Summary

I am proposing these points for our continued conversation together:
- that the nature of the pastoral role is (or ought to be) under careful reconsideration;
- that the NT does not supply us with a ready-made, normative set of job descriptions for ecclesial roles;
- that the NT does, however, set forth a deep structure for the church, in which those who bear the word (in several overlapping roles) serve the whole body in a distinct, hyper-necessary way;
- that “pastors” are linked strongly into this cadre of word bearers, and that their compassionate leadership especially takes the form of word bearing;
- that the doctrine of Scripture across the Evangelical world, though “high, is proving itself to inadequate to support the kind of word function that comports with the full character of Scripture;
- that the divine word, and therefore (by inclusion) Scripture, is not only authoritative and true, but powerful, life-giving, community forming, and sacramental by mediating to the church and the world the transforming presence of Christ;
- that such a view of Scripture should call us forward to reconsider how best to teach the Bible (in ways more commensurate with its nature);
- that our preaching can be buoyed with a confidence that the word can make its way in the world;
- that our preaching ought to dare to trust the agenda-setting competence of the Bible, as well as its rich fare for disciples, as we edge away from too great a dependence on discernment approaches to selecting texts;
- and that such views (as proposed above) provide an anchor point from which we can venture in full creativity as we seek better how to glorify God in our common life together.

Part One  Ambiguities in Pastoral Job Description

In his book The Church on the Other Side, Brian McLaren issues a simple plea: “Save our Leaders.”¹ Reasons for urgency on this matter are not hard to come by, as McLaren himself makes clear by citing a litany of pressures often taking pastoral life right up to (if not beyond) the breaking point. But of the many factors contributing to this crisis, one has roots growing deeper into matters of substantial biblical and theological debate. In his book The Once and Future Church, Loren Mead identifies “loss of role clarity” as a source of much clergy stress and burnout.

One man, whom I first knew in the 1950s, was then a pastor-educator. Next I heard he was a pastor-counselor. Then in followed in rapid succession human relations

In an illuminating way, Mead connects this loss of clergy role clarity with the rise of the “newly awakened laity.” In our own denomination perhaps only a generation or two ago, we all seemed to “know our places,” and therefore know our roles. Usually the line of demarcation between “the ministry” and the laity was clearly drawn, with all of the “good words” on the clergy side. Clergy were “called of God,” they were “gifted,” they were “anointed,” and they were in “the ministry.” To a large extent, clergy identity, role, and worth arose from their sole possession of these descriptors. Now that world Christianity has, in a remarkably ecumenical way over the last generation, emphatically and enthusiastically promoted the laity into the ranks of the “called,” the “gifted,” the “anointed,” and the “ministry,” it is no wonder that clergy (and now we struggle with what to call them!) find themselves puzzling over who they are and what they are to do. Ironically and unfortunately, this disorienting paradigm shift with regard to pastoral identity has coincided (in many denominations) with the onset of a rigorous managerial culture requiring ever higher degrees of accountability and (measurable) output from clergy. The pincer effect between high ambiguity and high expectation is not only demoralizing in its own right, but can whip up crippling firestorms of insecurity.

Part Two  Elusive Biblical Roles and Polity

Our instinct to turn to the Bible for clear direction has generally not been rewarded in matters related to church structure and ministerial roles. In an earlier day perhaps, one might have imagined that a little concordance work, a little etymological analysis of key Greek words, and a few quotations garnered from selected commentators or luminary churchmen (who seemed absolutely sure of themselves) could salvage from the Bible God’s own blueprint for how we should organize the church and ourselves within it. But presently an impressive and diverse body

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2 Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (N.p.: The Alban Institute, 1991), 34. Unfortunately, in my view, Mead’s larger analysis of the malaise of the (mostly mainline) church world is theologically tone deaf.

3 In this respect it is noteworthy to recall that one of the primary emphases of Vatican II was to insert the laity right into the business of “apostolic activity.” An entire decree was devoted to the role of the laity, and significant portions of the first decree (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) concern the same. Walter M. Abbot, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II: All Sixteen Official Texts Promulgated by the Ecumenical Council 1963-1965* (New York: Guild Press, 1966).

4 This issue has, in fact, been percolating for centuries in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation. In surveying the history of a cornerstone Protestant conviction, the priesthood of all believers, Eastwood concludes that “no single Church has been able to express in its worship, work, and witness, the full richness of this doctrine.” Cyril Eastwood, *The Priesthood of all Believers: An Examination of the Doctrine from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1962), 238. I suspect that while the situation has substantially improved in the decades since Eastwood’s conclusion, it has not been overturned.
of scholars concludes that the NT does not generate a sufficiently complete or cohesive picture of church order to serve as an authoritative polity.\(^5\)

The evidence for such a conclusion is fairly clear to see, and can be sketched out with this sampling of indicators: The major Pauline epistles present various “gift lists,” but these lists do not neatly mesh together in consistent terminology or in parallel arrangement. Furthermore, these gifts are not cross-indexed with the leadership roles Paul himself alludes to (especially elders and overseers/bishops), making it difficult to discern just which ministries or clusters of ministries such leaders might have been expected or permitted to assume.\(^6\) Even more to the point, no watertight distinctions can be made between many of the so-called “gifts,”\(^7\) since under careful analysis they seem more like highly overlapping fuzzy circles. Then the roles of Timothy and Titus themselves are difficult to assess for purposes of (normative) replication, given their unique personal association with and commissioning by the Apostle, whose peculiar apostolic authority was to some degree bequeathed to his lieutenants.\(^8\) These lieutenants, by the way, were

\(^5\) For example, Schweizer concludes that “there is no such thing as the New Testament church order.” Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1961), 11. Scobie, who has composed a fascinating biblical theology (pulling OT and NT themes together), seems to accept this same general conclusion, but with the added proviso that the absence of a normative church order in the NT does not mean that important insights about ministry cannot emerge from its pages. “The basic NT understanding of ministry does not of course in and of itself provide a blueprint for church order, but it does qualify everything else the NT does say about ministry and order, and it stands in judgment on all later forms of ministry and order that fail to live up to the norm.” Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 648. Compare with Ladd: “It appears likely that there was no normative pattern of church government in the apostolic age, and that the organizational structure of the church is no essential element in the theology of the church.” George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, revised by Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 579.

\(^6\) See, for example, Hans Kung, *The Church*, E. T. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967)), 395, where he writes: “Distinctions are not clearly drawn even within the permanent ministries in the community; the prophet can also be a teacher, the teacher a prophet; Paul himself embodies several ministries. Finally, the different lists of charisms…do not agree.”

\(^7\) Patzia concludes from his analysis that “rather than promoting distinct and self-contained roles, the early church made room for a variety of functions. The picture…is much more like a series of interlocking and overlapping circles than a row of separate entities.” Arthur G. Patzia, *The Emergence of the Church: Context, Growth, Leadership & Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 182.

\(^8\) This point is forcefully argued by Warkinten, who finds the unique Moses-Joshua relationship of succession serving as the model for what is likewise judged to be a unique sharing of Paul’s apostolic authority with Timothy and Titus. Marjorie Warkentin, *Ordination: A Biblical-Historical View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 136-152. One might be troubled, however, by Warkentin’s heavy-handed treatment of the whole issue of ordination. Warkentin repeatedly reveals that her hostility to the idea of ordination stems from her conviction that it constitutes the first step towards an inevitable slide toward hierarchicalism, clerical abuse of power, self-aggrandizement, and division within the body. (See especially pp. 185-188.) We can accept the
charged by Paul to be fulfilling numerous ministry roles (preaching, teaching, pastoral care, evangelism, meting out discipline, etc.) without clarification as to how these various roles might later be legitimately broken apart and reassigned in new combinations in response to the changing needs and varying resources within particular congregations.

It is still tempting to imagine that with just a little more massaging of the data one might tease out at least a “basic” ecclesial structure normative for the whole church. But such efforts appear successful only to the degree that they suppress large parts of the (diverse) NT data and enthrone one or two texts as the only word on the matter.\(^9\) It seems that the NT, in the final analysis, may actually present bits and pieces of slightly different organizational and ministerial arrangements which cannot be merge into a single, comprehensive system. In fact, stories like Acts 6:1-6 can easily (and I think legitimately) be read even as promoting an open-ended, inventive, pragmatic (albeit Spirit-led) approach to the establishment and arrangement of ministry/government within the church. In that instance (Acts 6), the need for the local assembly to resolve the problem of cultural tensions and (at least perceived) irregularities in the distribution of resources prompted the apostles to improvise for the sake of the larger mission.

Perhaps at no time in history has the church been more entrepreneurial than it is today. Seeing the church as an evolving, adaptive organism alive with the life of the Spirit and responsive to discerned needs has freed church leaders and theologians to propose and experiment with new forms of organizing, of leading, and of “doing” church.\(^10\) An entire discipline (Leadership Studies) has taken shape within a generation, and a massive network of conferences, resources and speakers has emerged for generating and disseminating leadership wisdom for pastors of churches of every size and disposition. The array of proposals, dizzying in their number and diversity, mixed in the quality of their analysis of the current state of affairs, but agreed in their insistence that all questions be reground through the fine screens of pragmatic effectiveness and cultural appropriateness,\(^11\) presents a nearly impossible digestive challenge even for the heartiest of appetites.

The realities of this new day have registered themselves strongly upon theological education as well. A generation ago or so, M.Div. degrees boasted large core curricula and few Moses-Joshua overtones she finds within the Paul-Timothy-Titus relationship without embracing her larger aversion to ordination.\(^9\) Here, I think, we should reference the current Pentecostal and Charismatic “rediscovery” of the so-called “fivefold ministry.” Such a view of ministry seizes upon Ephesians 4:11 as if no other texts exist, and as if all other descriptions of the church in the rest of the NT fit neatly into the categories supplied in Ephesians. For a positive presentation of the “fivefold ministry” see Matthew D. Green, ed., *Understanding the Fivefold Ministry* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2005).\(^10\) The literature here is enormous, and growing by the minute. One resource that offers a sampling of “new think” is Leonard Sweet, *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). The value of Sweet’s book is enhanced by the insights afforded in his own sweeping introductory chapter, by the theological diversity of the writers of the five perspectives, and by the interaction between them interlaced within the text itself.\(^11\) To my colleague Michael Pasquarello I owe the observation that the common link between most ecclesial experimentation today is the conviction that “culture” stands as the supreme (?) test of validity. He offers the expression *sola cultura* as a tongue-in-cheek identification and critique of the extreme application of this conviction.
electives, assuming that all ministries into which students were heading would require largely the same set of training and skills. But students now arrive with callings that are difficult even to classify, that cobble together widely separated roles into cohesive visions, and that require training in disciplines that are themselves presently under formative construction. Cafeteria-styled curricula, servicing “designer” ministries, will produce an ever-growing tide of able, creative, motivated, and spiritually energized believers who will offer themselves for service to churches whose structures will be taxed in accommodating them. For many of them, the rite of ordination and the role of pastor appear as fuzzy mysteries, as holdovers from a simpler day when inflexible tradition served a culture now alien to ours.  

**Part Three** A Deeper Kind of Guidance

To this point I have urged that the NT provides the church with neither a consistent nor a comprehensive program for defining and ordering Christian ministry, but that it does model for us an inventive and creative approach to the same. So is that the end of the matter? Do we (merely) pragmatically invent our way forward?

Here I want to announce one of the leading claims of this paper: that while the NT does not lay out for us a unified *surface* structure regarding these matters, its does provide something of a *deep* structural shape for them. That is, despite a shifting terminology for charismata, despite a disjointed and unsystematized swirl of (nascent) offices, and despite a strong nod toward inventiveness, the NT nevertheless establishes a crucial “ordering” that must directly inform and guide our ecclesial vision. What is that deep structural shape? We may put it this way: While all believers are “in ministry,” and all ministries are “essential” to the health, worship and mission of the church, *ministries that mediate the “word of God” are “hyper-essential,”* steering the whole people of God forward according to the will of God.

This broad distinction within the deep coding of ecclesial DNA can be detected in a number of NT passages I have chosen precisely because of their diversity on many other counts.

1) *Acts 6:1-6.* Here the apostles respond with creativity and flexibility to the challenge of ethnic tension and inequity within the community, and it is clear that the church grows as a result of their bold engagement. But a merely managerial interpretation doesn’t quite get to the heart of the matter according to the language of the story itself. It appears that the real focus of the incident is the central importance of “prayer and…the ministry of the word,” and that apostolic organizational ingenuity was effective *precisely because it served to safeguard and advance that word-bearing ministry.* In fact, the subsequent growth of the church is described in those very terms: “And the word of God increased”

2) *1 Cor 12-14.* These well-worked chapters establish as a first principle the “belongingness” to the body of every individual member. Accordingly, no one part can declare to another “I have no need of you,” since all have been arranged according to the will of God within the whole for mutual edification.

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12 I have been asking M.Div. students for about 10 years just why they are being ordained. It is rare to find one who can articulate a theologically grounded answer, even among those who are advanced in their candidacies. The vast majority sense that ordination is a relic from the past from which today’s church somehow cannot escape, and that they are acceding to ordination simply as an accommodation.

13 All Biblical quotations in this paper are from the RSV.
But the intrinsic value and reciprocal sharing of each part does not prevent the apostle from working out a complementary and somewhat paradoxical truth in chapter 14, where he urges his readers to “earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.” As he develops his appeal throughout this chapter, a picture of what he means by prophecy emerges. It is clear, intelligible speech that 1) addresses the whole community while remaining intelligible to outsiders, 2) employs the mind by moving it toward mature thinking, and 3) can be termed “instruction.” Somehow within its very delivery, insiders will be edified, while outsiders will sense the very presence of God and come to faith. Paul’s insistence on the value of all gifts (chapter 12), then, is complemented by his insistence that the gifts of prophetic/instructional/evangelistic address are at a premium.

3) Ephesians 4:1-16. In our haste to construct a master list of spiritual gifts, we often cannibalize this passage for the gift categories it can contribute to our project, and thereby miss its peculiar interests. What is often overlooked is the unusual nature of this list: it is not complete (compared to the larger lists in I Corinthians and Romans), and it is not representative (i.e., its four or five categories do not represent well the great diversity of ministry roles we see in other listings). This suggests an intentional restriction to a specific group of persons who turn out (under analysis) to share the characteristic of being “word-bearers.” Whatever differences may exist between them (apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers), they are all tasked with speaking in behalf of God to the church and the world. This set of persons equips the saints for their ministries, not by employing whatever tools they may want to use, but precisely through their speech which has as its purpose bringing the body to full maturity while granting it protection from false doctrine. We might say that a church without the full range of gifted persons (of all sorts) will be dysfunctional, but that a church crippled in the ranks of the word bearers will be downright disastrous, exposed to utter dissolution.

There is some debate about the significance of the “first, second, third” listing of gifts in 12:28. Some read this chronologically, as if apostles were the first persons appointed, prophets the second, and so on. Others read this as non-hierarchical itemization (What’s in your grocery cart? First, eggs, then detergent, then butter…), ordered mainly by the chance. But Thistelton’s survey of the data has concluded, convincingly in our view, that the very logic of the argument in I Cor. 12-14 depends upon demoting glossalalia within public worship and promoting “prophecy.” The breadth of agreement on this matter is impressive: “The comments of Bruce, Dunn, Senft, Hooker, and Schrange remain valid, and interestingly come from Brethren, Methodist, French-language Protestant, Anglican, and German Protestant writers respectively.” Anthony C. Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, in The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1014-1015.

A fascinating, detailed, and up-to-date analysis of the data regarding the nature of “prophecy” appears also in Thistelton (956-965). Thistelton concludes that prophecy (in the sense intended by the Apostle Paul) essentially consists of “pastoral preaching,” which he unpacks as “preaching gospel-truth to move present hearers to repentance, change, consolation, or the full assurance of salvation” (960).

The purpose clauses in 4:12-16 make clear that Christian maturity and protection from false doctrine are the primary outcomes of the equipping ministry.

From different points of view and with different emphases, both Andrew Lincoln (Word Biblical Commentary) and Markus Barth (Anchor Bible Series) come to the same conclusion.
4) II Timothy 3:10-4:5. The Pastoral Epistles are saturated with exhortations focused on the verbal, word-bearing dimension of ministry exercised by Paul, Timothy, and Titus. The apostle twice describes himself as having been appointed “a preacher and apostle and teacher” (II Tim. 1:11; cf. similar wording of I Tim. 2:7). In reflecting on his imprisonment, he confidently declares that his confinement ultimately cannot restrict his ministry, because “the word of God is not fettered” (II Tim. 2:9). This suggests that he can view his whole ministry as a form of God’s own speech. And while the apostle certainly urges that his whole life and behavior serve as a model for emulation (II Tim. 3:10), he leads the list of all he can bequeath to his protégés with the discursive dimension of his ministry: “my teaching” (II Tim. 3:10).

Repeatedly he instructs his own appointees to engage in verbal, word-bearing ministry. In the first epistle, Timothy is urged to “put these instructions before the brethren” (4:6); to “command and teach these things” (4:11); to “attend to the public reading of scripture” and to “preaching” and “teaching” (4:13); and to take heed “to your teaching,” since such attention “will save both you and your hearers” (4:16). In the second epistle emphasis on the discursive continues: “remind them” (2:14), “charge them” (2:14), “preach the word” (4:2), “convince, rebuke, and exhort” (4:2). Likewise Titus must “teach” (2:1), “bid” (2:2, 9), “remind” (3:1), and “insist” (3:7). His upright character and fruitfulness in good deeds will serve to validate his “teaching” and “sound speech” which will (when so validated) prove unassailable to opponents.\(^\text{18}\)

It should not be surprising that the evaluation and selection of elders/overseers, while focusing initially on issues of character and spiritual maturity, moves firmly to the matter of discerning the capacity of candidates for word-bearing ministry. A bishop must be “an apt teacher” (I Tim. 3:2), as must anyone (like Timothy) who would be “the Lord’s servant” (II Tim. 2:24-25). Likewise Titus, in selecting bishops, must ensure that candidates not only be well

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\(^{18}\) The power of all verbal instruction is underscored by the source of the greatest danger to the congregations led by Timothy and Titus: false teachers.
taught, firmly holding to “the sure word,” but be persons then able to play it forward, able to “give instruction in sound doctrine and also confute those who contradict it” (1:9).

But two further features of this data require closer attention for our purposes here. First, in I Tim. 5:17ff., we find a clue that not all “elders” were gifted or charged with word-bearing responsibilities, “Let the elders who rule will be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (emphasis added). It would seem that while all elders rule (or lead) in one fashion or another, some elders (the arithmetic ratio between the two groupings cannot be discerned from this passage) shoulder the added challenge of word-bearing ministry. While one might suppose that the “double honor” to be awarded them stems simply from the doubled job description and its doubled workload, the entire atmosphere of the Pastoral Epistles (with its emphasis on word-bearing ministry) should steer us toward a different conclusion: that the roles of preaching and teaching constitute hyper-essential callings which wield power either to enliven or to destroy the community as other callings do not.

Second, we find that the Holy Scriptures themselves provide the supreme and divinely provided resource for all who serve in word-bearing roles. The well-known declaration that “all Scripture is inspired,” immediately cites those ministerial functions which Scripture sponsors: teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness, conviction, rebuke, and exhortation. We now see that the verbal behaviors mandated for Timothy and Titus in their word-bearing ministry are essentially matched by the very ministry functions the Scripture enables. This match makes clear what is implied throughout but never quite directly asserted: that Scripture itself is the supreme resource for all who speak in God’s behalf for making disciples. And those disciples who are profoundly shaped by Scripture will be mature and full-orbed: “complete, equipped for every good work” (II Tim. 3:17).

Initial Summary of Part Three: These diverse passages which among themselves do not combine to present any normative “surface structure” for ecclesial organization, offices, or ministry functions, nevertheless evince an underlying shape, a “deep structure” that must inform and direct all our ecclesial experimentation and imagination. Those who speak in behalf of God to the people of God (whatever nomenclature attaches to them, and whatever structures house

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19 I am actually settling here for that interpretation which less supportive of my overall interests in this paper, though I think my point is still supported in this passage. According to Knight, since all elders must be able to teach (I Tim. 3:2), Paul (here in 5:17) cannot be implying that a subset of elders do not teach. Rather, the “especially” (ma, lista) in 5:17 would better be translated “namely,” or “that is.” The point of Paul’s instruction in 5:17, according to Knight, is to urge the double honoring of the elders who teach particularly well. George W. Knight III, The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 232. If Knight is right, then it is all the more certain that the primary function of an elder is (to lead by) teaching.

20 Knight sums up the intimate relationships between Scripture and the whole scope of Christian growth/mission: Since God created Christians for good works and calls on them to do good works (Eph. 2:10; Tit. 3:1; II Tim. 2:21), he has given scripture to instruct them so that they may know…what God expects of them and thus be equipped to do that particular “good deed” called for in each situation.” Knight, 450.

21 Time prevents us from considering James 3:1-18 and I Peter 4:7-11 which would support the conclusion we are drawing.
and regulate them) stand in a peculiar relationship to the whole congregation, exercise a peculiarly powerful influence (whether for good or ill) over the whole by virtue of the word, and thereby stand under more stringent accountability than those exercising other forms of ministry. All of our entrepreneurial and experimental ventures in crafting the church of tomorrow must anchor into this mooring by establishing, promoting, and safeguarding the word-bearing roles… if we will be birthing disciples who are complete and equipped for every good work (II Tim. 3), or to birth congregations that are maturing towards the image of Christ (Eph. 4), or to experience the genuine and supernatural growth of the word in evangelism (Acts 6).

Closing the Loop on “Pastor”

Against this backdrop it is now a bit safer to address the more specific question about the nature of the pastoral role as it appears in Ephesians 4:11.

First, we note how surprisingly rarely pastoral language occurs in NT materials to describe a ministry role within the church: the noun (shepherd: poi'mh,n) appears only in Ephesians 4:11, and the verb (to shepherd: poi'mai,nw) appears only in three passages (John 21:16; Acts 20:28; and I Peter 5:2). Metaphorically, pastoral terminology naturally evinces the notion of leadership, given the way a shepherd “leads” the flock in his or her charge. Not surprisingly then in I Peter 5:1f., it is the elders (presbute,rouj) who are commanded to “tend the flock of God that is in your charge.” Then (as if on cue to use the “other” Greek word associated with leadership!!) in Acts 20:28, it is the overseers (evpisko,pouj) who are commanded to shepherd “the church of God.”

So far, so good. Pastors (shepherds) are leaders of local flocks, and “pastor” may therefore be a way of describing the role of “elders” or “overseers.” But of what significance is the peculiar grammatical construction in Ephesians 4:11 that seems to link pastors so closely with teachers (tou.j de. poime,naj kai. didaska,louj)?

Surely the “fivefold ministry” advocates are off target in separating these two terms into cleanly distinctive roles (as if being numbers four and five in this list), given the conjunction joining them together and the lack of an article preceding the second noun (didaska,louj). At most, these nouns together refer to one and the same group of people, as Markus Barth argues by translating the double construction as “teaching shepherds.” At least, pastors and teachers are barely distinguishable, overlapping each other so highly as almost to merge into one. Wallace, for example, concludes on the basis of an exhaustive analysis of this grammatical construction (article; plural noun; “and” plural noun) that “all pastors were to be teachers, though not all teachers were [necessarily] to be pastors.”

So, is the role of a pastor (a shepherd) tightly bound to the role of teaching only here in the grammar of Eph. 4:11, or is this connection evident elsewhere? Let’s consider the following:

1) In Acts 20:26-32 where Paul commands the Ephesian overseers (evpisko,pouj) to shepherd the flock, he describes himself (as a model of good shepherding) as one who “did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” He also warns that the Ephesian elders must provide pastoral care because “fierce wolves will come in among you…speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.” He then urges the Ephesian shepherds to “be alert,

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22 Markus Barth, p. 438.
remembering that for three years I did not cease admonishing everyone with tears” (emphasis added). It is hard to miss how a shepherd’s role (of feeding and protecting sheep) is expressed here in terms of the full, faithful, fearless, fervent, and compassionate declaration of God’s truth (i.e. in terms of a word-bearing ministry). 2) In Mark 6:30-44 which narrates the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus looked upon the crowd that had gathered and “had compassion upon them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” The immediate response of Jesus to this starving and needy flock was that “he began to teach them many things” (6:34). Gundry insightfully comments, “Jesus is a man of compassion. [But] his compassion on the crowds grows…not out of their hunger and lack of food (as in 8:2),” but out of his deeper assessment of them as being absolutely starved for God’s truth. “Thus, by teaching them he shepherds them” (emphasis added). 3) Beautifully connecting with the feeding of the 5,000 is the promise of God through Jeremiah that “I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jeremiah 3:15). Again we see that shepherds provide the nourishment through their instruction to the flock. 4) Similarly in Ecclesiastes 12:9-12 we read that God (?) in his role as shepherd has supplied the “sayings of the wise,” and has underwritten the work of the Preacher who “taught the people knowledge” and “wrote words of truth.” 5) The idea that shepherds care for their sheep by teaching them is echoed in (pagan) Greek religious guilds wherein teachers are compared to shepherds, and pupils are compared to a flock. 6) In Sirach 18:11-14, an OT apocryphal text nearly contemporary to the NT, we read these lines demonstrating the remarkable convergence between shepherding, compassion, and teaching:

Therefore the Lord is patient with them
   and pours out his mercy upon them.
He sees and recognizes that their end will be evil;
   therefore he grants them forgiveness in abundance.
The compassion of a man is for his neighbor,
   but the compassion of the Lord is for all living beings.
He rebukes and trains and teaches them,
   and turns them back, as a shepherd his flock.
He has compassion on those who accept his discipline
   and who are eager for his judgments.

We might summarize our findings for Part Three as follows: The combined testimony of diverse NT witnesses suggests that God has given word bearers (and word bearing gifts) to the church as persons hyper-necessary for her full health, and (in congruity with this) that the core calling of compassionate and effective pastoral leadership is that of teaching.

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Points for further reflection: On the one hand, the pastoral role as traditionally prescribed among us requires too many “hats” to be worn. In the blizzard of multi-tasking, the core responsibility of feeding the flock too often receives less attention than it should. How can the Wesleyan Church as a denomination encourage both pastors and congregations to renegotiate (realistically, creatively, and with follow-through) their vision(s) of pastoral “job descriptions,” so that the core responsibility of word bearing (as expressed in Acts 6:1-7) can indeed thrive?

On the other hand, the nature and look of “church” is rapidly being deconstructed by a new wave of forward-thinking entrepreneurial visioneers. At times their passion for a completely egalitarian congregation, for the full deployment of all gifted persons, and for effective communication according to the requirements of a post-modern age has resulted in a loss of confidence in Christian preaching and teaching as we know it. How much cultural skin and flesh can we strip away from the present form of Christian teaching/preaching before we begin cutting into the very bone of it, and before we begin denying God’s gift of a word-bearing cadre to the church?27

**Part Four**  A New Kind of High

If the “deep structure” of the church reveals the critical importance of the Word of God for the life and health of the church, and if word bearing lies right of the heart of pastoring, then one might conclude that the Wesleyan Church is well positioned for continued strength and growth. After all, the Discipline’s article of faith on Holy Scripture espouses what most would call a high view of Scripture by affirming the full authority and inerrancy of the Bible.

But many have noticed a strange and paradoxical phenomenon extending across the broader Evangelical world we inhabit. It is not difficult to find leaders who honestly and fervently affirm a “high” view of Scripture, and who yet engage the Bible obliquely, touching upon it just enough to introduce sermon topics to be enhanced by other means, or reading just enough of the Biblical text (a phrase or verse) to create the impression that the sermon ought to be believed. Frequently I encounter students enrolling in seminary (again, from a wide variety of Evangelical backgrounds) who have been taught to stand firm for the absolute authority and truthfulness of the Bible, but have inherited from their mentors only a paper-thin biblical knowledge interrupted by spans of outright biblical illiteracy. How can a sky-high doctrine of Scripture not infrequently be combined with an appallingly low use of Scripture? Why too often does our rhetoric about the Bible so far outstrip the quality of our actual engagement with it? Why might this be a growing trend among many of us in the Evangelical world?28

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27 Frost and Hirsch, for example, believe that the entertainment industry has forever changed communication. They have concluded that “sermons have little or no impact,” that the “Emperor of preaching has no clothes,” and that Christianity’s love of preaching stems “more from the philosophical art of rhetoric than it does from the Bible.” “We invented the sermon…and then it reinvented us.” Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 151.

28 So strong is the anecdotal evidence here that I have not attempted to document it. My confidence in the accuracy of these perceptions rests in several factors: 1) They have been gained over many years time; 2) They are strongly affirmed by my professorial colleagues; 3) They are affirmed not only by my classically oriented colleagues, but also by those in non-
I suspect that the roots of this phenomenon run very deep, and that the challenge cannot be met merely by ratcheting up to an even higher pitch our assertions about the Bible’s authority and truthfulness. (They’re already ratcheted up about as far as they can go!) It is my judgment that this growing crisis regarding Scripture in the church is a *theological* one, and is due in large measure to the skewing effects of theological warfare over the nature of the Bible waged over the last 500 years.29

I propose that the short version goes like this: The Protestant Reformation rose up against a corrupt Catholic church that had created a thick crust of traditions choking out the truth and vibrancy of the Gospel. The sword of reform in the hands of the Reformers was the Bible itself, wielded with the battle cry “*sola scriptura:*” what was not directly taught in Scripture or could not be fairly inferred from it must not be required of the believer. The heat of the battle forged into place for Protestants a view of Scripture that insisted *first and foremost* on the Bible’s supreme *authority* vis-à-vis all other authorities (especially that of church tradition). The inevitable outcome of promoting especially this particular attribute of the Word was that the Bible tends to be valued primarily for its *conceptual* cargo, the prized content of prescriptive *information* which could be converted into doctrinal and ethical requirement. (Of course, this cargo must be valued in its own right!)

Later in the great battle between Liberalism and Fundamentalism (especially during the height of the battle in North America from about 1910 until about 1940), the issue of Scripture again came to the fore. Against a demeaning and demurring approach to the Bible as practiced by Liberalism, Fundamentalists rightly fought to defend the Bible’s reputation by asserting its truthful character (“it contains no errors or lies”) as a *primary* description of God’s Word.

As the children of Protestantism and Fundamentalism, we Evangelicals have inherited a way of talking about and engaging with the Bible that flows out of these battles that engulfed our forebears.30 In my judgment, two unintended (and unfortunate) consequences have converged upon us as a result. First, in our zeal to defend the Bible (certainly a worthy goal), we have isolated and abstracted the Bible from the *larger reality of God’s Word* (understood as *all* that proceeds from the mouth of God). For example, many post-Reformation dogmatic formulations treat the Bible to its own article of faith, unwittingly luring us into viewing the Bible as a stand-

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29 A far more detailed survey of this history is offered in William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

30 A sampling of the way in which Evangelical identity is forged around just the matters of Biblical authority and inerrancy is found in Ellingsen’s analysis of Evangelicalism. His entire chapter entitled “View of Scripture and Theological Method” (pp. 205-229) focuses entirely on inerrancy and ways in which various Evangelicals have attempted to define, defend or modify it. No other attributes of Scripture are seriously addressed as meaningful for constructing Evangelical identity or theology! I take this, regrettably, to be an accurate portrayal of the state of affairs within Evangelicalism. Mark Ellingsen, *The Evangelical Movement: Growth, Impact, Controversy, Dialog* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988).
alone entity, as an independent creation of God with clean lines of demarcation around it to establish its identity.  

Second, in promoting the authority and truthfulness of the Bible above every other attribute, we have come to envision the Bible primarily as “information.” We speak of “mastering biblical content,” of “mining the text for nuggets of gold,” of “discovering its principles,” and of deploying it as our “owners’ manual.” We promise readers that it gives “answers” to all of life’s “questions.” In this vein, preaching the Bible effectively morphs into an exercise in effective communication, whereby we take what the Bible gives us (content) and make it “come alive” or “become relevant” for our audiences.

In my judgment, no matter how fervently we continue describing the Bible primarily as a deposit of authoritative and true information, we will find ourselves slipping further away from the actual practice of genuine Scriptural engagement that should characterize the pastoral role. The gap between our talk about the Bible and our actual practices with the Bible will, I fear, continue to widen until we 1) reposition and then 2) expand theologically our convictions about the nature of Scripture. The strategy for repositioning the Bible I am proposing here involves two steps: first, to step back and consider the nature of divine speech in general (a broader and deeper reality than Scripture itself); and then to consider how our view (and use) of Scripture might be transformed if we were to allow Scripture to share the characteristics of that larger reality.

The Larger Reality of Divine Discourse

First, God’s speech is repeatedly portrayed as powerful. Psalm 29 celebrates the raw power of God’s utterances to shatter forests, make mountains quake, and send shivers of fear down the spines of mortal creatures. In Isaiah (55:10-11) we see God sending out his word on a mission among the kingdoms of the world. So potent is divine utterance that it will not return to the throne room of God without having accomplished its mission, however impossible or far-reaching that mission might be. In the mouth of the prophet Ezekiel, the divine word will uproot nations and kingdoms across the face of the earth according to the will of God. All of this dynamic activity of the word simply replays the action of the word in creation, where God’s simple utterances (…and God said, “Let…”) effortlessly issue in the appearance of light, the rearrangement of mighty forces (water, land), and the ordering of an erstwhile chaos into rhythmic harmony. Our very first glimpse of God in Scripture is of a God who works mighty wonders precisely by means of speaking a word.

Second, while the power of divine speech should thrill us, we must discern the ultimate directional thrust of this power: it is power for making alive. 1) The story of creation (already

31 The impression that Scripture somehow “stands alone” as an independent entity is unfortunately enhanced by the well established practice of including within doctrinal statements about Scripture the listing of books to be received within the canon. To define Scripture as containing “these books and no others” (itself a legitimate and necessary demarcation) quite easily leaves the impression that “the word of God” is no larger than the Biblical canon.

32 The painful move from viewing the Bible as primarily informational to receiving its as transformational is mapped out by Robert M. Mulholland, Jr., Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation (Nashville: Upper Room, 2000).

33 In my own practice I have stopped using this language. If I am making the Bible come alive, and become relevant, then by implication I am presuming that the Bible was dead and irrelevant before I rescued it from its helpless condition!
Pastoral Identity

referenced, Genesis 1) displays not only the raw power of divine speech to shape and control mighty forces but to cause life to burst forth...whether out of nothingness or out of shapelessness. We see a world called by God’s own speech from a dark murky soup to be a world crawling with life in its every corner. 2) The prophet Ezekiel (37:1-14), having been taken to survey a valley filled with dry (lifeless) bones, is commanded to “speak” to the bones, to “prophesy” to them and “declare to them God’s intention to make them into a living army. Yes, God would send his wind/breath/Spirit upon them as the immediate animating force, but this wind will be set in motion by the Ezekiel’s prophetic announcement of God’s intentions. 3) The life-giving function of divine speech was dramatically illustrated when Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb and back to life (John 11:43-44). This (temporary) resurrection anticipates the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise (John 5:28-20) that “all who are in the tombs will hear [my] voice and come forth…” Charles Wesley captured the same theme: “He speaks, and listening to His voice, new life the dead receive.”

Third, divine speech functions to create and shape a community of those being animated with divine life. Here the rich language of “calling” comes to the fore. 1) The synoptic gospels routinely portray Jesus as calling disciples to join themselves to him (and thereby to the whole company of disciples). 34 2) The divine calling issued to lost humanity cannot be subdivided into a million separate callings, each with its own identity. Rather, the call into the life of the Gospel has a singularity because it calls to “one hope…one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” and to “one God and Father who is overall.” This singular focus of the divine call resonates with the gift of the (one) Spirit who creates unity in the “bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:1-4). 3) Further, the peace which should characterize Christian fellowship stems from the single destination embedded within the calling: “[to this peace] you were called in one body” (Col. 1:15, emphasis added). Through the word of his mouth, God not only calls the dead to life, but calls them into miraculous and beautiful union with Himself and all of his children. Under the influence of divine discourse, persons are gathered and shaped into the singular community of the body of Christ. 35 As Achtemeier puts it, “The community of the Christian church is formed and sustained by the...word.” 36

34 See, for example, Mk 1:16-20; 3:13-19; 8:34-9:1.
35 This theme [of the community called into existence by the word] is a favorite of Willimon. “In preaching, people not only hear an announcement of their changed situation (justification) but are also given a new language and a new grammar whereby they are enabled daily to participate in that new world (sanctification). As a preacher describes what God has done in Jesus Christ, people are being formed into a new people by water and the Word” (emphasis added). William H. Willimon, Proclamation and Theology (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 94. Likewise Snodgrass: “A sound understanding of ministry is essential. At the center of all else is the ministry of the Word preparing a community for service. Language creates a community, and those who communicate the message of Jesus create a community with shared identity and shared values. Preaching creates a power sphere in which and from which people live, for language is the tool we use to shape reality. Preaching is the opportunity every preacher has to bring order out of chaos on the basis of the Word of God” (author’s emphasis). Klyne Snodgrass, Ephesians, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 214.
36 Elizabeth Achtemeier, Preaching from the Old Testament (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 29. Webster, systematic theologian at the University of Aberdeen, offers this
Fourth, divine speech mediates divine presence and intimacy. The experiences of Moses cannot be surpassed for our instruction as we watch him interceding for the sinful nation. Having asked to see God’s “ways” and “glory,” Moses was promised such a vision, and then prepared himself for the dangerous theophanic encounter (Exodus 33:12-23). After Moses was safely positioned within the cleft of a rock and covered by the hand of the Lord, God himself descended (actually “drew near”), and “stood with him there” (34:1-5). But here the narrative takes a surprising turn as the visual expectations of Moses are overtaken by the verbal self-revelation of the Lord. The “vision” of the Lord, and the unsurpassed intimacy granted to Moses at this moment actually took the form of divine speech: “And the Lord said, ‘The Lord, the Lord, slow to anger ...” (34:6). This shift from the expected visual to the granted aural does not constitute a cruel slight of hand by which God granted less than what Moses hoped for, but rather how God granted far more. As even human relational dynamics show, words allow one person to divulge to another the depths of one’s being inaccessible to sight.

This same dynamic comes to fullest expression in the incarnation of the Eternal Son who became flesh, entering fully into the human world of suffering and loss. This divine drawing near to humanity, this ultimate self-giving in full and intimate contact with us, can be set (now, not surprisingly give the OT antecedents above) under the rubric of divine speech. According to the Johannine prologue, it was the Word who became flesh, dwelling among us as the Father’s own eternal (living and personal) speech, affording us the promise and hope of eternal intimacy with the very source of all life and love (John 1:1-18). In more than just a metaphorical way, all words of God, all divine speech and utterance, are but the echoing of the eternal conversation of love and self-giving within the eternal life of Holy Trinity.

Scripture Viewed in Light of Divine Speech

I want to propose, then, a more robust career for Scripture within our ecclesial practice than is typically articulated within present-day Evangelicalism. We often speak of and long for power, transformation, effectiveness, life, community, and intimacy with God; but have not always perceived that such things flow from the very mouth of God. In grafting Scripture (in our language and practice) back up into the larger reality of divine speech, and allowing the nature of this divine speech to transform our view of Scripture, we will move from a largely informational model of Scripture to a more sacramental one. All who are called and gifted to speak for God can be filled with the confidence, not only that the Word is true and authoritative, but that in our wording: “The church exists in the space which is made by the Word. Accordingly, it is not a self-generated assembly and cannot be adequately described only as a human historical trajectory or a form of human culture. The church exists and continues because God is communicatively present; it is brought into being and carried by the Word....The ‘Word’ from which the church has its being is thus the lordly creativity of the one who, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, calls into being the things that are not. John Webster, Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), 44.

37 See also Hebrews 1:1-2. “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a son....” In this same connection, it is interesting to note that none of the gospels even attempts to recollect the visual appearance of Jesus (e.g. his facial features). They avidly recall and recount his teaching.

38 By this I am not at all wanting to leave biblical truth and information behind! I want this to be taken up within a more sacramental view.
very teaching and preaching of the word, God himself, according to his promises, is mightily present to strike down the powers of sin and bondage, to make the dead alive, to draw persons to himself, to fuse them together into the one body of Christ, and to bless them with his glorious presence. Such is the potency of “the Word.”

Part Five Vital Connections

Given the interconnectedness of all truth, the pursuit of any single topic will create, if not carefully integrated with others, an immediate skewing. To help fend off such distortion and weave our claims into the larger theological fabric, I’m offering the following sketches as seeds for further development.

Word and Spirit

An amazingly constant motif throughout Scripture is what we might call “the Word-Spirit Nexus.” Wherever the one appears, the other lies close at hand, even intertwined with its steady partner. 1) At the creation, just before we read that God began speaking a living world into existence, we read that over the shapeless, unformed deep “hovered” the Spirit. 2) In Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones brought to life, the animating Spirit of God is activated in and through the prophetic address that Ezekiel was commanded to deliver. 3) At the temptation of Jesus, wherein the forces of light and darkness squared off in an initial skirmish, Jesus battled successfully against Satan in the strength of two resources: the Spirit (with whom he had just been baptized in power) and the Scripture (three citations from Deuteronomy). 4) Both word and Spirit share their deep origination in the mouth of God: speech and breath (dabar and ruach, logos and pneuma) both issue from God’s mouth in an inseparable nexus of “breathy word,” or “wordy breath” through which God imparts his own life: whether as the breath of life (Genesis 2) or as the bread of life (Deut. 8:3ff). 5) So close is the connection between Word and Spirit that at times Jesus (the Living Word) and the Spirit can be referred to as if they were identical.

39 It is fair to say that something of a revolution is taking place in recovering a fuller vision of Scripture as a peculiar means of grace, and as a vital centerpiece in church renewal. The following have been especially formative for me: N.T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005); William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). This revolution is not confined to scholarly circles but shows up in surprising places. Erwin McManus, pastor of the innovative and interethnic L.A.-based church “Mosaic”, writes: “the Scriptures are more than a record of God’s activity. They are a portal into God’s presence and activity….The greatest evidence for the authority of the Scriptures is that God speaks through them, and we are translated into his presence and transformed by his power….When engaged with humility, [the Scriptures translate us into the very presence of God.” McManus’ essay is found in Leonard Sweet, ed., *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 235-264. My citations above are from page 254.
“Christ and the Spirit are so closely related in communicating to believers the benefits of salvation that Paul can move [referentially] from one to the other almost unconsciously.”

All of this is highly suggestive for our concerns in this paper. Despite all of our interest in God’s word (in all of its forms and expansiveness) and in those who bear God’s word, we must now edit all our thought and language to reflect the Word-Spirit nexus. We could put this negatively: Any grieving or neglecting of the Holy Spirit necessarily hinders the power and effect of the ministry of the word; while any neglect or carelessness in handling the word will eventually distort and pervert the work of the Spirit. One could put this positively: In honoring and yielding to the Spirit, we make way for the word and release it for fuller effect among us; while careful attention to the word opens avenues for the Spirit to move and transform in unprecedented ways.

We can all discern that various theological traditions struggle in opposite ways to maintain the Word-Spirit nexus without collapsing it into one pole or the other. Some who champion the word have difficulty allowing for the Spirit, while many who champion the Spirit appear to neglect or abuse the word. Honest assessment of our own history (the whole movement stemming from John Wesley, or the American Wesleyan-holiness movement, or the Wesleyan Church herself) would yield some helpful insights leading towards improvement. But a broad view of our roots and development can sponsor enormous hope. The movement flowing out of John Wesley bears within itself the makings of a strong and well-balanced emphasis on both poles of the nexus, and has in fact generated many leaders (from the beginning right up to the present) who have beautifully modeled the balanced nexus. What remains for us is to lift up the balanced nexus to the level of full awareness, to assess all theological and ecclesial trends around us in light of it, and to commit ourselves to developing a corps of word-bearers who are equipped, practiced, and affirmed in such a Word-Spirit ministry.

Word and Sacrament

Our present circumstance is one filled with irony with regard to sacramental worship. Much of our church (at least in my awareness of it) is lukewarm, if not cool, toward the sacraments. Fear of formalism and dead ritualism runs strong among us, as do the tight association (in our minds) between sacramental worship and intellectualism or Catholicism. Beyond that, many feel that the last thing our contemporary unchurched culture would ever be drawn to is the churchiness of sacramental worship.

Irony emerges from several factors: 1) John Wesley, the father of the world-wide Wesleyan revival, (along with his brother) not only subscribed to but was deeply immersed in sacramental spirituality. Charles wrote not 5 or 6, but 166 hymns celebrating the Eucharist. John recommended partaking of the Lord’s supper as often as possible, even daily. Furthermore, John was not simply a “memorialist,” as most of us are; but believed that the presence of Christ.

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40 Douglas J. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 491.
See here Romans 8:9-11 for an example of confusing interchange between “Christ” and the “Spirit.”

41 A helpful tool in theological reflection at this point is Donald G. Bloesch, A Theology of Word & Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992). The best way to access his various discussions is through the indexed references to the Holy Spirit.

Himself was mediated through the celebration. 2) It should be a point of reflection for us to consider that though the vast majority of the billion Roman Catholics around the world are poor and undereducated by North American standards, great hosts of them resonate deeply with the beauty and power of the sacraments. 3) We might want to rethink our assumption that we understand our culture, and that we have rightly concluded that our culture is averse to ritual. A strong case can be made that large tracts of our cultural life (entertainment, sports, politics, and social relationships) are highly ritualized by our own preference and design. We also see growing pockets of people who grope for meaning through quasi-religious ritual activity. Could this reflect a deep human need that God longs to fill through Christian sacrament? 4) Within most Christian traditions, ordained ministers are authorized both to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments. Is this linkage merely an accident of tradition, or is there a deeper, innate bond between the two? A strong case can be made for a close bond: 1) The sacraments are a form of proclamation. To the Corinthians Paul explained, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (I Cor. 11:26, emphasis added). We might say that the full proclamation of the gospel requires careful attention both to its verbal and to its sacramental dimensions. 2) Scripture and sacrament both share in the incarnational strategy of God. Just as the Eternal Son assumed tangible flesh, so the “inscripturation” of the speech of God into visible and readable texts, and the presence of the risen Lord granted in the eating of bread and the drinking of wine are further proofs of God’s commitment to meet us in and through created, tangible reality. 3) Baptismal and Eucharistic liturgies have been typically evolved over the centuries with lengthy prefatory prayers reviewing the whole story of salvation and redemption, and recounting the last hours of Jesus earthly life. The sacraments, then, are housed within the instructional ministry of word-bearers whose voices keep the worshipping community rightly oriented as it looks back and looks forward across the sweep of Salvation history. 4) In Jesus’ great commission, the process of “making disciples” is presented in terms of the dyad of word-sacrament: “baptizing…teaching.” For at least these reasons, sacraments are rightly associated closely with the word, and appropriately belong within the ministerial purview of those responsible for bearing the word.

Word and Ordination

Though a full exploration of ordination theology is well beyond our scope here, we can venture the following points in light of what we have said above. 1) Even those most hostile to

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43 Beyond the standard bibliographical leads in Wesley studies on the sacraments, we refer again here to Rattenbury, 14-18.
44 The infamous “burning man” festival in the Nevada desert outside Reno stands as a remarkable witness to deeper human need for ritual. Frost and Hirsch explore the religious significance of the festival for Christian theological reflection. Frost and Hirsch, 3-6.
45 I credit my ATS colleague Lester Ruth for this insight.
46 “The Reformers compared sacramental efficacy closely to that of the ministry of the word, which enabled them to ascribe power to the ministry of the sacraments as being akin to the ministry of the word. The more rigorous Reformers confined the ministry of both [word and sacrament] to the ordained ministers of the church because they saw correspondence between the two kinds of ministry of God’s grace or found them linked in Mt. 28:19-20.” C. O. Buchanan, “Sacrament,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 607.
the idea of ordination, fearing that hierarchicalism and abuse of power inevitably follow it, still do admit that there is a sufficiently clear distinction in role between those variously gifted throughout the church and those who are gifted to equip the whole body of the saints.  

2) We have argued that these “equippers” function primarily as “word-bearers,” so that their role in speaking for and about God is the primarily manner in which they equip others.  

3) The power and privilege of such a role requires that they answer to the church and to God with a greater degree of accountability than do others.  

4) Given the seriousness of this, it is understandable that actual persons who fill such roles be identified by (and to) the congregation.  

5) It is perfectly understandable that the congregation should want to pray (in a public and intentional way) for God’s gracious enabling upon those who serve such a vital function, and it is understandable that such prayer be accompanied with the laying on of hands (as modeled in the NT for a variety of purposes).  

6) Such an event need not be viewed as delegitimizing or devaluing other persons, or as forbidding the laying on of hands upon other (non-word-bearing) ministers in prayers requesting divine enabling (see again Acts 6), or as establishing an indelible mark on the ordained, or as creating a chain of succession.  

This should help us steer our way forward as various ministries are bubbling to the surface among the people of God today. Those whose primary role will involve bearing the word of God to the world and the church should be identified, placed under higher levels of accountability, and blessed with the fervent prayers of God’s people for their strategically necessary success in equipping the whole people of God for ministry.  

Part Six  Prospects  

The proposals developed above, which prioritize word-bearing ministry roles in the church and urge a more sacramental view of Scripture, could cause us to rethink and perhaps reshape several of our practices.  

In Higher Education  

In our delivery of formal biblical instruction (especially in colleges and seminaries), a more sacramental view of Scripture might help us heal the divide too often modeled between an “academic” approach to Scripture, and a “pastoral” (or “spiritual” or “devotional”) approach to Scripture. Too often in the classroom we have handled the text primarily as an informational deposit to be analyzed, without at the same time cultivating an active awareness of the life-giving presence of God at work within and through all biblical texts. In other words, we “sequentialize” our work, beginning (as it were) with an inert, non-sacramental text on the dissection table, and allowing it off the table to become “Holy Scripture” only after our exegetical work has been completed. This two-step move correlates with what has been practiced in many places for decades under the prevailing vision of philosophical hermeneutics. According to that vision, “general” (neutral, scientific) hermeneutics has authority to give an initial account of “meaning” for all texts since they stand as human artifacts; and that “special” hermeneutics (such as Biblical or theological) can be permitted a voice (only) during the final phases to make local and limited

47 After arguing strenuously for an egalitarian ecclesiology, Frost and Hirsch end up dividing the roles of ministry into 1) the leadership matrix, and 2) the ministry matrix, largely in response to Ephesians 4:11. Frost and Hirsch, 166-173.
adjustments within the boundaries already established by general hermeneutics. But if such a division and sequence of labor is itself the product of modern (secular) epistemology, then the recovery of theological hermeneutics along with a more sacramental vision of Scripture could radically reshape course descriptions, classroom practices, and curricular design. Why shouldn’t the most rigorous intellectual encounters with the Word be freely and repeatedly interlaced (structurally, chronologically, and pedagogically) with prayer, praise, repentance, meditation, declarative confession, and witness? Why shouldn’t the normal and most fruitful engagement with Scripture normally happen within an explicitly Christian community as it invokes the presence of Spirit and takes every thought captive to Christ? It would seem that a lively experiment could be launched which asks how the Bible can be most fruitfully engaged in light of its own nature, and which inculcates within students (at every phase of their work) spiritually and intellectually integrated habits.

In the Local Congregation

A sacramental view of Scripture could reinvigorate the confidence that all word bearers must have in the power of the word to make its own way in the world and among its hearers. In my opinion, Evangelical preaching is manifesting a growing crisis of confidence in the Bible…not confidence in its informational truthfulness…but confidence in its potency for mediating the Spirit’s liberating, life-giving, transforming work. After assessing contemporary (post-Christian) culture, we are sorely tempted to conclude that cultural codes have so radically shifted that the Bible has been excluded from meaningful conversation as irrelevant. Some fear that, if we want to speak meaningfully and persuasively within this new landscape, we will have to start somewhere other than the Bible, or at most, introduce it in very small doses, or with apology, or under the culturally acceptable rubric of “story.” Such a conclusion is understandable, but deeply misguided. The effectiveness of divine utterance does not rest primarily upon initial human acknowledgement of it, or agreement with it. By definition, the Word comes to us from outside us, and through the miracle of divine grace begins to impress its weight upon us (through the Spirit) and win a hearing among us in spite of our initial resistance to it. Those who seek to create a transformational ministry in a post-Christian culture by somehow obscuring Scripture because of its supposed drag effect will discover, I fear, that they have obscured the very avenue through which the Spirit of God awakens and breathes life into the dead.

Second, an increased confidence in Scripture to win its own way in the world should, in my view, parlay itself into an increased confidence in Scripture to set its own agenda, call its own shots, and speak more on its own terms. Across the Evangelical world, preaching texts are typically chosen either through (1) the discernment/therapeutic model (in which the pastor continuously monitors the needs of the congregation and selects biblical texts to address those needs), or through (2) the visionary leadership model (in which the pastor, with the church’s

48 A stimulating exposition of this perspective can be found in Jens Zimmermann, Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). I would welcome some intense discussion among us Wesleyans around the claims Zimmerman sets forward.

49 Here we might all benefit from an engagement with features of Barth’s theology. One resource for doing so in light of preaching would be William H. Willimon, Conversations with Barth on Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).
vision statement or mission in hand, selects biblical texts to advance those missional elements). Certainly there is a time and a place for each of these selection strategies, and godly, gifted preachers have used both models to good effect.

But both models can too easily set into motion troubling tendencies that even their practitioners have come to acknowledge. 1) Despite our best intentions, we will probably end up offering too narrow a diet of truth to the people of God. The tyranny of immediate need coupled with the constrictions inherent within our own visions of ministry (however expansively we may try to frame them) will over time create huge tracts of untouched Scripture on the one hand, and an overly-worn “canon within the canon” on the other. 2) Despite our confidence to the contrary, our capacity to discern precisely the inner needs of God’s people is probably not as great as we think. Too easily we presume we have a God’s eye view of human hearts and of inner-congregational dynamics. Constantly keying our preaching topics (and textual choices) to our discernment capacities might be missing “real” need, and might be restricting the Spirit’s freedom to speak to our people in ways utterly surprising to us. 3) Despite our best intentions, the habit of choosing texts to address topics we have already chosen tends to reduce the (holy) risk, the adventure, the wonder, and the joy of engaging the Bible without already having decided what we need to “mine” from it. In subtle ways we might not even recognize, we can end up trying (essentially) to control the text and meting it out to our listeners in ways suitting our strategic purposes but rarely challenging us. If habitually we open Scripture knowing what we want to find, we will end up hearing nothing fresh from God for ourselves or for our people.

Could we enter into a lively experiment of radically trusting the wealth and richness of Scripture (in its great diversity and full dietary range) as the means by which God, through the Spirit, wants to speak to the church and the world to transform, to make alive, to heal, to equip, and to send? Let us have the confidence that all our worries about “relevance” will be entirely laid to rest whenever the very God of the universe is heard to speak.

**Part Six**  Summary

I am proposing these points for our continued conversation together:

- that the nature of the pastoral role is (or ought to be) under careful reconsideration;
- that the NT does not supply us with a ready-made, normative set of job descriptions for ecclesial roles;

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50 An important feature of Paul’s theology of ministry is the necessary imperfection and tentativity of spiritual gifts (see I Cor. 13:8-13 especially). NT prophecy, unlike OT prophecy, must be examined by the hearers (beyond ascertaining if the prophet is false or not) and tested for its soundness and viability [see I Thess. 5:12-22, I Cor. 14:29]. The authority of Moses, by which Israelites were not permitted to examine or question his words, is not continued in the NT understanding of prophecy and leadership. On this distinction see James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 556-558.

51 This view of preaching as an adventure with Scripture that is not under our control is forwarded from Tom Long through Willimon: “The biblical preacher goes to the biblical text, in the service of the congregation, hoping to make a discovery. Then the preacher announces the discovery to the congregation.” William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 146.
that the NT does, however, set forth a deep structure for the church, in which those who bear the word (in several overlapping roles) serve the whole body in a distinct, hyper-necessary way;

that “pastors” are linked strongly into this cadre of word bearers, and that their compassionate leadership especially takes the form of word bearing;

that the doctrine of Scripture across the Evangelical world, though “high, is proving itself to inadequate to support the kind of word function that comports with the full character of Scripture;

that the divine word, and therefore (by inclusion) Scripture, is not only authoritative and true, but powerful, life-giving, community forming, and sacramental by mediating to the church and the world the transforming presence of Christ;

that such a view of Scripture should call us forward to reconsider how best to teach the Bible (in ways more commensurate with its nature);

that our preaching can be buoyed with a confidence that the word can make its way in the world;

that our preaching ought to dare to trust the agenda-setting competence of the Bible, as well as its rich fare for disciples, as we edge away from too great a dependence on discernment approaches to selecting texts;

and that such views (as proposed above) provide an anchor point from which we can venture in full creativity as we seek better how to glorify God in our common life together.