. As evangelical Christians, we want to be biblical in our thinking about ministry but also wise about how we use words.

'Pastor' is the same word as 'shepherd' in biblical Greek. So when Paul wrote about Christ's provision of pastors for the church in Ephesians 4:11, he used the same word that Jesus used to describe himself as the good shepherd in John 10:11. Likewise, the verb 'shepherd/care for sheep' is used for ordinary shepherds in 1 Corinthians 9:7 but also for church pastors, such as in Acts 20:28 or 1 Peter 5:2. What this means is that a pastor is simply a person who cares for God's people in a similar way to how a shepherd cares for their sheep.

That's a helpful start, but how does a pastor care for God's people? Lead them outside for some grass and water? One of the most helpful passages is Acts 20:17-35, in which Paul describes his own ministry and exhorts the Ephesian elders to continue serving (shepherding) in the same way. His emphasis is on teaching (vv. 20-21, 27), guarding against false teaching (vv. 28-31), and helping the weak (v. 35). These activities (along with prayer) come up frequently in other passages about the role and activities of Christian leaders (e.g. 2 Tim 2:14-15, 4:1-5; Titus 1:5-9).

So are growth group leaders pastors? Well, if they are teaching the Bible, guarding against false teaching and caring for people, then yes they are! They are functioning in the role of pastors for their group.

Should we therefore start calling them pastors? No, I don't think so. Why not, if they're functioning that way biblically? I think there are a few reasons to be cautious.

Firstly, labels are not always helpful. We tend to attach a bit too much importance to the status that 'pastor' carries. The New Testament itself is fairly flexible when using terms such as pastor, teacher, elder and overseer. It might be wise not to cling to any one of these too closely.

Secondly, many people, both leaders and group members, have quite high or unrealistic expectations of an official pastor. In some people's minds a pastor should know their Bible inside out, have great relational (even counselling) skills, and be highly available. These are hard enough expectations for paid pastors to deal with, so I'd rather not risk burdening growth group leaders with them too.

Thirdly, calling growth group leaders pastors potentially obscures the relationship between them and the overall pastor or pastoral team. It's actually helpful to have some distinction between leaders who lead a small group for a limited time under the oversight of senior leaders, and pastors who are leading the whole church for a long time and who take responsibility for many leaders. I think this distinction helps people see the networks of pastoral relationships across a whole church.

Fourthly, calling growth group leaders pastors potentially obscures the relationship between the small group and the church. There's a risk people would opt out of the main church if they came to see their group as an isolated church under the leadership of a sole pastor.

Maybe I'm being overly cautious, but while I think growth group leaders do function as pastors within a church, I suggest that we give them a more specific, non-biblical name. As far as I've seen this does seem to be the usual practice, at least in Australia.

Having said that, there are plenty of other ways we can talk about growth group leaders and their work in a way that demonstrates their pastoral nature. For example, we can teach people about the shared pastoral ministry exercised by the staff team and the group leader, involving teaching, guarding and caring, etc. We can talk about how leaders might pastor people in particular situations and how Bible teaching fits with that. Finally, we can teach and apply passages about Christian church leadership to our growth group leaders, even pointing out how theologically they are pastors in our particular church context.

Growth group leading is a great ministry, even a pastoral ministry, for which the Bible gives heaps of guidance. Let's just keep things simple and avoid the label of pastors.

Gotherefor weekly - Matthias Media - 4 May 2017

Sign up for free weekly updates here : <https://confirmsubscription.com/h/y/A9FBAC36F92F118E>

Observation in Bible study

Material drawn from Chapter 3, *Learning from the Bible in Groups* in *Leading Better Bible Studies*, Karen Morris and Rod Morris, Aquila Press 1997

The process of Bible Study

Observation, interpretation and application are fundamental to effective Bible study. At the end of a Bible study every member should be confidently able to answer these three questions:

- What does the text actually say?
- What does the text mean?
- How do we respond to what the text means?

Skills for observation - What does the text actually say?

There are whole host of different techniques for helping your group members to find out the answer to this question. Some of them are listed below. Depending on the kind of text that we're looking at we might make a judicious choice about the best way to engage the group in the observation process.

Elements to consider

- Context
 - Passage
 - Passage in its immediate context
 - Passage in its immediate context in its book
 - Passage in its immediate context in its book, in its biblical categoryin its Testament....in the Bible as a whole.
- Specific facts and details
 - Who? Where? When? What? How?
- Persuasion
- Thought development
- Emphasis
- Connectives

Using our imagination

For example, in a study on Philippians 1, it is normal to ask questions such as, 'What does Paul say about evangelism in the passage?' Consider what happens when you ask people to determine from the passage 'How does Paul feel about evangelism?' The results, while both true to the text, are completely different. For instance, in answer to the first question the group might say that Paul says evangelism is really important and that he does not mind being in jail for it. The second question however could elicit the response that he is completely passionate and perhaps even a bit obsessed by it. The question which flows from this observation is, of course, 'Why? Why is Paul so passionate about evangelism?'

There is often much more to be discovered if you keep asking questions. Do not accept the easy answer and then move on. Imagine what can be learned by asking questions like:

- How is this idea related to that idea?
- What is not said?
- What else is involved in this?
- How can this be true when....?
- If this is so, could it be that....?

Workshop Philippians 1:9-11

And this is my prayer.....
 in knowledge and depth of insight,
 may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ
 so that you may be able to discern what is best
 to the glory and praise of God.
 filled with the fruit of righteousness
 that comes through Jesus Christ

1. Make cards and scatter them on the table so that the group can arrange the cards to show the logic of Paul's prayer.
2. What is Paul's ultimate desire for the Philippians?
3. What is his ultimate desire in his prayer?
4. What time frame does he have in mind?
5. According to Paul's prayer what will enable them to "approve what is excellent" v10 and for whom is it excellent?
6. Try to explain the flow of the whole prayer. How does one part lead to the next?

Methods for doing observation with a group:

Summarise	Contrast	Mapping	Plot
Paraphrase	Identify	List	Key Question
Compare	Drawing	Table	Swedish Method
Note	Interview	Role-play	Manuscript Discovery
Organise	Sentence Analysis	Logic flow and cause and effect diagrams	

