

The pastor as spiritual mediator between God and the congregation: Corruptions of the relationships of the 'under-shepherd', the 'flock' and the 'chief shepherd' in a Zambian context and their implications for spiritual maturity

**Author:**Misheck Nyirenda¹ **Affiliation:**¹Department of Biblical Studies, Berea Centre of Excellence, Chilanga, Zambia**Corresponding author:**Misheck Nyirenda,
bjamisheck@hotmail.com**Dates:**

Received: 07 Oct. 2020

Accepted: 16 Feb. 2021

Published: 07 July 2021

How to cite this article:

Nyirenda, M., 2021, 'The pastor as spiritual mediator between God and the congregation: Corruptions of the relationships of the "under-shepherd", the "flock" and the "chief shepherd" in a Zambian context and their implications for spiritual maturity', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a6349. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6349>

Copyright:

© 2021. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This article examined an ecclesiology that has led to the administrative and spiritual subjugation of members of local assemblies as God's will and modus operandi under the New Covenant. The article will help adherents to re-examine the conclusions of the ecclesiology through a careful exegesis of the texts used in support. This article aimed at highlighting to Christians the potential dangers of this ecclesiology. It provided an analysis that can be consulted by any Christian who has been affected by this ecclesiology. This article examined a specific articulation of the teachings supporting a new ecclesiology and its bases in a local assembly in Lusaka, Zambia, during a 're-envisioning' process. The author participated in this process, purchased the videos, transcribed the teachings and used them as his primary research data. The research was based on transcriptions of a series of teachings that were recorded in video format. The author explored key themes in the teachings, identified the texts used in support, examined those texts by critically using the historical-critical method and drew conclusions. A careful examination of the ecclesiology and the texts used as its proof-texts showed that it was based on flawed exegesis of the texts. The ecclesiology extracted from the transcripts was based on grounds other than careful interpretation of the texts used. The outcomes of this study were that proponents of this ecclesiology must find biblical texts that support it, or consider it to be wrongly derived doctrine.

Contribution: The primary contribution of this article is re-examination of a specific teaching that is purportedly derived from the Bible, through a critical analysis of the texts used in its support. The article fits with the scope of the journal to be a critical forum for theological reflection and praxis.

Keywords: shepherd; good shepherd, under-shepherd; flock; mediator; congregation.

Introduction

This article is limited to a critical evaluation of a particular teaching in a Pentecostal church in Lusaka, Zambia that is advocating for pastors who project themselves as 'under-shepherds' to Christ, and the only legitimate vehicles of Christ's revelation and ministry in the assembly. In this role, they are not answerable to or accountable to their assemblies.

The teachings are about the nature and function of the presiding pastor in a local assembly. Their purported biblical supports are texts that point out the relationships between Jesus Christ as chief shepherd (Pt 1 5:4), the local overseer as under-shepherd (Pt 1 5:2, 3) and the congregation as the flock (Pt 1 5:2, 3). The paradigmatic texts for these relationships are supposed to be John 10 and, to a lesser extent, the imagery of the relationship between the vine and its branches in John 15. The title 'under-shepherd' is extrapolated from 1 Peter 5 where 'chief shepherd' is used for Christ. For the purposes of this article, we focus on the leader's understanding of these relationships in the light of his interpretation of these specific texts.

Mbewe (2013) thinks that the foundation for this and several related teachings and practices in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles in Africa is the superstructure of the African religious

worldview that has been baptised 'with wrongly applied Bible verses and Christian language'. In this theology, the man of God has replaced the witchdoctor as the priest who enters 'the inner sanctuaries to bring down blessings to us'.

Kalu (quoted in Clarke 2010:109–110) agrees, arguing that African Pentecostal Christianity is 'an authentic outworking of Africa's religious quest for life' and is heavily influenced by African cosmology. He sees 'the big man of the big God' to be a mirror image of African socio-cultural realities where 'the big man of the village is replaced by the big man (the bishop) of the Church'. For him, 'it is within the field of primal religion and not Western ecclesiastical structures' that African Pentecostal ecclesiology must be understood.

These syncretistic beliefs are largely unarticulated and evolve with time making them difficult to document and critique. They are characteristically not the subject of written doctrinal or policy documents. It would require an extensive and qualitative analysis of sermons and proclamations from several Pentecostal and Charismatic fora to begin to articulate them. Even then, this would only be a snapshot of the evolving beliefs and practices. These transcripts are therefore, a rare cache of detailed interpretations and applications that provide a basis for a critical evaluation.

Methodology

The core research data for this article arises from qualitative analysis of the transcripts of specific teachings given from the 14th to the 16th of October, 2013, at Northmead Assembly of God (NAOG) Church,¹ as part of a so-called 're-envisioning' process for the assembly. The sessions were captured on video, and every person in attendance is encouraged to purchase a copy as part of their re-application process for church membership and for future reference. The author transcribed the videos and isolated specific arguments and interpretations. The arguments and interpretations provide exegetical and theological data. In this regard, the transcripts of the teachings are public, specific and researchable data. Firstly, this article summarises in a descriptive format the basic arguments and interpretations of the key texts in the sessions. These summaries are found in Methodology section. Secondly, it discusses the implications of these arguments and interpretations for church polity and spirituality in the congregation. This is found in the section entitled Implications for church polity and spirituality. Thirdly, it undertakes a critical re-evaluation of the same texts using historical-critical biblical study methods, particularly rhetorical, canonical and genre analyses. The author's re-examination of the texts used is brought into conversation with the arguments and interpretations in the transcripts. Further, in order to cast a wider canonical and theological context to the subjects of shepherd and flock, we examine Paul's metaphors for the church and Snyder's view of the church. Snyder's conclusions read like systematic theology. However they are derived from historical-critical analysis of selected texts from both the

Old and New Testaments that shed some light on the nature and function of the New Testament (NT) Church. Paul's metaphors and Snyder's conclusions are found in a critique of the texts used for this understanding and the 'community of the king'. The analysis in a critique of the texts used for this understanding and the 'community of the king' also discusses some key claims in the transcripts. There, the author's re-examination of the key texts used in the transcripts – of Pauline texts and Snyder's conclusions – converse with the arguments and interpretations contained in Methodology section. The conversation suggests an alternative understanding of texts of John 10 and 1 Peter 5:1–4, and the relationships between the chief shepherd (*αρχιποιμην*), the presbyter (*πρεσβυτερος*) and the congregation (*ποιμνιον*). The Conclusion section contains a summary of the points of departure between the transcripts and the analysis in a critique of the texts used for this understanding, and other supporting voices. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible.

A synopsis of the perceived relationship between 'under-shepherd' and 'flock'

In the transcripts, the rationale for perceiving pastors of local assemblies as 'under-shepherds' and exclusive mediators between their congregations and God is based on particular interpretations of John 10 and 1 Peter 5:1–4. According to these, John 10 establishes the *prototypical* relationship between any 'ποιμην' (shepherd) and his flock. The under-shepherd's relationship to the flock 'mirrors' (Transcript of 15 October 2013:3, 7) that of Christ and his sheep. The chief shepherd has overseers here on earth, his vision carriers and the under-shepherds (Transcript of 15 October 2:6).

John 10:1–2 is interpreted to mean that the *legitimate* pastor of the assembly is the under-shepherd, and also the 'door to the sheepfold'. Everything hinges on the *legitimacy* of the under-shepherd. Therefore, thieves and robbers are those who lack this legitimacy at a particular assembly. Just as Jesus promised to be with his believers to the end of the age (Mt 28:20), the under-shepherd is in his or her role for the long haul (Transcript of 15 October:2–3).

The congregation must obey the voice of this under-shepherd as they are, in a secondary sense, the under-shepherd's sheep. There is supposed to be intimacy and mutual acceptance between the two, and the congregation should allow the under-shepherd to lead. He or she *goes ahead of them* and *they follow*, because they know his or her voice (Transcript of 15 October:4–5, 11).² They should never³ follow another under-shepherd but rather flee when they do not recognise their voice (Jn 10:3–5). John 10:12 and the following are also applied to the under-shepherd. Ignoring the apparent divine

2. Therefore, 'voice identification is about hearing the heart of the chief shepherd as well as that of the under-shepherd'.

3. He points out that the οὐ μὴ in John 10:5 is emphatic negation.

1. Northmead Assembly of God Church, Lusaka, Zambia.

echoes of 'εγω, εμμι',⁴ the teaching in the transcripts applies to the rest of John 10:12–16, particularly in relation to legitimacy and guidance rights of the under-shepherd.

The other text cited in support of this ecclesiology is 1 Peter 5:1–4. Here, we find a fellow elder's (συμπρεσβυτερος) advice to others. Their role, Peter advises, is to shepherd (ποιμαινω) the flock (ποιμνιον) of God. John 10:16 we already established that the sheep (προβατα) constitute the one flock (ποιμνη) of God having one shepherd (εις ποιμην). The elders in 1 Peter 5:1–4 assume the role of the shepherd as those who are accountable to the 'chief shepherd' (αρχιποιμην), at some future date. The semantic domain for the etymological root ποιμ- dominates this pericope, with the widely practiced caring, leading and protective roles of a shepherd in relation to his sheep and goats at the center.

The transcripts argue that the shepherding role of the Good Shepherd in John 10, identified in 1 Peter 5:4 as the 'chief shepherd', is typical of the shepherding role of the elder of 1 Peter 5:2 who, by extrapolation, is an under-shepherd. As such, in local assemblies the under-shepherds are the 'vision carriers' and 'spiritual fathers' whilst the congregations are their 'spiritual sons and daughters' (Transcript of 14 October:11).

These two texts are woven together to yield the following: the under-shepherd *shepherds* God's flock as a proxy and is accountable *only* to the chief shepherd; this shepherding *presumes the same bilateral relationships* between the Good Shepherd of John 10 and his flock. Therefore, the flock owes the same obligations to the under-shepherd as they do to the chief shepherd. These include: (1) recognising the legitimacy of the under-shepherd; (2) exclusively *hearing* and *obeying* the voice and leading of the under-shepherd, and (3) refusal to follow the voice and guidance of any others (Transcript of 15 October:7).

Substantial interpretations and applications in this local assembly are most evident in this area and we must dwell longer here. These teachings have been allegedly adopted consensually, following much reflection by the previous Council of Bishops for the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, Zambia (Transcript of the 15 October:9).

The chief shepherd holds undisputed pre-eminence of rank, both as the saviour of his flock and the ultimate shepherd. Next in rank is the under-shepherd. He or she is the legitimate conduit of the chief shepherd's ministry in the local assembly. For this reason, the under-shepherd is *the* vision carrier in a local assembly (Transcript of 15 October: 6). Therefore, any member who digresses from the voice of the under-shepherd is in fact departing from the voice of the chief-shepherd because, 'to some level, obeying the under-shepherd is a demonstration of the fact that you are obeying the chief

shepherd' (Transcript of 15 October:7). The consequence of such disobedience is forfeiture of the spiritual guidance and blessings that flow from the chief-shepherd, through the under-shepherd to the flock.

The under-shepherd is accountable to the chief-shepherd, not to the flock. This places him or her *beyond* the performance analysis of both the congregation and other leaders in the assembly. Those who disagree with his or her guidance or way of doing things are advised to leave the congregation. They are like destructive squirrels that must be identified and made to run or be killed, lest they compromise the flow of power in the assembly (Transcript of 15 October:9).⁵ However, the under-shepherd, *following the pattern of the chief shepherd*, is gracious, not vindictive:

The Good Shepherd is such a gentleman, that even when we are rejecting him, he says, 'It's up to you'. He says, 'If you are willing and obedient, you will eat of the good of the land'. So he actually gives us the liberty to say, 'No', and he will let us walk away should we desire to do so. He will not hassle us. (Transcript of 15 October:5)

Implications for church polity and spirituality

Church polity

In the light of the above, all the leaders in the assembly must champion the spiritual guidance and blessings that the under-shepherd receives from the chief-shepherd. They themselves may not *directly* access spiritual counsel and guidance, or represent the chief shepherd to the flock, without synchronisation to the 'heart' and ministry of the under-shepherd.

Further down the chain, the flock will not be established and blessed by the chief shepherd, exclusive of the under-shepherd:

That is the kind of connection you have also, to the under-shepherd. When you are not aligned, the juice that is supposed to flow from Aaron's head, as in Psalm 133, the anointing that God has given the under-shepherd, to capacitate him to adequately supply and lead, to go before the sheep, that which is supposed to be supplied ... I can assure you, no, I warn you, you will not succeed. You need to be connected ... so that what is supposed to be supplied to you ... can actually flow ... And the others are part of the under-shepherd regimen that God has arranged. (Transcript of 15 October:8–9, 15, 16)

In short, the under-shepherd is the *critical* mediator of spiritual guidance and divine blessing between God and the congregation. The congregation does not have direct access to the chief shepherd's ministry. For this reason, the flock's basic task is to engage the under-shepherd and hear his heart 'because it is really God's heart' (Transcript of 15 October:9), failure to do this task 'will not engage in the kingdom' (Transcript of 14 October:12).

4.Cf. v. 4 and the implicit reference to the cross in v. 15 with the global flock and a single shepherd in v. 16.

5.The speaker was using damage caused by a squirrel to the electrical wiring of his car as an illustration. His car could not start as a result.

The under-shepherd is like a boss and the flock, employees. His or her servant-hood is *only in relation to God*, not the assembly. Everyone else is obligated to know the heart and style of the under-shepherd and to align themselves accordingly, in order to deliver better and to succeed. Apparently, the need for this alignment is greater in the church because it is for the sake of the kingdom (Transcript for 15 October:7–8).

Judging from other contexts in Africa, there is apparently no limit to the extent to which members follow the voice of the under-shepherd. A pastor in Pretoria, South Africa, purportedly on God's guidance, instructed his 1000 strong congregation to eat grass as the gateway and access to greater intimacy with God, and to various supernatural blessings (Masambuka). Another in Dandora, Kenya, advised his female congregants to come to church without inner wears to facilitate spiritual intimacy with Christ ('No pants' 2014:26). Their followers happily complied.

In keeping with this exalted position, the under-shepherd accrues appropriate exclusive designations, such as 'vision carrier', 'spiritual father' and 'father/mother of the house'. All the members of the assembly are their 'spiritual sons and daughters'. And as the bible teaches (Eph 6:1–4), 'sons and daughters' are encouraged to *obey* and *honour* their parents. Disagreement with the under-shepherd is *disobedience* to God, a *dishonour* or *disrespect*, and is subject to curses. This is because 'God's order is that we must demonstrate our obedience to God through obeying those who oversee us' (Transcript for 15 October:7).

In several African traditions, *honour* typically includes giving material gifts to 'parents'. The more valuable the gift, greater is the show of respect. It is even argued that children do not lend to their parents, even where such a request was made: they only give to them.

Bringing these traditions into the ecclesiology of a local church has made *reverence* or honour the currency of relationships between the under-shepherd, support leaders and the congregation. Nobody dares to question the teachings and practices of the under-shepherd. Such conduct activates perceptions of disobedience, dishonour and disrespect, with a cloud of imminent curses hanging over the head of the dissenter.

In such assemblies, all members would forfeit their Christ-bought access through faith to the *direct* guidance and ministry of God; from the study of the Scriptures and the indwelling Spirit of God. Like the congregation of Israel at Horeb, they wait upon the 'man of God' to ascend alone into the presence of the Lord and to receive directions and instructions on behalf of everybody else (Ex 19, 20:18–21).⁶

6. However, see Hebrews 12:18–24 for comparison with the New Testament church.

In such an assembly, those whose knowledge of the Scriptures is rather tenuous are persuaded that the under-shepherd is the bona fide and *exclusive* mediator of the Grace and blessings of God to them, and to defend this teaching with gusto. Those who think their livelihood depends on the beneficence of the under-shepherd are terrified of losing their sustenance. Those who's privileged standing in the assembly depend on 'the extension of the golden sceptre by the king' (Es 5:2), fear being relegated to the common ranks. Those already amongst the common ranks fear expulsion from the assembly altogether. All this is an assault on the spiritual growth and maturity of congregants.

The narrative of the under-shepherd as sole mediator is reinforced in several ways: for example, some under-shepherds arrive late for services. After all, in many African contexts, the really important people are never late, only delayed by other more important commitments. You almost get the sense that even God, whose presence is premised 'where two or three are gathered', must wait for them.

Many are waited upon in keeping with their position of honour. Others carry their Bibles and other paraphernalia in the service and beyond. Often, this honour cascades down to their spouses. Some acquire a retinue of body guards: after all, the conduit of God's Grace and blessings to so many must be jealously protected.

Many unilaterally make all the important decisions, albeit with a façade of consultation. After all, conduits of God's direct revelation and counsel do not need the secondary opinions of lesser mortals. Many are not accountable to the flock for administrative and spiritual decisions. Apparently, understanding the principles of 'son-ship and spiritual connections' demands abandoning the democratic structures and practices left by the Canadian missionaries who pioneered the work that is the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (Zambia) (Transcript for October 15:8–9).

Spirituality

In these teachings, spirituality is defined by the under-shepherd. In an echo of Jean-Paul Sartre's absolute enthronement of the *ego-in-solitude*, the 'other' never attains the status of equal interlocutor (Cohen 2006:xviii). Those who violate this spiritual order are encouraged, both explicitly and implicitly, to leave the assembly.

The result is spiritual oppression and stunted growth. Direct access to the Scriptures, to the point of cross-checking the teachings of God's servants against them (Ac 17:11) and intimate interaction with the Spirit of God (Rm 8:9–17; Ac 6:3), are the bed-rock of the spirituality of the NT Church. The 'voice' of the under-shepherd is a very poor substitute for these divine doors to God and his grace. In such assemblies, enlightened church members often dare not raise their heads above the parapet for fear of being shot at.

The stunted ones are quite oblivious to their condition, which they consider authentic NT Christianity.

The net result is the *de-humanisation* of the flock, the erosion of their *humanity* and *dignity*, and the suppression of their direct and personal experiences with God and his word. It is the 'violence of the face' that Levinas (1999) regards to be the natural outcome of enthroning the 'I' at the expense of the "other". He poignantly notes, with reference to religion, that 'the most dangerous of seducers is the one who carries you away with pious words to violence and contempt for the other man' (p. 177). As Costas (1982) also noted, 'every movement that dignifies human life ... can be said to be ... a manifestation (though partial) of the saving power of the gospel' (pp. 29–30).

A critique of the texts used for this understanding

A confusion of metaphors

Textual background

It has been noted that the Gospel of John is Hebraistic in style, meaning that 'its writer contends himself with laying thought alongside of thought and leaving it to the reader to discover the connection' (Nicoll 1990a:665). These thoughts and their organisation serve the main goal of the Gospel of John: to prove that Jesus is the Christ and that faith in him leads to eternal life (Jn 20:31). The Gospel is also acclaimed for its deep knowledge of Jewish traditions, ideas and modes of thought, activities, expectations and customs. This must be the starting point for any exegesis of the text of John.

John 1:19–12, in the immediate context of Chapter 10, roughly contains scenes in which 'Jesus made those self-revelations which it was essential the world should see' (Nicoll 1990a:680). The teachings in John 10 follow the healing of a man born blind in the previous chapter.

The man is healed by Jesus on the Sabbath day and becomes the centre of a theological tussle between Jesus and the Pharisees. Some Pharisees are particularly incensed that this happened during the Sabbath and therefore, as work, violated it. For others, the problem was that a sinner performed the 'sign'⁷ (9:16). Meanwhile, many people understood this and other signs that Jesus did, as proof that he was from God and that God was with him (Jn 3:2 cf. 9:24, 31).

Jesus utters the words in John 10 to a group of Pharisees that claimed to see, whilst blind. In essence, he is presenting *his messianic identity* and *ministry* using the illustration of a shepherd and his sheep (10:1–6) in a communal sheepfold:

The sheepfold was commonly a courtyard near or beside a house and bordered by a stone wall, in which one or several families

7. John characteristically uses the word σημεῖον (here, a miraculous 'sign') throughout his account to highlight certain supernatural acts that serve as evidence that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing in him, people should be saved (Jn 20:30–31).

kept their sheep ... Such sheepfolds may or may not have a formal door and would be guarded at the entrance by a 'gatekeeper' (v. 3) who would be hired to keep watch. (2007, *ESV Study Bible* note)

The Jews were agriculturalists and pastoralists, and sheep and shepherds were a very significant part of their lives. The nature of sheep: relative lack of intelligence, propensity to wander, ability to bond very strongly with the shepherd⁸; their general helplessness without a shepherd, and the qualities of a good shepherd – comprehensive care and compassion – make the two appropriate material for teaching spiritual realities (eds. Ryken, Wilhoit & Longman 2004:782).

The distinction between shepherds and hirelings lay in the quality of care and devotion towards the sheep. Shepherds intimately cared for their sheep and the latter both *recognised* and *trusted* them.⁹ Hirelings were wanting in all these departments.

The Bible likens leaders to shepherds, including Moses (Ps 77:20), David (Ps 78:70–72), Judges (2 Sm 7:7) and πρεσβυτεροι in the NT (Pt 1 5:2–3). Greedy, selfish, domineering and exploitative leaders are regarded to be adversaries to the sheep (Ezk 34:1–10).

Jesus comes as the promised good shepherd (Ezk 34:23; Mt 2:6) and the owner of the sheep; as the creator of mankind (Jn 1:3–4, 10, 11–12). He is the door for the sheep, the legitimate entrance, *as* the saviour of mankind (Jn 10:9). Therefore, the thieves and robbers in this text must surely be messianic imposters. The reference to 'door' is particularly intriguing, referring to a reality beyond the illustration of a good shepherd and his sheep. Whereas the Pharisees regarded the healed man as an outcast by his association with Jesus, Jesus tells him the opposite: Jesus is the entrance into the fold of God Nicoll 1990a:789).

Exposition of John 10

John begins with the creator relationship between Jesus Christ, the eternal word and all created things, including mankind (Jn 1:1, 3). His incarnation was a coming to his own in this sense. His life-giving 'shepherding' care includes his atoning sacrifice for mankind. This locates the sheep's recognition of the voice of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:14–18) in a different light. We hear echoes of the Shepherd's Psalm 23, where יהוה is David's רעי; we hear the end of the times, where Christ is the Lamb 'in the midst of throne' and 'their shepherd' who guides them to 'springs of living water' (Rv 7:17). Here, Christ is the shepherd, and redeemed mankind the sheep.

In John 10, several thoughts are placed side by side, demanding a connection. First is the legitimacy of the shepherd: he enters by the door, the gatekeeper recognises

8. This included recognition of the voice of the shepherd.

9. Psalms 23 is a classic portrayal of these qualities in a shepherd.

him and opens it for him (Jn 10:1–5); he knows *his own* and they recognise his voice, just as the sheep knows and recognises the voice of their shepherd in a communal sheepfold. He has other sheep which are not part of this fold: clearly a reference to gentiles, who are not part of the elect nation of Israel. These too will be brought in, so that there is one flock and one shepherd.¹⁰ The next thought, meant to shed some light on the first, makes Christ the door for the sheep. He is the one, the only one, who admits people into fellowship with God or salvation (Jn 10:9). The matter of exclusive right to admit is taken up using different images in the book of John, for example, in John 14:6 – *εγω ειμι η οδος και η αληθεια και η ζωη, ουδεις ερχεται προς τον πατερα ει μη δι' εμου*. These teachings refer to Christ's messianic legitimacy and salvific ministry. As Ryken et al. (2004) note, 'The shepherd is no longer a figure in the story, but the figure around whom it all revolves' (p. 784). The metaphors of sheep and shepherd in John 10 refer to Christ's role as creator and saviour. The claim in the transcripts that John 10 provides *the prototypical* relationship between any ποιμην and his ποιμνιον is not supported by a careful reading of the text.

In the NT, pastors and elders are urged to learn from the shepherd in their role, bearing in mind that the sheep belongs to Christ (Jn 21:15–17; Ac 20:28–29; Pt 1 5:3–4). However, Jesus alone is both 'the great shepherd of the sheep' (Heb 13:20) and επισκοπος (Pt 1 2:25) of the souls of the saints in the senses of creator and saviour.

In the NT, the image of flock is used of the church as God's possession, whilst those who may, use Israel in a similar way in the Old Testament (OT) (Ryken et al. 2004:783);¹¹ looking to him confidently for guidance, provision and security. The metaphor of Christ as the vine and his disciples as the branches (Jn 15) reinforces the seminal bond between Christ and his church. A pastor cannot claim or demand such a bond. Christians never belong to a πρεσβυτερος and no πρεσβυτερος or επισκοπος can admit anyone into God's presence. Pastors are mere stewards of a church that is in a mysterious bond with Christ; of which marriage, according to Paul, is similar (Eph 5:31–32).

In linguistics, it is generally understood that the generator of a metaphor is responsible for its meaning, although it is supported by some perception of similarity between two entities from common knowledge. Therefore, Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2014:150) regard metaphor as 'language creativity at its highest'. The user of a metaphor controls its meaning.

As seen, Jesus uses the metaphor of the Good Shepherd and his flock to explain *his* relationship with those who recognise him and obey his message (which the Pharisees did not). He exploits several elements of this common pastoral activity to

teach about his messianic and salvific (Jn 10:7–9, 11, 14–17) and pastoral (Jn 10:1–5) relationships with his disciples.

Exposition of 1 Peter 5:1–4

Peter uses the language of the 'chief shepherd' (αρχιποιμην) – referring to Jesus – in order to exhort his fellow presbyters (πρεσβυτερος), people with religious oversight in a local assembly as opposed to age (cf. Ac 14:23), to shepherd (ποιμαινω) *the flock of God* according to the pattern set by Jesus (Pt 1 5:1–4). Therefore, the transcripts calling elders 'under-shepherds' as shepherd (ποιμην), by extrapolation is legitimate. The addition of και μαρτυς των του Χριστου παθηματων (1:2) is meant to drive home to them the fact that despite being amongst the eyewitnesses and company of Christ on earth, 'the essential qualification of an Apostle in the strict sense' (Nicoll 1990b:76), Peter was a mere πρεσβυτερος, like them. If any πρεσβυτερος had any justification to be κατακυριευων των κληρων (1:3), it would be an apostle who was part of the 12. However, Peter says a πρεσβυτερος functions through exemplary, not domineering leadership. His intentions are clear: πρεσβυτερος must be good shepherds, not like the rejects of Ezekiel 34.

The πρεσβυτερος in question were leaders of local assemblies, following the synagogue pattern of leadership by elders (Ac 14:23; Tm 2 3:1). This was historically before some of these designations, for instance επισκοπος, had evolved into technical titles indicating clerical rank. In NT usage, the terms overseer, elder and pastor (or shepherd) are used to refer to the same office. In Acts 20:28 Paul tells the Ephesian πρεσβυτερος (20:17) that the Holy Spirit had made them επισκοπους, to 'care for' (ποιμαινω) the church of God.

In addition, the language indicates a plurality of πρεσβυτερος for each local assembly (Ac 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Tm 1 5:17; Tt 1:5; Pt 1 5:1, 5). There are no grounds in 1 Peter 5:1–4 for assigning to these πρεσβυτεροι the voice recognition and legitimacy of door criterion seen in John 10.

According to tradition, Peter was quite averse to attracting any sense of equality between himself and Jesus Christ. He was so ardent in this regard that he even requested for a modification to the manner of his crucifixion (Oakes).¹²

Paul's metaphors of the church

We consider a wider NT canonical context. The apostle to the gentiles, for whom Bruce (1996) avouches amongst other things, claiming 'the exhilarating release effected by his gospel of redeeming grace' (p. 15), also employs metaphors to express the nature of the church. We briefly interact with a few of the pertinent ones for this article.

10. Initially echoing Ezekiel 34:23 and 37:24 (David). Here its application is broader to include the gentiles. Matthew 28:18–20 and Ephesians 2:11–22.

11. The classic text is Psalms 23.

12. The evidence is rather spotty, but Eusebius (AD 325), apparently citing tradition, indicates that Peter was so averse to being likened to his Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, that, upon his crucifixion, he specifically asked to be crucified upside down in order to make a distinction between his Lord and himself.

The temple

Paul uses this metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3:16, 2 Corinthians 6:16 and Ephesians 2:20–22. In all three, *ναος* is used; a word which according to Lange (2008), in Greek usage and in contrast with *ιερον*, refers to the very dwelling of God. Talbert (2002) agrees, noting that the LXX (the Septuagint) uses *ναος* for ‘the most sacred parts of the temple’; including the holy of holies and claims that Paul is most likely influenced by that usage. Therefore, the local assembly is ‘the very dwelling of God’.

For Fee (1994:113–114), 1 Corinthians 3:16 is a critical text to uncover Paul’s understanding of ‘the nature and significance of the local community of faith as a people of the Spirit’. The Church in Corinth referred to God’s people in Corinth.

In the section beginning 1 Corinthians 3:5, ‘Paul sets out to correct their false view of church leadership by redirecting their focus from the teachers to God, who owns all, and whose alone they are (vv. 5–9)’. The church is God’s field, ‘with the emphasis on God as owner and producer’. It is also God’s building.

Therefore, those who are constructing this building must build with the uttermost care, using material that is compatible with the foundation – Christ crucified (vv. 10–11). The work of those who build using wood, hay and stubble will not survive the eschatological test. In the context of the letter, those who build using hay, wood and stubble were those using worldly wisdom, *σοφια* (Fee 1994:113).¹³

The body

Paul uses the metaphor of ‘body’ in the context of discussing ministry through all, in the assembly. Authentic operation of ‘spiritual gifts’ (*πνευματικων*) means edifying the assembly. 1 Corinthians 12–14 is corrective, especially with regard to the abuse of tongues. There must be intelligibility in the assembly, since only this can edify the hearers which for Fee (1994:147–148), is the essence of these three chapters.

In the assembly, there are diverse gifts and manifestations by the same Spirit (1 Cor 12:1–4), as illustrated by the human body (v. 26). Ministry here is the multi-faceted workings of the Spirit of God, through different members, towards mutual edification. The remotest idea in Paul’s mind is of a *πρεσβυτερος* who alone is the conduit and carrier of vision and revelation from God on behalf of everybody else in the local assembly.

The shepherds

Paul addressed the elders of the church in Ephesus at Miletus (Ac 20:17–38). As their former *πρεσβυτερος*, he admonished

13. Cf. references to the ‘wise person’, *σοφος*: 1 Corinthians 1:19, 20, 26, 27; 3:18, 19, 20; and to ‘wisdom’, *σοφια*: 1 Corinthians 1:17, 19, 20 (second instance), 22; 2:1, 4, 5, 6 (second instance), 13, and 19.

them, using *his example* amongst them, to observe a number of things. Serve the Lord in humility and with tears (presumably, of care). Declare ‘the whole counsel of God’ (by which he primarily means teaching the word of God and evangelising. cf. v. 20 with v. 27) to the flock at all times and without fear. This absolves them from all responsibility before God.

Just as he has accomplished his *δρομον* and *διακονιαν*, so should they – those received from the Lord Jesus – with distinction, even in the light of danger (Ac 20:22–24). The Holy Spirit had made them *επισκοπους* over *his* flock and *his* church, which *he had purchased* with his own blood.

To fulfil all this required paying careful attention to themselves and the flock,¹⁴ for fierce wolves would arise from amongst themselves, aiming to destroy God’s flock through twisted doctrines and seeking disciples for themselves.¹⁵ This prophetic prediction apparently came to pass a decade or so later (Tm 1 1:18–20; Tm 2 1:15; 2:17–18; 3:1–9).

According to Paul, then, the *ποιμνη* is commissioned by the Holy Spirit to provide spiritual oversight to an assembly. The *ποιμνη* may be a part of a team. The *ποιμνιον* belongs to God, not the shepherd. The *ποιμνη* serves God’s *ποιμνιον* through an exemplary life and dispensing of the whole counsel of God. They may not make personal disciples (*μαθηται*) or exploit the *ποιμνιον* for personal gain. Finally, *ποιμενες* will be held accountable by God. In all this, Paul’s counsel mirrors that of Peter in 1 Peter 5:1–4 with no reference to demands for voice recognition or legitimacy as the door to God.

The ‘community of the king’

Snyder (2004) discusses the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in relation to Joel’s prophecy (2:28–29), towards an ecclesiology of function for the church. For him, the church is the visible community of God’s reign (p. 9) and its mission is a continuation of the work of Jesus Christ in reconciling all things to himself (p. 10). He roots his conclusions in historical-critical expositions of specific texts in both testaments. Here, we just highlight his conclusions.

He argues that ‘Proper thinking about the ministries of the church can happen only where there is a clear biblical understanding of the church itself’ (p. 12). The church is a manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth, the community of God’s people, called to serve God and to live together in communion as witness to the character and virtues of God’s reign. The church is also the agent of God’s mission on earth, and the reconciling of all things to God through Christ so that they are all subject to his dominion, his kingdom.

It is a liberating messianic community (p. 13), of which Jesus Christ is the head (p. 14). As an agent of the Kingdom, God

14. In 1 Timothy 4:16, this refers to leading an exemplary life and adhering to and teaching sound doctrine as the *πρεσβυτερος* or *επισκοπος*. Cf. 1 Timothy 3:2. Cf. 1 Peter 5:2–3.

15. This remarkable insight into the future could have been a product of revelation by the Holy Spirit, *ESV Study Bible* note.

acts through the Church (p. 14). Her mission therefore, is living and proclaiming the reign of God as a reconciling community of believers through the proclamation of Christ (p. 16). To enable the Church to accomplish this mission, the Spirit of God works through her (p. 17). According to Hocken (1998:214), this constitutes the critical Pentecostal contribution to ecclesiology.

The transcripts in the light of the outcomes of a re-valuation of their key texts and other witnesses

The transcripts reflect the central premise that the metaphors in John 10 – voice-recognition by the sheep and the legitimacy of the door – are prototypical and transferable from the Good Shepherd as Christ, to the under-shepherd as *πρεσβυτερος*. This is what justifies the teaching there: the primary task of the congregation is to ‘hear the voice of the under-shepherd and obey it’. However, a re-examination of John 10 and 1 Peter 1–4 demonstrates that Christ meant his voice as the creator to mankind. He also meant his legitimacy as the door in admitting people into the kingdom of God. A *πρεσβυτερος* cannot apply these roles to himself. Rather, as the witness from 1 Peter 5:1–4, Paul’s metaphors, Snyder and other witnesses show, the congregation is at the same level as the *πρεσβυτεροι* in recognising the voice of Christ, and in entering the kingdom of God through the one door, Jesus Christ. This leaves an example of character in leadership style, care and devotion to the sheep as the only transferral from the Good Shepherd in John 10 to the *πρεσβυτεροι*. Voice recognition and legitimacy are not included.

Other voices agree. Within Pentecostalism, focus on spiritual gifts has influenced ecclesiology in various ways. One has been ‘the social levelling and empowerment of the poor and of all church members, not just “clergy,” for ministry and significant participation’ (Snyder 2004:50). As Hodges (1986) also notes:

[The] marvellous privilege [of being an empowered witness] is not reserved for the spiritual elite but is the heritage of every believer, regardless of age, sex, or social station ... The Holy Spirit is poured out on the common [believer so that everyone] finds an important place in the body of Christ according as the Holy Spirit grants His gifts and enablements [sic]. (pp. 83–84)

Peterson (1999:85–86) identified three results of such empowerment for the socially marginalised: spiritual and social liberation, dignity and equality, and a sense of empowerment. This also makes everybody a missionary with an emphasis on multiplication. For this reason, indigenous church growth has been a natural outflow of this Pentecostal ecclesiology (Snyder 2004:52).

From other considerations, reversion to *institutional* and *spiritual* hierarchies is a radical departure from the gains of two definitive gatherings of Christians in the 20th century: Vatican II (1962–1965) and Lausanne (1974).

These have in common the model ‘Church as the people of God’ in place of ‘Church as institution’ (Roman Catholic) and ‘Church as correct belief, orthodox preaching and sacraments’ (Protestants). They also have in common the repudiation, although not to the same degree, of the priority and superiority of the clergy over the laity (Snyder 2004:33–42).

Therefore, whereas in historical Pentecostalism, the *biblical reality* of the Pentecost informs Pentecostal ecclesiology, in the transcripts the *pastoral role* of *επισκοπος* or *πρεσβυτερος* is interpreted to undermine Pentecostal ecclesiology.

In Pentecostal ecclesiology, God is lord in the Church and the Spirit of God allocates gifts and callings as he chooses, and dispenses both individual and collective visions in the Church for the spread of the Kingdom of God on earth. In the transcripts, the under-shepherd is the sole local ‘vision carrier’ and the mediator (*μεσσητης*) between God and the assembly. Ng’ang’a (2013) issues a poignant warning to all Christian leaders:

If you think that you are divine and others human, you will deal with them as unquestioning tools in your hands. Who are you really, and who are the people in your group? If you know that you are amongst equals, this will affect the way you relate with others, which will in turn affect the overall success of your project, business or ministry. (p. 41)

He further observes that ‘in a dictatorship, only one mind works; others are not allowed to work. The group can therefore not rise above the abilities of the leader’. (p. 42)

Conclusion

In this article, we set out to address the interpretations of John 10 and 1 Peter 5:1–4 in the NAOG transcripts that support an ecclesiology that elevates the pastor above the local assembly in matters pertaining to hearing from God and ministry. We noted the key ramifications of this ecclesiology. We noted that spiritual oppression or stunted growths are the logical outcomes. The assembly only functions in roles and ways that are prescribed or approved by the under-shepherd. God’s prerogative to interact directly with his people is violated and hijacked by a *πρεσβυτερος*.

A close re-examination of the key texts used for this teaching revealed that (1) Jesus’ roles as the Good Shepherd and *owner* of the sheep in John 10 refer to his roles as the creator and saviour of mankind. Further, his role as the door referred to his exclusive legitimacy to admit people into the kingdom of God. Both roles are not transferrable to pastors. Rather, the function of pastors is to give spiritual oversight and guidance to people who have equal standing before God and enjoy equal access to God.

Critical examination of the texts showed that the texts were taken out of their contexts and synchronised in a

bizarre manner to support the meta-narrative of the mediator-pastor, the 'vision carrier'. In their contexts, the texts yield interpretations that are well-supported by other voices, including Paul, Snyder, Vatican II, the Lausanne Conference of 1974 and historical Pentecostal ecclesiology.

TRANSCRIPTS OF NAOG CHURCH RE-ENVISIONING SESSION 2013 – DAY 1. Monday, 14th October, 2013.

TRANSCRIPTS OF NAOG CHURCH RE-ENVISIONING SESSION 2013 – DAY 2. Tuesday, 15th October 2013.

TRANSCRIPTS OF NAOG CHURCH RE-ENVISIONING SESSION 2013 – DAY 3. Wednesday, 16th October 2013.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

M.N. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Aland, B., Aland, K., Karavidopoulos, J., Martini, C.M. & Metzger, B. (eds.), 2015, *The Greek New Testament*, 5th rev. edn., United Bible Societies, Philadelphia, PA.
- 2007, *ESV study Bible*, 2008, *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL.
- Bruce, F.F., 1996, *Paul: Apostle of the heart set free*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Clarke, C.R., 2010, 'Ogbu Kalu and Africa's Christianity: A tribute', *Pneuma* 32(1), 107–120. <https://doi.org/10.1163/027209610X12628362887712>
- Cohen, R.A., 2006, 'Introduction: Humanism and anti-humanism – Levinas, Cassirer, and Heidegger', in E. Levinas (ed.), *Humanism of the other*, transl. by N. Poller, pp. vii–xlv, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, IL.
- Costas, O., 1982, *Christ outside the gate: Mission beyond Christendom*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, NY.
- Fee, G.D., 1994, *God's empowering presence: The holy spirit in the letters of Paul*, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA.
- Fromkin, V., Rodman, R. & Hyams, N., 2014, *An introduction to language*, 10th edn., Wardsworth, Boston, MA.
- Hocken, P.D., 1988, 'Theology of the church', in S. Burgess & G. B. McGee (eds.), *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements*, pp. 211–218, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Hodges, M.L., 1986, 'A Pentecostal's view of mission strategy', in L.G. McClung Jr. (ed.), *Azusa street and beyond: Pentecostal missions and church growth in the twentieth century*, pp. 83–84, Bridge, South Plainfield, NJ.
- Lange, J.P., Schaff, P., Kling, C.F. & Poor, D.W., 2008, *A commentary on the holy scriptures: 1 Corinthians*, Logos Bible Software, Bellingham, WA.
- Levinas, E., 1999, *Alterity & transcendence*, transl. by M. B. Smith, Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers, The Athlone Press, London.
- Mbewe, C., 2013, 'Why is the Charismatic movement thriving in Africa?', *Sunday*, 21 July 2013, viewed 06 January 2014, from <http://www.conradmbewe.com>.
- Nicoll, R. (ed.), 1990a, *The Expositor's Greek New Testament*, vol. 1, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Nicoll, R. (ed.), 1990b, *The Expositor's Greek New Testament*, vol. 5, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Ng'ang'a, J.N.N., 2013, *Leadership King David's style: Lessons from the book of 2nd Samuel*, 2nd edn., Taruma Consultants Ltd., Nairobi.
- 'No pants and bras, pastor orders ladies', *The Post*, Wednesday, 5 March 2014, p. 26.
- Oakes, J., 2010, *What is the evidence that Peter was crucified upside down in Rome?*, viewed 06 January 2014, from <https://evidenceforchristianity.org/what-is-the-evidence-that-peter-was-crucified-upside-down-in-rome/>.
- Peterson, D., 1999, 'Pentecostals: Who are they?', in V. Samuel & C. Sugden (eds.), *Mission as transformation: A theology of the whole gospel*, pp. 85–86, Regnum, Oxford.
- Ryken, L., Wilhoit, J.C. & Longman, III. L. (eds.), 2004, *Dictionary of biblical imagery*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL.
- Snyder, H.A., 2004, *The community of the King*, rev. edn., IVP, Downers Grove, IL.
- Talbert, C.H., 2002, *Reading Corinthians: A literary and theological commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, rev. edn., Reading the New Testament Series, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Macon, GA.