

# What does the Bible say a pastor is? It's complicated

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—During their annual meeting in New Orleans, Southern Baptists drew a clear line in the sand: Give a woman the title of “pastor” and your church no longer fits in the nation’s largest Protestant denomination.

But as nearly 13,000 local church messengers departed the Big Easy in mid-June, a crucial question was left unanswered.

What exactly is a pastor?

Answering that question is complicated.

That’s in part because, when Southern Baptists talk about the word “pastor,” they are discussing three things at the same time: job description, gender and church governance. And there’s a difference between how Southern Baptist doctrine defines the word and how churches use the term.

That disconnect has caused enough confusion that last year, a prominent Southern Baptist Convention committee wanted to form a study group to sort out how the word “pastor” is used in local churches. That request was soundly rejected, with one influential leader insisting Southern Baptists know exactly what a pastor is.

And in New Orleans this year, the Southern Baptist Convention made it clear if a woman is a senior leader of a congregation or preaches regularly, that church is out.

But what happens at the estimated 2,000 SBC churches where women have a number of support roles, such as associate pastor, worship pastor and

children's pastor? Are they also in danger of being kicked out of the SBC?

And is using the term "minister"—often seen as a synonym for pastor—for women staffers also a violation of Southern Baptist doctrine?

## What does the Bible say?



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Answering that question is not simple, in part because the Bible uses a series of titles for church leaders, including elder, overseer (often translated as bishop), pastor and deacon.

"The New Testament does not define the word 'pastor' in any way near the way we define it today," said Scot McKnight, author and professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary, a private Baptist seminary in Lisle, Ill.

Three of the most common words used for leaders in the New Testament are the Greek words "*presbyteros*," which is often translated as elder; the word "*episkopos*," translated as overseer or bishop; and the term "*poimen*," which is translated as pastor.

Because the Christian church was in start-up mode during the time the New Testament was written, none of the structures that developed later were yet in place. And Christian groups have come to interpret those words

differently.

For example, the term “overseer” or “bishop,” in the Catholic Church and among Protestants such as Lutherans and Methodists, is someone who oversees a geographic area, whereas a pastor leads a local congregation.

Presbyterians, Baptists and some other Protestants, by contrast, don’t have a hierarchy of bishops, and most congregations are overseen by local leaders, such as a pastor or board of elders.

“There’s a long debate about the relationship between an elder and overseer,” McKnight said. “And there is a long debate because the New Testament is not at all clear.”

Ray Van Neste, dean of the school of theology and missions at Union University, a Baptist college in Jackson, Tenn., disagrees. He said there’s long been a consensus among Southern Baptists that the three main words for pastor—elder, overseer and pastor—refer to the same distinct role in the church. That role is set apart from other church members, who may also be involved in church leadership and ministry.

## **How do Southern Baptists use the term?**

But while the New Testament’s teaching about pastors is clear, Van Neste said, Southern Baptists have not always been careful in how they use language, especially when it comes to job titles and job descriptions within the church.

“We love Jesus and try to get people saved,” he said. “Those things are crucial, but failure to pay attention to definitions has led to sloppy language, which leads to confusion.”

Van Neste said a woman who leads the children’s ministry or music ministry of the church could be called a minister without violating biblical teaching. But he’d prefer they use the job title of director instead, as people sometimes confuse the terms “pastor” and “minister.”

Bart Barber, recently elected for a second term as SBC president, offered a solution to the confusion about job titles.



Bart Barber is pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville and president of the Southern Baptist Convention. (RNS Photo / Riley Farrell)

At First Baptist Church in Farmersville, where Barber serves as pastor, both men and women have leadership roles in ministry. But anyone with the title of pastor must be eligible for the senior role at the church, while those with different titles needn’t be.

Barber said churches that use the word “pastor” differently could simply change job titles and be in line with SBC doctrine. He also noted the overwhelming support during the annual meeting for the belief that only men can serve as pastors.

# Gender an underlying issue

Still, the gender restrictions on the role of pastor are also debated. While many Christian groups, including Southern Baptists and Catholics, restrict that role to men, the New Testament shows women taking prominent leadership roles.

Amy Peeler, author of *Women and the Gender of God* and an associate professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, said the restriction of women pastors played a role in her leaving the SBC, where she had been raised.

“I really love teaching, and I love teaching the Bible,” Peeler said. “I realized there wasn’t a place for me in the SBC.”

She now is an associate rector at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Geneva, Ill., adding she was also drawn to a more liturgical style of worship.

Peeler said there are valid interpretations of the Bible that see all the terms used for the pastor as referring to one role—and that the role is limited to men. But there are also valid interpretations, she said, that define the terms differently and see the role of pastor as open to both men and women.

“Let’s show respect to someone that reads the Bible differently,” said Peeler, who has always found the Bible empowering to women because it shows women acting as leaders and pastors, no matter what their title.

## What did women do in early churches?

McKnight also believes there are several ways of interpreting a prominent passage found in 1 Timothy, where the Apostle Paul says he does not allow women to teach or have authority over men.

Southern Baptists point to that verse to support limiting the role of pastors to men. McKnight believes that statement dealt with a specific situation in a specific church, rather than applying universally. The New Testament also shows women teaching and leading, he said, at times in partnership with Paul.

“You can’t prohibit women from doing what they were doing in the early church and be consistent,” he said.

During their meeting in New Orleans, Southern Baptists approved a change to their statement of faith to clearly state the terms “elder,” “pastor” and “overseer” refer to the same office. That change must be ratified next year.

## **How are churches governed?**

The change may also have unintended consequences for church governance.

Many local Southern Baptist congregations use what’s known as an “elder-led” model, where the pastor is one of a group of men who serve as a governing board for the church. That model has become increasingly popular in churches as a way of making sure that one person—often the pastor—doesn’t hold all the power.

While many scholars agree having multiple elders at a church is good, not all church governance boards are led by elders in the SBC. And not every pastor on a church staff is always included on the church elder boards.

Also, in many cases, the church’s deacons—another role mentioned in the New Testament but not always defined—serve as the board, while the pastor is not called an elder.

Van Neste said that structure doesn’t match the biblically defined role for deacons. Instead, he said, it shows the way Southern Baptists have not

been precise in their language. He said Southern Baptists understand what they believe about pastors and elders. Now it is time to practice what they preach when it comes to church leadership.

“We need to sit down with the understanding, which is pretty clear, and ask hard questions about whether or not we’re being true to that understanding,” he said.