



# ***Bible & Life***

## **Bible Teaching Newsletter**

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### **Overseeing the Flock**

By David Dunlap

Every church in the New Testament is specifically said to have elders. A careful study reveals that the elders in a local church function as a plurality. Moreover, the main role of the elder is to feed and shepherd the flock of God. “Elder,” “Overseer,” and “Shepherd” are three New Testament terms for one local church responsibility. Each term is not merely an honorary title, but each describes the task in the building up and maturing of believers in Christ. And yet, all three terms describe for us the important work of shepherding believers in the local church. Thus, the elders of the church shepherd and care for God’s flock *by* exercising oversight. Digging deeper into the meaning of *oversight* in the context of shepherding gives us a crucial description of God’s call for every elder. The apostle Paul writes, “If anyone aspires to the office (literally “work”) of *overseer*, he desires a noble task” (1 Timothy 3:1). And what is this noble task? The apostle Peter provides one answer near the end of his first letter. There he charges the elders of the church to “shepherd (used as a verb) the flock of God that is among you, *exercising oversight*”(1 Pet. 5:2).

#### **Sight Plus Responsibility**

What, then, does it mean to shepherd? The biblical authors intended for us to consider the work of actual shepherds and actual sheep. Shepherds care for the sheep. Shepherds lead the flock and feed it. Shepherds guide the flock to green pastures and still waters, all the while guarding and protecting the flock from bears, wolves, and roaring lions. They are attentive to the health and safety of their sheep. If the sheep begin to look sickly, shepherds examine their diet. If they come down with a disease, shepherds bring medicine to heal. If a sheep falls into a crevice in the earth, the shepherd pulls him out and sets him back on the path. If a lion attacks, a good shepherd grabs his rod and staff and uses them to defend his sheep, even at great cost to himself. We gain further clarity if we consider Peter’s additional phrase—“exercising oversight.” We might ask, “What’s the difference between *sight* and *oversight*?” Oversight includes

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**C. S. Lewis**  
(1896-1961)

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sight. You can't exercise oversight if you can't see clearly and understand accurately. But oversight is more than merely sight. *Oversight is sight plus responsibility.* To exercise oversight means that when you see a spiritual need, you are responsible to do something about it. You can't just see; you must also take action to relieve the need.

### **Failure to See**

We gain a greater understanding about the task of oversight when we consider the ways elders might fail in fulfilling their responsibility. If oversight is sight plus responsibility to act, this means that there are, broadly speaking, two main ways that pastors can fail.

First, shepherds can fail *to see clearly*. Perhaps they didn't recognize that the disease was spreading in their flock. They didn't see the pack of wolves creeping over the hill, or were deceived by wolves in sheepskins, or mistook real sheep for wolves. They didn't see that the water was polluted. Failure to see, or failure to discern, is a failure to shepherd effectively.

In the church context, elders might fail to see the false teaching that is spreading like gangrene among their **sheep**. In particular, deceptive teaching can enter into a local assembly through many of its efforts for the Lord: a men's ministry, a women's ministry, children and youth ministries, or a counseling ministry.

Alternatively, elders might fail to recognize destructive patterns of behavior that are beginning to take root among their people. Whether it's gossip and slander, ungodly suspicion, domineering leadership, overly passive leadership, blaming victims, or empowering victims — elders fail to exercise oversight if they fail to see when false beliefs and destructive patterns of behavior are spreading among their people.

### **Failure to Act**

The second issue in the work shepherding is that elders can fail to act. They see the disease, but they don't wisely apply the medicine. They see the wolves, but they cower in fear. They see the polluted water, but they don't move the flock to better pastures. Failure to act is also a failure to shepherd well the flock of God. Some elders may have the tendency to think but not to act, the tendency to feel but not to respond. If we continue to go on feeling and thinking without taking action, someday we will be unable to respond. In *The Screwtape Letters*, respected author C. S. Lewis warns:

*The more often [a Christian] feels without acting, the less he will be able to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel.”<sup>1</sup>*

In the local assembly context, elders might fail to counter false teaching with the truth. Rather than patiently correcting error, they might coddle it and tolerate it. Or conversely, they might reactively escalate theological conflict without understanding the appeal of the error to their particular people. They might make mountains out of molehills (or molehills out of

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mountains), or mishandle the timing with impatience or sluggishness.

In confronting destructive patterns of behavior, elders might fail to speak with sober-minded clarity and sincere love. They might avoid confrontation out of fear that some sheep might “vote with their feet” and find another church. They might give in to the impulse to say, “Peace, Peace” when there is no peace. In each of these situations, elders, even when they see the danger clearly, might lack the nerve to act wisely and intentionally to address the challenges before them. And in doing so, they fail to exercise oversight.

### **Subtle Temptation**

Some elders might fall prey to a subtle form of the failure to see and the failure to act. These elders see clearly and are prepared to act with courage and compassion to address what they see, but they aren’t attentive to the particular needs, cares, issues, dangers, temptations, and tendencies of their own flock. Their eyes look far and wide for danger, but rarely near and present. Peter’s call is specific. It’s not just “shepherd the flock of God”; it’s “shepherd the flock of God *that is among you.*” Elders are called to shepherd *their* believers in their own local assembly. They are not instructed to care for sheep in another pasture or local assembly. Elders are called to exercise oversight over those *in their charge*. In the age of instant news and social media, it’s easy to miss the importance of this. It’s easy for pastors to be concerned about dangers to the health of flocks over there, on the other side of town or the other side of the country. In fact, you can actually build a flock (numerically, at least) around pointing out the dangers to other flocks while ignoring the dangers to your own flock.

### **Plurality of Elders: More Eyes and More Hands**

In the face of the spiritual dangers among believers in a local assembly, God has given us two great helps. The first is the plurality of elders in a local assembly. The apostle Peter in his first epistle speaks of elders as a plurality, “The *elders* who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God that is among you...” (1 Peter 5:1-2).

It is important to notice that throughout the New Testament, elders are always mentioned as a plurality. When you have a plurality of elders, you can see more and act better. No single shepherd has 360-degree vision. No single shepherd can pay attention to all of the macro-dangers and micro-threats — but a team of shepherds can.

Some shepherds can scan the horizon to the east, while others scan the horizon to the west. Some can direct their attention to distant threats — the storm rolling in, the pack of wolves settling into the valley. Others can

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direct their attention inward — the condition of the pasture, the health of individual sheep. When elders shepherd the flock of God among them *together*, they can see more and act with greater wisdom and insight than if they saw and acted alone.

### Pray for Elders

The second help is prayer. Recognizing the call to exercise oversight and the two potential failures provides two good ways for us to pray.

First, we can pray that our elders would clearly see what they need to see about their church — that they would know the needs, the dangers, the tendencies, the temptations of the people in their congregation, in their particular city, at this time in history. If there's a fire in a church across the country, and a flood in their own church, we want pastors who bring sandbags and life rafts, not bucket brigades and fire hoses.

Secondly, may we pray for godly elders to function in a way that God desires, with strength and purity in a perverse and wicked society. A godly example is a powerful motivation for believers to live for God. My strong conviction is that when the elders and believers in an assembly submit to God's pattern for leadership, then a local assembly will begin to experience His blessing beyond anything we could ever ask or think.

### Conclusion

Exercising oversight, as well as shepherding the flock requires heart and nerve, courage and compassion, plurality and responsibility, teaching and prayer. May those who are elders take up the work of oversight faithfully and with love for the flock.

### Endnotes

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*. (New York, MacMillan Company, 1962), p. 61