

Aspire to the Office of Overseer

One of the biggest handicaps that churches across the world today face is a lack of good leadership.

God designed congregations of His people to be lead and ruled by elders, also called overseers, pastors, or shepherds. This is vital for at least four reasons:

A church without overseers will never live up to the Scriptural standard. Sure, there are cases in which there are not yet qualified men to take the office of overseer (such as pre-Acts 14:23). But a church without elders has fallen short of what God desires for any church in any city. That's why Paul told Titus, "for this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city" (1:5).

A church without overseers will struggle. Members, from the newly converted to the mature, will wander "like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). People will lack someone to turn to for direction in marriage, parenting, and temptation. People's spiritual needs will go unmet, those struggling and lagging behind will go unnoticed. As a result, that congregation will never experience true and lasting growth, neither spiritually nor numerically, for those slipping out the back door will outnumber those coming in the front door.

A church without overseers will always be in danger of falsehood. Shepherds, fiercely loyal to and protective of each member of the flock, are vigilant to chase away wolves (Acts 20:28–30). A church without overseers is vulnerable to takeover by false teachers.

And a church without overseers will always find it difficult to move forward decisively. Elders have the authority to make decisions, and the members are freed of the burden. They can instead focus on their own work in the Lord rather than staying embroiled in controversy. The members can have confidence in these decisions, even when they don't always agree with them, because they know that the elders know they shall answer to the Lord for their decisions (Heb. 13:17). That's a powerful safeguard.

For these and other reasons, God has high standards for those who are to take the office of leadership (1 Tim. 3:2–7).

An overseer then must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. He must be

one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the Devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the Devil.

We quickly notice two things about this list. First, each qualification is expected of every Christian (in order: Eph. 1:4, Matt. 19:6, Ga. 5:23, Eph. 5:15, Acts 2:47, Rom. 12:13, 1 Pet. 3:15, Eph. 5:18, Jam. 1:19, Gal. 5:23, Tit. 3:2, Matt. 6:19, Eph. 6:4, Heb. 5:12, Matt. 5:14). An overseer, then, is simply a man who has succeeded in attaining, as far as humanly possible, the stature of a mature Christian, and who is able to help others attain it as well.

Also, we notice that each qualification is something that cannot be attained overnight, but through years, even decades, of conscientious faith. That is why Paul begins the list by saying, “if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine [Gk. *kalos*, good, honorable, virtuous] work he desires to do.”

This means, young men, it would be a virtuous thing for you to “aspire” to the role of elder at a very early age—in your teens and twenties and in each decade beyond—that you may be ready to take on the most vital role in the whole world. Here are seven things you should begin to do:

1.) **Marry well.** That is, marry a godly woman, who shares your goals and puts the kingdom of Christ first in her life. You will fail without her help.

2.) **Make worship a priority.** Be there when the doors are open. Try to keep work and activities and hobbies from cutting into your worship time. Volunteer for and gain proficiency in the various duties in worship.

3.) **Become a Bible expert.** To give you some perspective, I have preached over 1,500 sermons, written 750 bulletin articles, and taught every book of the Bible in 13-week classes. Yet, I do not feel like I know what I need to know. I haven’t grappled with every passage. I haven’t answered all my own questions. And just when I think I have it all figured out, I run into a person having a spiritual crisis that causes me to rethink whether I am applying God’s word correctly to people’s lives. I still change my mind.

So, start now, at a young age, reading and studying God’s word. Have a love affair with that book—carry it, take notes in it, underline passages, seek the answers to the hard parts. Master doctrine. To the phrase in 1 Timothy 3:2 “able to teach,” Paul adds in Titus 1:9, “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict.” This doesn’t happen overnight. It will take a lifetime to become

competent with the word of God. You can't cram for this exam three weeks before some congregation would like to appoint you to the position of elder, any more than a doctor can open Gray's Anatomy three weeks before the Boards. The help and leadership and decision-making you will provide, and all the experience you will bring to the table, will be worthless if it is not fully grounded in Scriptural knowledge.

4.) **Pray regularly.** Spend quality time talking to God.

5.) **Learn to love people** and especially their souls. If you don't like people, you won't like shepherding the flock of God. The good shepherd "calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out" (John 10:4). Fix their plumbing, babysit their children, visit them in the hospital, invite them over for dinner. Teach the lost the gospel. Reach out to the brother struggling with sin and heartache. Become the sort of person that people turn to instinctively when there is a problem—not because they expect approval, but because they expect godly wisdom, delivered frankly but gently (John 8:11). Get used to being inconvenienced by "the flock of God among you" (1 Pet. 5:2). While Jesus said "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11) I've known of shepherds that won't lay down the remote (Ezek. 34:4–5).

6.) **Develop the skill of influence.** Being a good leader is not less than knowing and modeling the truth. But it's more! It's also convincing others to learn and obey the truth. It's learning to speak up at the right times, and be silent at the right times; to teach, guide, and encourage persuasively and gently. As a parent (the training ground for shepherding a church) influence is a combination of proactive teaching and corrective discipline. It's not just dragging your kids to church, but communicating and disciplining so that they develop a faith of their own, that motivates them after they are no longer under your thumb. Influence is a shepherd's rod and staff.

7.) **Arrange your affairs** so that God comes first. Readers, hide your toes, but it irks me to see a man spend twenty years as an elder-in-name-only, focused mainly on secular work and unable to devote himself to shepherding work, who finally rejoices to retire; but, rather than now devoting himself to shepherding work, he selfishly disappears into the mountains to relax on the porch swing for the rest of his golden years! Just when the church can most benefit from his skills and free time, he gives himself to pleasure. I can't judge the heart of another, and maybe I'll change my tune if I reach that age, but it seems to reveal a lack of proper priorities. It may be that selfish disobedience takes subtler forms than we realize (Luke 18:22). The mountain valleys are beautiful, and I recommend them for occasional mental renewal, but the fields are white for harvest! Save retiring for heaven!

The work of the shepherd is “diligently laboring” (1 Thess. 5:2). It is “working hard at preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). It’s much, much more than occasional elders’ meetings. It’s being involved in people’s lives on a daily basis. Since our society is different from the agrarian lifestyle of the ancient world, we must be careful to carve out time for God in our hectic weekly schedules, and we must also make God-honoring plans for our entire lives. From a young age, if possible, choose a career that will allow you to retire with a measure of freedom. Learn to manage your growing wealth so that, if possible, you are not saddled with a mountain of debt, a mortgage, or other obligations in your later years, which force you to labor into your eighties. Value recreation—yes, go ahead and check some things off that bucket list—but fill your mind mainly with the joys of shepherding the flock, rather than six-month cruises or year-long RV trips. For the church deeply needs your leadership.

—*John Guzzetta*