

Introduction

There are two offices in the church: overseer and deacon. [Philippians 1:1](#) “1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:” [1 Timothy 3:1](#) “1 The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” [1 Timothy 3:8](#) “8 Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.”

Exegetical Study

Ephesian Elders

[Acts 20:17](#) “17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.”

Who met with Paul in Miletus? Paul met with the elders from Ephesus, where he had previously established a church. *How many elders did the church at Ephesus have?* The passage does not state how many elders were in the church. However, it is important to note that this church had multiple elders.

[Acts 20:28](#) “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.”

Over whom had God made these elders overseers? God made the elders overseers of the flock, which is God’s church. *Whom were the elders supposed to care for?* The elders were supposed to care for the church of God. The word translated “care” (ποιμαίνω) is the verb form of the word shepherd. The elders were to oversee and shepherd the church. *To whom does the church belong?* The church belongs to God; He purchased it with His own blood. **Side Note:** This is an explicit statement of Jesus’s deity.

Note: The **elders** were also called **overseers** and were appointed to **shepherd** the church.

First Peter

[1 Peter 5:1-3](#) “1 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: 2 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; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”

How does Peter refer to himself in verse 1? Peter is a fellow-elder (with the elders of the churches to whom he writes). *What command does Peter give the church in verse 2?* The only imperative verb (command) is **shepherd** (ποιμαίνω). This is the same expectation as [Acts 20:28](#). *How do verses 2-3 describe **how** elders should oversee the church?* Elders should shepherd (1) by overseeing the church, (2) without compulsion (i.e., willingly), (3) not greedily (shameful gain in ESV), (4) eagerly, (5) without domineering the church, and (6) as examples to the church.

Qualifications, part 1

[1 Timothy 3:1-3](#) “1 The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.”

What does verse 1 say is a noble task (good work)? The office of an overseer is a noble task. Remember in [Acts 20](#) and [1 Pet 5](#) that elder, shepherd, and overseer are used interchangeably. It is significant that it is called a noble task (work), not a noble office. This implies that the work, not the position is noble. *What qualification does an overseer have that is not required of a deacon?* Overseers must be able to teach. [Titus 1](#) will give more insight into what this means, but it refers to proper doctrine more than teaching skills.

[1 Timothy 3:4-7](#) “4 He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, 5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.”

Why does verse 6 say that an overseer should not be a recent convert? An overseer should not be a recent convert to prevent him from falling into pride. Overseers are given authority in the church. This command protects a young believer from the danger of pride.

Qualifications, part 2

[Titus 1:5-6](#) “5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— 6 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.”

Where did Paul leave Titus? Paul left Titus in Crete. *Who was Titus supposed to appoint in each town?* Titus was supposed to appoint elders in every town. It is important that “every town” is singular and “elders” is plural. This suggests that each church had multiple overseers, just as the church at Ephesus.

[Titus 1:7-9](#) “7 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, 8 but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. 9 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.”

What does verse 7 call the elders whom Titus should appoint? The elders are also called overseers. This is the same pattern that is seen in [Acts 20:17, 28](#). *What qualification is given in verse 9?* Verse 9 is an elaboration of the requirement that an overseer must be able to teach ([1 Tim 3:2](#)). Overseers must have a strong personal understanding of Scripture. He must be able to explain correct doctrine to others (e.g., church members). He must be able to refute wrong doctrine. Again, this suggests that “able to teach” refers more to how well one can understand and articulate doctrine, not how well they speak.

The office of overseer

What is an overseer?

There are three titles used interchangeably in the NT: elder, overseer, pastor.

An **elder** can refer to someone who is older; however, in contexts that refer to an appointed office, elder refers to someone who has been appointed as a leader (see BDAG, πρεσβύτερος). The term was borrowed from the OT, where men were appointed as city leaders or tribal leaders. This same pattern existed in first-century Judaism.

An **overseer** was a political or religious leader (see BDAG, ἐπίσκοπος). Oversight refers to guarding and supervising (see BDAG, ἐπισκοπέω, ἐπισκοπή). Oversight in the church would include guarding the members of the church and supervising the beliefs and activities of the church.

Pastor is a modern translation of “**shepherd**.” This is rarely used as a title in the NT (only [Eph 4:11](#)). Shepherding in the church would include loving the members, feeding (teaching) the members, guarding the members, correcting the members, and caring for the needs of the members).

Various passages interchange the titles or related verbs.

[Acts 20:17](#) “17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the **elders** of the church to come to him.” [Acts 20:28](#) “28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to **care [shepherd]** for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

[1 Peter 5:1-2](#) “1 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: 2

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;”

[Titus 1:5-7](#) “5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint **elders** in every town as I directed you— 6 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. 7 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,”

In the NT, churches are **always** described as having **multiple** elders.

[Acts 20:17](#) “17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the **elders** of the church to come to him.”

[Acts 14:23](#) “23 And when they had appointed **elders [plural]** for them in every **church [singular]**, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

[Philippians 1:1](#) “1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the **overseers** and deacons:”

[Titus 1:5](#) “5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint **elders [plural]** in every **town [singular]** as I directed you—”

What are the qualifications of an overseer?

An overseer must be a **man**. Two of the major responsibilities of an overseer are teaching and exercising authority in the church.

[1 Timothy 2:12](#) “12 I do not permit a woman to **teach** or to exercise **authority** over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.”

An overseer must have visible Christian **character** ([1 Tim 3:1-7](#); [Titus 1:5-9](#)). These standards of Christian character are similar to deacons.

I would argue that a **call** to pastoral ministry is **not** a qualification of an overseer.

First, although there is good personal & historical evidence that God calls some men to devote themselves to pastoral ministry, that is never listed as an expectation for an elder. Requiring that qualification imposes tradition into Scripture.

Second, the description in Scripture is that men should be **identified, trained, and appointed**. This process does not rest on a call to ministry.

[2 Timothy 2:2](#) “2 and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to **faithful** men, who will be able to teach others also.”

[Titus 1:5](#) “5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and **appoint** elders in every town as I directed you—”

[Acts 14:23](#) “23 And when they had **appointed** elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

Third, it reduces the **local** aspect of the church. That is, our tradition of ordaining men for pastoral ministry is most often for the sake of other churches. Few men pastor their entire lives at the church where they were ordained. In the NT, overseers were appointed from within the congregation.

With that said, I agree with the tradition of ordaining men whom the church recognizes a call to pastoral ministry. I also agree that these men should **at least** meet the qualifications of an overseer (probably should have more qualifications). However, I think that goes beyond the appointment of overseers in the local church.

An overseer must be able to teach.

[1 Timothy 3:2](#) “2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to **teach**,”

[Titus 1:9](#) “9 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.”

The context of these qualifications suggests that teaching means holding to the biblical doctrine, explain biblical doctrine to the church, and defend against false teaching ([Titus 1:9](#)). This does not necessarily mean that they must be great orators.

What are the responsibilities of an overseer?

The overseers are responsible for shepherding the church.

This includes protecting, feeding them (teaching), leading them, correcting them, and caring for them.

[Acts 20:28](#) “28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to **care [shepherd]** for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

[1 Peter 5:2](#) “2 **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;”

[James 5:14](#) “14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them **pray** over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”

Jesus is the shepherd of the church. Overseers serve as shepherds under Jesus.

[John 10:11](#) “11 I am the good **shepherd**. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

[1 Peter 2:25](#) “25 For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the **Shepherd** and Overseer of your souls.”

The overseers are responsible for overseeing the church.

They are to guard the doctrine of the church and lead the church.

[Acts 20:28](#) “28 **Pay careful attention [care for, be devoted to]** 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 5:2–3](#) “2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising **oversight [care for, oversee]**, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”

[1 Timothy 5:17](#) “17 Let the elders who **rule [exercise leadership]** well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

Churches are instructed to follow the leadership of overseers.

[1 Thessalonians 5:12](#) “12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are **over [exercise leadership]** you in the Lord and admonish you,”

[Hebrews 13:17](#) “17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Overseers are instructed to lead without being an authoritarian.

[1 Peter 5:3](#) “3 not **domineering** over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”

[Matthew 20:25–27](#) “25 But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles **lord it over** them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,”

Jesus is the Overseer of the church. Overseers in the local church lead in submission to Christ and His word.

[1 Peter 2:25](#) “25 For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and **Overseer** of your souls.”

This is one of the reasons that churches should not be led by an individual (i.e., churches should have multiple overseers, if possible). Overseers are given authority by Scripture, but that authority is not meant to be given to one man. Multiple overseers should share that authority.

The overseers are responsible for teaching the church. This relates directly to shepherding and oversight. Teaching feeds the church, guards the church, leads the church, corrects the church, and cares for the church.

[1 Timothy 3:2](#) “2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to **teach**,”

[Titus 1:9](#) “9 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.”

I think there **is** a biblical case for appointing men (who qualify as elders) to be the primary teachers of the church (e.g., pastors). Scripture teaches that some overseers should be paid a salary sufficient for them to devote their time to teaching and preaching. This does not remove the responsibility from **other** overseers of teaching; however, those who are financially supported by the church should bear the bulk of that burden.

[1 Timothy 5:17–18](#) “17 Let the **elders** who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who **labor in preaching and teaching**. 18 For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his **wages**.””

[1 Corinthians 9:13–14](#) “13 Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? 14 In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who **proclaim** the gospel should get their **living** by the gospel.”

It is essential that shepherding, leading, and teaching are not separated.

If the church gives authority to an individual or group of people without also appointing them as recognized teachers, then authority is separated from Scripture. Scripture (the word of Christ) is the only authority in the church. Giving authority without evaluating doctrine removes the authority of Scripture.

If the church appoints men to lead who do not have responsibility to shepherd, then they become default authoritarians. Shepherding is part of leading.

[Why should a church have overseers?](#)

First, a church should have overseers because Scripture teaches the two offices of overseer and deacon. Any model we impose because of culture, tradition, or efficiency imposes something onto Scripture.

Second, a church should have overseers to guard biblical doctrine. If the church has a single leader, his error will risk the entire church. If a church has no leader, every error will risk the entire church. If a church has unqualified leaders, their errors will risk the entire church.

Third, a church should have **multiple** overseers to protect the pastor. No pastor has every gift necessary for leading a church. No pastor has all necessary wisdom for leading a church. No pastor is infallible in doctrine or leading. Multiple overseers protects the pastor from the burden of an impossible task of leading a church alone.

[1 Timothy 4:13-16](#) “13 Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. 14 Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. 15 Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. 16 Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”