

The Use of Titles

By Bill Scheidler

In the church world today many ministries seem to love titles. In some cases you can look at their business card and they have so many titles before or after their name that you have to turn the card over to finish reading them. The issue of titles has two sides to it. Jesus addressed this subject because of the abuse among the religious leaders of the day.

This is what Jesus said:

Matthew 23:5-12

*But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. 6 They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, 7 greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, “Rabbi, Rabbi.” 8 But you, do not be called “Rabbi”; for One is your **Teacher**, the Christ, and **you are all brethren**. 9 Do not call anyone on earth your **father**; for One is your **Father**, He who is in heaven. 10 And do not be called **teachers**; for One is your **Teacher**, the Christ. 11 But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

It should be noted that this is the **only verse** in the Bible that specifically addresses this subject. This is important to note, because there are some who give the impression that this was a real problem in the church that needed repeated attention. We know that it is not wise when interpreting the Bible to be dogmatic about anything that is only referenced once in the Bible (2 Cor. 13:1).

This verse must be read in the context of the whole passage challenging the heart of the Pharisees and religious leaders. In the context of this passage, Jesus was dealing with...

- How they taught the letter of the law but did not practice it.
- How they wanted to be perceived as spiritual authorities.
- How they dressed to impress and to accentuate their greater spirituality.
- Their love for best seat seats.
- Their love to be seen.
- Their love for special treatment.
- Their love for praise.
- Their focus on outward righteousness rather than inward beauty.
- Their hypocrisy as leaders (they say but they do not do).

Jesus was dealing with the heart issues of the Pharisees who loved titles and position. They were not humble servants of the Lord who saw themselves as servants to the people. The word for teacher that Jesus used three times in this passage is the word *kathegetes* (2519) which is only used here in the New Testament. It means “an authoritative guide” much like our concept of a “guru” (IVP Bible Background Commentary).

The terms “Rabbi” and “Father” or “Papa” in their culture had become more than just titles of respect they were badges worn by those who had their disciples or pupils. The relationship with these pupils was very formal and those under their care were often referred to as their

children. Their disciples had to keep their distance and one of the ways this was done was by the promotion and enforcement of the use of titles.

The title “Rabbi” literally means “My great one” (The Bible Exposition Commentary).

The warning of Jesus has more to do with the “air of superiority” that is exhibited by some who serve in positions in the church (A Critical Commentary).

The religion of the Pharisees was a religion of ostentation and spiritual pride as can be seen in all of the various examples that Jesus gave (Daily Study Bible).

While no one should ever demand the use of a particular title, there is another side to this whole debate. Certainly the over use of titles and the demands by some to be referred to in certain ways can be cause for concern, however, there are reasons why the title of pastor can be encouraged (not demanded) among the people of God.

Reason #1 – We are encouraged to honor those who are in authority in our lives.

This includes the following:

1. God (John 5:23)

For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.

2. Parents (Ex 20:12; Eph 6:1; Mal 1:6)

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with promise: that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.” Ephesians 6:1-3

3. Civil Authorities (Rom 13:1-7; I Pet 2:17)

- We are commanded to be subject to the higher powers and give honor to whom honor is due.
- We are commanded to honor the king.

4. Employers (I Tim 6:1; Mal 1:6)

We are to honor our masters.

5. Church Leaders (I Th. 5:12-13; I Tim 5:17; Heb. 13:)

And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. I Thessalonians 5:12-13

Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. I Timothy 5:17

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. Hebrews 13:17

Reason #2 – We are to teach our children respect for older people and church leaders.

This admonition is found in both the Old and the New Testament (Lev. 19:32; I Pet. 5:5).

Show your fear of God by standing up in the presence of elderly people and showing respect for the aged. I am the LORD. Leviticus 19:32

Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. I Peter 5:5

I am sure that most of us feel that it is inappropriate for small children to approach the church leaders on a first name basis. When a child says “Hi Fred!” to the lead pastor of the church we all shutter a bit.

The question is how do you prefer the little ones of the church to show this kind of respect?

1. Should we use the term “mister” and “misses”?

This seems to me to be rather formal and must be used with the last name to make sense. When children use this toward me, it makes me feel like their school teacher.

2. Should we use the term “brother” and “sister”?

This works to some degree within the church gathering, but when people outside of the church here these expressions they think that church leaders are all “monks” or “nuns.”

3. Should we use the term “pastor”?

There are several reasons why the term “pastor” is a good option.

- This term can be used with a first name which makes it less formal (e.g. “Pastor Bill”).
- This term is generally understood in society at large.
- This term defines a relationship in the church.

Leaders in the church are given the responsibility of pastoring or shepherding the flock (Acts 20:28; I Pet. 5:1-4).

When you use the title it reminds you that you are talking to a church leader who bears some authority in the house of God and in your personal life. The words of church leaders are weightier than the opinions of others because of the responsibility that God has given to them in relation to the local church.

*To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 **Be shepherds** of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. I Peter 5:1-5*

In Our Church

We encourage the use of the term “pastor” in relation to the elders and all of those who have been officially placed in a pastoral role by the elders of the church. It is especially done to facilitate the respect that should accompany the office. It is not done to create an “air of superiority” but to assist parents in the training of their children and to ensure that proper respect is given to younger pastors who serve in such a capacity (I Tim. 4:12).

Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers...

It should be noted that this is encouraged but is never be enforced among adults.

It should also be noted that this is more important when children are present.