

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF OVERSEERS AT REDEEMER

In the Book of Acts, chapter 20, we read of the Apostle Paul meeting with the local church leaders in the city of Ephesus. Paul addresses these leaders by saying,

[28] Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. [29] I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. [31] Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years, I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. [32] And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

The call to “pay careful attention” is one of the most helpful descriptions of the work of an Elder. In the passage, Paul refers to this role as an *Overseer*, a term that can be used interchangeably with *Elder*. These local church leaders are Overseers who pay careful attention both to themselves and to all the members of the church. All of the responsibilities of an Elder fall under the banner of “paying close attention.” Biblical teaching, tending to the sick and suffering, orderly worship, doctrinal fidelity, discipline, and spiritual direction are all expressions of the close attention elders are to pay to their local congregation to care for the church of God.

The Apostle Paul also explains that Overseers are not simply individuals who have sought out roles and positions of authority, but leaders who were made Overseers by the work of the Holy Spirit. The nature of the relationship between the Overseers and the church (flock) is emphasized when Paul notes that the Holy Spirit makes Overseers, and the church of God was obtained by the blood of Jesus. This means that the relational dynamic of church members and Overseers is established by God and is, therefore, primarily spiritual in nature.

It is critical to understand that the establishment of elders in the early church is not a continuation of the priesthood. The role of Overseer is distinct from the historic Levite office of a Priest. Priests served as intermediaries for the people of Israel and chiefly worked to preside over the complex sacrificial system. With the coming of Jesus Christ and his perfect and final sacrifice, the sacrificial system and the need for intermediaries ended. The Overseer is neither a priest nor an intermediary between people and God. Instead, Christ fulfills the sacrificial system, and Christ alone is the intermediary between people and God.

Further, the priesthood now includes every believer. Every disciple is tasked with ministering to the needs of their brothers and sisters in the faith family (Hebrews 10:24-25). Because Christ accomplished our redemption, every disciple of Jesus is a minister of the gospel of

reconciliation. For this reason, every disciple needs to be equipped to do the ministry of the Church. Here we begin to see the role of the Overseer take shape.

With the traditional functions of priesthood ended (Hebrews) and a new royal priesthood expanding to every disciple (1 Peter), we now see the crucial need for local church oversight, ongoing shepherding, and the faithful equipping of the saints for ministry; this is the charge of the local church Elder.

When the members of the local church are faithfully overseen by Elders, the gifts of the Spirit given to the congregation are fostered, and God's people flourish. These gifts are to be identified, nourished, and enjoyed for the good of the household of faith and the surrounding community. This is the work of the Overseer: to pay careful attention to the needs, gifts, and dangers to the family of faith that God has entrusted into their care. The Overseers are not responsible for meeting every need within the community, but rather for empowering members to meet one another's needs. If elders fail to cultivate the congregation's gifts, they fail to execute the noble task of an elder faithfully. But when elders faithfully serve the congregation as overseers, the congregation is nurtured to steward their giftings to bear much spiritual fruit.

A wide range of gifts are given by the Spirit to the local church. These gifts include various services and activities, all empowered by God and for the good of the community (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). In the New Testament, we see the following gifts identified: Administration, Being an Apostle, Discernment, Evangelism, Exhortation, Faith, Giving, Healing, Helping, Hospitality, Knowledge, Leadership, Mercy, Prophecy, Serving, Speaking in tongues, Teaching, and Wisdom.

The very presence of these gifts within the local church body informs us that ministry responsibilities are not relegated to a small few as in the old Levite priesthood but are entrusted to every disciple of Jesus. The oversight provided through the elders brings clear order, consistent doctrine, and faithful direction to the fruitful deployment of these various gifts. While the Overseers are responsible for the orderly expression of spiritual gifts, they are mostly called to be the chief encouragers and primary supporters of the stewardship and expression of the gifts within the household of faith.

The Overseers are to pay close attention to these gifts and to their stewardship within the church family. The New Testament presents elders as those who serve the congregation through consistent, healthy, and active oversight, expressed through teaching, governing, discipline, equipping, and care.

It is a glorious gift from God to the Church that ministry is not relegated to a select few. Just as the character of an elder (1 Timothy 3:1-7) should be the aim of every follower of Jesus, so too should the participation in gospel ministry be evident in every church member.

While the authority and responsibility of oversight have been entrusted by God to the eldership, church members share in the work of shepherding, instructing, admonishing, and so forth. The aim is not to concentrate ministry to the elders or even church staff. The aim is for the elders to exercise godly authority and oversight as the members live into their calling as ministers of reconciliation.

When elders fulfill their duty of faithfully overseeing the congregation, then every member of that particular household of faith is directed, supported, and encouraged to live into the fullness of their gifting and calling from the Lord. In such a faithful and fruitful environment, men and women in the community will exhort, heal, prophesy, teach, encourage, and more, all to the glory of God and the great good of God's people.

THE ELDER AS OVERSEER AND PASTOR

Jesus himself is any church's true pastor. He is the Chief Shepherd. Therefore, all of Redeemer Community Church's Elders serve as "under-shepherds" tasked to "elder" like Jesus. What, then, is an elder? At Redeemer, an elder is a biblically-qualified man who has been called, assessed, and affirmed by a local church's leadership to teach, lead, and care for its congregation within a plurality of elders.

At Redeemer, we use the titles *Elder*, *Overseer*, and *Pastor* interchangeably. Each term offers helpful insights into the role and the biblical responsibilities of a local church elder. The term *overseer* emphasizes the responsibility of watching over the people and church ministries in a local congregation. The name *pastor* emphasizes the elders' responsibility to guide and nurture the church family. As a church, we aim to hold a biblically robust view of the role and responsibilities of elders because our end goal is faithful obedience of our leadership to Jesus, the Great Shepherd.

Everyone who serves on the Redeemer staff as a *pastor* is also called to serve the church in the role of an *elder*. While each elder brings their own unique gifts, skills, and experiences, and each elder can be tasked with varying responsibilities of oversight, no elder is above any other elder in authority or significance; each elder serves side-by-side under the supreme headship of Jesus Christ.

The primary goal of all Elders at Redeemer is to care for the flock in real and tangible ways. One of the core convictions of our church family is the commitment to *Relational Shepherding*. While every member is expected to participate in this convictional commitment, the elders exercise a particular oversight and direction for their shepherding.

We believe that, for Elders, relationally shepherding the flock involves three key areas of focus: *Teaching, Leading, and Caring.*

Teaching: training the congregation in God's Word and gospel understanding; stewarding spiritual gifts and calling.

Because our true food is God's Word, Elders are called to lead by teaching the congregation through preaching the Word and facilitating the application of the Word for daily life through pastoral counseling and discipleship relationships.

Leading: leading the congregation in organizational, directional, and operational order; spiritual discipline and direction in following Christ.

Elders are called to encourage those under their care towards maturity of faith and to prayerfully direct and steward the resources and organization of the church family. Therefore, Elders must invest in the individuals under their care with the goal of shepherding and directing them as leaders and disciples of Jesus, and they must ensure operational order among the church's staff, ministries, and finances.

Caring: providing ongoing support, encouragement, and prayer for the members of the congregation through all the seasons of life and faith.

Elders are called to stay attuned to the needs of the sheep under their care. This involves knowing them and providing pastoral care as they walk through life.

Elders are called to watch over, protect, and direct the flock. They are to be watchful for potential dangers to the soul and respond with gentle boldness, biblical clarity, and loving concern.

THE BIBLICAL CALL TO PLURALITY

God designed the life of his church to be led by qualified elders who are to teach, lead, and care for his beloved flock. These men are called to serve as under-shepherds to the Good Shepherd, ensuring that the church rightly handles the Word of God, rightly administers the sacraments, and rightly exercises discipline and authority.

The Blessings of Plurality

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20), and Jesus has given “the keys of the kingdom” (Matthew 16:19; 18:18) to the church—not to any individual pastor, no matter how talented or Spirit-filled. Instead, God has ordained that called and qualified Elders (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9) humbly and prayerfully share in authority as a plurality as a means of both protecting and purifying the church.

While many churches may operate within a lead-pastor-as-CEO model, the New Testament seems to take plurality leadership for granted (see Acts 11:30; 14:21-23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Timothy 5:17-20; Titus 1:5-11; James 5:14). As Alexander Strauch has written, “On the local church level, the New Testament plainly witnesses to a consistent pattern of shared pastoral leadership.” This practice of plurality is tremendously good news not only for every member of a church but also for every pastor.

Every Shepherd is Also a Sheep

When Overseers receive a call from God and are affirmed by a local church, they are not, therefore, above failure or free from sin. The apostle Paul lamented his ongoing struggle with sin, crying, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24). All of us remain, in the words of Martin Luther, simultaneously justified and sinful, until we see Jesus face to face.

The practice of plurality reminds us that every Elder —lay or vocational— remains both a sinner and a saint, every Elder and pastor needs pastoring, and every Elder is by God’s design to be known, fed, and guided by the Elders of his church.

Our “adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour,” and elders are certainly not immune from his schemes (1 Peter 5:8). Satan would love nothing more than to convince an elder that his sin would be better off remaining in the dark; that God must not be that concerned with his remaining sin because he’s granting ministry fruit; that his blind spots should be kept hidden from sight.

But God is just as committed to every pastor's sanctification as he is to every other member of his bride, and the gift of plurality in leadership is one of the means by which the Lord sanctifies and humbles his elders. He protects them from themselves, from those who would stir up division (Titus 3:10-11), and from the temptation to grow overly discouraged in the face of trials or overly confident in ministry success.

Plurality Celebrates the Diversity of Gifts from God

In order that the body of Christ might be built up in unity, knowledge, and maturity (Ephesians 4:11–13), Paul tells us that grace has been given “to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift” (Ephesians 4:7). It should seem obvious, but no member of Christ's body – including elders – has been given every gift that the church needs in order to be presented blameless and without blemish before Jesus.

Every elder has been given by grace a limited perspective and a limited set of gifts. It is God's design that some elders may be gifted teachers but lousy accountants or faithful evangelists but ineffective counselors. Paul teaches us that we were created and redeemed to be “individually members one of another” (Romans 12:5) and to see each part of the body as “indispensable” (1 Corinthians 12:22).

Every Pastor is Finite

Practicing plurality recognizes that a pastor is not Superman; he cannot and should not attempt to do all of the work of ministry, because that has never been God's desire or design. Instead, Christ gives his church leaders “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12). The church's growth in unity, knowledge, and maturity is not meant to rise and fall with one man but is instead based on the Spirit working within each member of the body to exercise his or her gifts for the benefit of the whole.

As one Elder serving within a plurality of Elders, every Elder can rejoice in the priesthood of all believers, freely acknowledging his own weaknesses and leaning in dependence upon the gifts of others. When a team of Elders is prayerfully working together, with each bringing his own unique insights and skills to the table, the church is led into deeper humility and trust—not trust primarily grounded in the leadership of fallible men, but grounded in the promises of the Good Shepherd to faithfully shepherd his flock until it is safely at home with him.

Elder Oversight and the Administration of Ministry Responsibilities

Communion and Baptism

The elders of Redeemer are responsible for the oversight of the **administration** of Communion and Baptism.¹ At Redeemer, we hold that when elders are faithfully exercising oversight, both doctrinally and organizationally, covenant members can be entrusted with administering both Communion and Baptism. This entrusting is dependent upon oversight and discernment on the part of the elders. While we do not believe the members have an individual right to free administration, we do hold that the eldership is vested with the authority to entrust the faithful administration to members of the covenant community.

Weddings, Funerals, & Ordination

The elders are tasked with overseeing the faithful administration of Weddings, Funerals, and Ordination.² At Redeemer, we hold that individuals who are ordained and licensed as ministers of the Gospel are thereby approved to officiate and conduct weddings and funerals. These authorized ministers are under the authority and oversight of the elders and do not have to be currently serving as elders or as vocational ministers. The elders reserve the right to deny any individual from officiating or conducting a wedding or funeral as a representative of our covenant community.

The elders are also tasked with overseeing the ordination of new elders, pastors, ministers, and deacons.³ The processes of discernment, calling, and equipping are under the oversight and authority of the elders. An existing ordination from another church body may be accepted and honored by the eldership of Redeemer. Still, they are not beholden to the ordination carried out by any other congregation. The elders are tasked with discerning the acceptance and/or continuation of an individual holding the designation of ordination. Therefore, the elders both bestow or revoke ordination privileges within the covenant community.

Membership & Discipline

The elders are tasked with overseeing the faithful administration of church membership and member discipline.⁴ This responsibility of care is conveyed to each member through the membership process. Biblical discipline is chiefly the work of offering members counsel, instruction, and guidance and is a primary way elders provide care for church members. Only in rare and extreme circumstances does discipline merit punitive action. The elders are entrusted with overseeing this process, and ultimately the authority lies with the elders to discern what faithful and ultimately loving action is required.

At Redeemer, we see biblical authority as being entrusted to the plurality of the elders.⁵ This is in contrast to the theological beliefs or practices of *congregationalism*, wherein the congregation

¹ 1 Cor 11, 14; Rmn 6:4; Eph 4:5; Col 2:12

² Acts 20:28, 14:23; 1 Cor 12:26

³ 1 Tim 3; Acts 6:1-15

⁴ Mat 16:19; Luke 17:3; Acts 20:28; 1 Tim 5:20; Titus 2:15

⁵ Acts 14:23, 15:2, 20:17; Phil 1:1; 1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 31:7; Titus 1:5-9; Heb 13:7

ultimately holds authority over the elders. Our theology and practice of local elder authority also mean that no singular elder is permitted to act authoritatively as an individual. Authority is shared; individual actions are in submission to the authority of the plurality, and each individual elder is accountable to the full eldership.

Preaching & Teaching

The elders of Redeemer are responsible for the oversight of the biblical instruction of our members.⁶ At Redeemer, we hold that when elders are faithfully exercising this oversight, both doctrinally and organizationally, qualified individuals can be entrusted with teaching and preaching. It is entrusted to both pastors and the Theology and Doctrine Committee to oversee the discernment of qualified individuals. The qualifications expected vary depending on the ministry context, but, at the very least, the individual has been assessed for their biblical competency, Christian character, and the maturity of their faith and skill for the task at hand. It is the responsibility of the elders to: discern the qualifications of the individual, maintain ongoing oversight of instruction, and address any concerns or issues swiftly and with clarity.

OVERSEER BIBLICAL QUALIFICATIONS

The New Testament letters of the Apostle Paul help us to understand the necessary character of an Elder. Most of what is stated is a character description that every disciple of Jesus should strive for in their own lives. However, the qualifications of an elder do include unique expectations, particularly that the elder is able to teach and is not a recent convert. These expectations are directly related to the responsibilities of the elder and the health of their leadership.

I Timothy 3:1–7: Qualifications for Elders

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

⁶ Mat 27: 19-20; 1 Cor 14: 26-40; 1 Tim 3:2; 2 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:9

Titus 1:6–9: Qualifications for Elders

If anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

OVERSEER BIBLICAL EXHORTATIONS

Acts 20:18–28: Paul's farewell to the Ephesian Elders

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by [b] the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

1 Peter 5:1–4: Peter's Exhortation to Shepherd the Flock of God

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.