

## The Office of Pastor

### 1. The Biblical Basis for Pastors

From the beginning, local churches have been governed and led by pastors (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) with the assistance of deacons (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:8-13). The pastor is ordained in a church to lead, teach, care for, and protect that local church.

While we most often use the term “pastor” for this office of the church, this is only one of several terms used in the New Testament to describe the role. The Bible refers interchangeably to this office as “elder,” “pastor” (or “shepherd”), and “overseer.”

“Elder” comes from the Greek *presbuteros* (e.g., 1 Tim. 5:1). When used of the office in the church, the implication is that the man is a mature and wise man, not necessarily that he has reached a certain age (1 Tim. 4:12).

A second term used of elders in the New Testament is “pastor” or “shepherd” (Gr., *poimēn*) as in Ephesians 4:11, “He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers” (cf. John 21:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). Places like John 10 and Psalm 23 remind us of the specific, individual care that God extends to us as our “Good Shepherd” and model for us what is meant by the term as it is applied to the elders of a local church.

A third term is “overseer” (Gr., *episkopos*) as in 1 Timothy 3:1: “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (cf. Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:7). This term captures the authority and leadership entrusted to elders.

It is critical that we see the equivalence of these three terms in the New Testament: an elder is a pastor is an overseer. We can see the synonymous nature of the terms in Titus 1:5-9 where Titus is told to “appoint elders” (v. 5), and then he is instructed concerning potential candidates: “the overseer...must be” (v. 7). Further, in Acts 20:28 the Ephesian “elders” (20:17) are told how they must “shepherd” their flock as “overseers.” In 1 Peter 5:1-4 he addresses “elders” (v. 1) and tells them to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (v. 2), specifically by “exercising oversight” (v. 2). While verb forms are mixed with the noun “elder” here, the ideas of elder- shepherd-overseer are clearly coextensive.

Thus, we ought to use all three terms to refer to the same office. Further, we need to let our understanding of the pastoral office include the connotations of all three terms. We cannot let one term swallow up the other two. Thus, the leadership and authority implied by “overseer” is to be joined to the protection, care, and nourishment implied by the use of “pastor”; and both of these are to be attached to the wisdom and mature discernment implied by the term “elder.” The

Bible itself must guide our use of these different terms, not how they have become traditionally understood in certain denominations.

## 2. Characteristics of a Pastor

Pastors are to be men of exemplary character and adequate gifting. Many of the qualifications detailed for pastors are commanded of all Christian men, implying the primacy of the pastor's example. The difference with pastors is that these qualifications are mandatory for office. The New Testament gives a number of requirements for pastors, many of which do not appear in a list, e.g., he is to invest in and raise up future leaders (2 Tim. 2:2), to grow in his handling of God's Word (2 Tim. 2:15), to patiently endure evil (2 Tim. 2:24), etc. However, Paul provides the basic profile of an pastor in the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, which are as follows:

Pastors are to be men.

*"the husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6)*

*"I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man" (1 Tim. 2:12)*

Pastors must have a sincere and mature faith in Christ, a connotation of the term "elder" (1 Tim. 3:6). The Bible warns against allowing recent converts to occupy the office of elder because of the danger of pride and the temptations that might accompany pastoral ministry for an immature believer.

*"He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil." (1 Tim. 3:6)*

Pastors must be men of authentic and exemplary Christian character (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9), though they are not sinless (1 John 1:8-10). Pastors are called to be godly men. Their role as examples to the church and the temptations that accompany this office make it essential to have men of character perform this service. However, godliness does not equal sinlessness (see 1 John 1:8-10). Pastors will not be perfect, though they must still be "above reproach" in the general sense. To call an pastor "above reproach" is not to say that he is without fault, but rather, that he cannot be charged with any significant pattern of sin or especially heinous sin that will bring shame to the church or the gospel and ultimately undermine his pastoral ministry.

The pastor's life must not have obvious flaws that make his life open to the charge of hypocrisy, bring shame to the gospel, or would make the temptations that go along with the office of elder too great for him. He is one whom others

would call “holy” in the basic, observable, but relative way that all fallen men can be holy.

*“Above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6)*

*“holy” (Titus 1:8)*

If he is married, he must exhibit faithfulness and sexual purity in his current marriage. He is a “one woman kind of man.” The requirement here does not speak to whether a man has been divorced or remarried, however a man's marital history is relevant to establish his character.

*“The husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6)*

The pastor-overseer must have the ability to see people in a variety of situations and not make rash judgments. Further, the pastor must demonstrate a basic wisdom and insight into the human heart. The pastor should possess the ability to encounter sin without being surprised and without growing cynical. The thought here is a clear-headedness that leads to rational thinking in difficult situations.

*“Sober-minded” (1 Tim. 3:2)*

The pastor's lifestyle ought to reflect intentional thinking and living, prudence, and wisdom. Having “control of oneself” has relevance in all areas of life, such as finances, sexual purity, decision making, spiritual disciplines, use of time, etc.

*“Self-controlled” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8)*

*“disciplined” (Titus 1:8)*

The pastor is a man others would describe as “respectable,” which means worthy of respect. He is dignified and proper in this outward sense. Yet 1 Timothy 3:7 also warns us that his reputation with those outside the church is important as well. The idea here is that if even an unbeliever thinks poorly of the man, how could we possibly elevate him in the church? This is speaking to his character, of course. If his reputation is poor specifically because of his stand for Christ and the gospel or because of slander, that is different. What is in view here is his integrity. It will be a “disgrace” to appoint a man to this office whom even unbelievers think a poor example.

*“Respectable” (1 Tim. 3:2)*

*“well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil” (1 Tim. 3:7)*

*“upright” (Titus 1:8)*

The “hospitality” required of all Christians (1 Pet. 4:9) is to be practiced by the pastor. In his life, there is a general openness to other people, whether demonstrated by shared meals, giving of his time, or simply being consistent in building relationships with others.

“Hospitable” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8)

An pastor should not be mastered by wine, drugs, or any other substance. Other potentially “addictive” types of activities such as gambling, pornography, computer gaming, or any activity that has overflowed its boundaries in the man's life could potentially apply as well.

*“Not a drunkard” (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7)*

A pastor must be “correcting his opponents with gentleness” (2 Tim. 2:25) and must “be patient with them all” (1 Thess. 5:14). There is a general ability to bring “peace” to situations of conflict (“peaceable,” 1 Tim. 3:3, NASB). Occasional expressions of anger or impatience are simply part of our fallenness, but if these characterize the man for those who live with him— his family, co-workers, others in church—the man must not be an pastor. A man prone to bully, fight, or be generally “hot-headed” should not serve in this office.

“Not violent but gentle” (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7)

*“Not quarrelsome” (1 Tim. 3:3)*

*“[not] quick-tempered” (Titus 1:7)*

There are different ways to be disqualified because a pastor is a “lover of money.” It can mean a general greed that motivates someone to exploit the church for his own financial gain (Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:2), or worse, to steal from it (Eph. 4:28). It can also mean a “covetousness” in the man's life that is really a form of “idolatry” (Col. 3:5), or it could simply be a continual discontent with what God has provided for him (Phil. 4:10-13; Heb. 13:5). All of these are temptations for everyone, but when they are characteristic of a man, he should not serve as an pastor.

*“Not a lover of money” (1 Tim. 3:3)*

*“[not] greedy for gain” (Titus 1:7)*

A pastor demonstrates a motivation to work for the good in others, in situations, and in his own life. This term in the Greek (philagathos) has to do with the heart of the potential elder. It is more than someone described as “a good man” or one committed to do “good works” (Titus 2:14), though it encompasses these. Beneath these is also to be a real love of and commitment to “the good” or “God's best.”

*“A lover of good” (Titus 1:8)*

Pastors must also be skilled managers of their homes with evident fruit in their children. Few qualifications for the pastor are as sobering as this one, but none are more telling of the kind of leader that a man will be in God's church. The daily interaction, myriad of situations, unpredictability, balance of love and strength, demand for wisdom, and sheer test of character that happen in a home mirror profoundly the kind of labors an elder is called to in the church. Further, a man may keep his true self fairly hidden from his co-workers, but what he truly is will be revealed in his family life.

Yet, while a man's wife and children are a vital evidence of a man's leadership, they are not an infallible one. The heart of the child plays a part in the overall fruitfulness of his or her life. Thus, as we examine a man's household, we must not make hasty judgments.

Paul provides the basic profile of an pastor's private leadership in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 and Titus 1:6, which are as follows:

The pastor must lead his household “well.” The key word used in Timothy is “manage,” a term that means “to lead, rule, direct.” How a pastor cares for his house and property and how he leads his wife and children are all included in this requirement.

All men are the heads of their homes, but we are looking for the man who leads “well.” A household kept in order by coercion and threat is clearly inconsistent with the other character traits listed of elders. A potential elder is instead to “manage” his household “with all dignity.”

Further, a man who manages his household well is obedient to the commandments related to his role as a father and husband: he is a husband who loves his wife as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25-33), he is living with her in an understanding way (1 Pet. 3:7), and he is a father who is bringing his children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). In other words, there is a pattern of loving discipleship and gracious leadership in his management of the home.

*“he must manage his own household well, with all dignity” (1 Tim. 3:4).*

A chief evidence of the man's parenting is his children. Their character, behavior, and even faith are seen as proper signs of how “well” he is parenting.

*“keeping his children submissive” (1 Tim. 3:4)*

*“his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.” (Titus 1:6)*

We believe the requirement here is for a man's children to be “faithful,” not that the children be “believing” (ESV, NASB). The word *pista* can be translated in either way with good biblical precedent, but the context in Titus connects “faithful children” to the issues of “debauchery” and “insubordination,” and in 1 Timothy 3:4 the parallel Greek phrase calls for children who are “in submission.” It seems then that Paul is referring to the obedience of the child, not their faith (for “faithful” as a character trait cf. 1 Cor. 1:9; 10:13; Eph. 6:21; Titus 1:9; 3:8; for “believer” as in “possessing faith in Christ,” cf. John 20:27; Acts 10:45.).

Furthermore, there is the theological issue that we cannot require the regeneration of a child for the father to be qualified. The spiritual state of the child is in the hands of the Lord, not the father, and is determined “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). For these reasons, we believe the Bible requires the elder's children to be obedient to him, not that the children be Christians. The requirement also does not apply to grown children, because adults are responsible for their own behavior and are not bound to obey their parents (even though they continue to “honor” them, Ex. 20:12).

This basic obedience in the pastor's children certainly does not mean sinlessness, and we ought to be very slow to disqualify a man for a given incident with one or more of his children. The key question is whether the incident reveals the general foolishness of youth or a characteristic and persistent lack of faithfulness in the father.

Lastly, an pastor's children must not be “open to the charge of debauchery” (Titus 1:6). “Debauchery” can include drunkenness (cf. Eph 5:18), but the broader sense perhaps fits better here: “reckless abandon, wild living,” “loose living.” The question in view here is not a single incident of drunkenness or some other reckless act in the child of a potential pastor, but a lifestyle that is out of control in a visible and public manner.

The pastor's household is also relevant because of the connection between parenting and pastoring. The Bible makes an explicit connection between caring for your family and caring for Christ's church.

The implication is that effective leadership in the home requires a set of gifts that eldership in “God's church” also requires. We can think of the combination of strategic thinking and personal relationship; the need to be both strong and gentle; the need to speak God's truth clearly, but in an environment of love and affection; the challenge of accepting someone fully for who they are and yet lovingly calling them on to something greater; and more besides. All of these dichotomies come together in the home and in the church. We believe that it is for this reason that God upholds a man's home as a necessary tool for evaluation.

*“For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?” (1 Tim. 3:5).*

Pastors must also possess an aptitude for sound doctrine, which means they understand and believe it and can teach and defend it. However, since we are appointing pastors and not seminary professors, we might call it an aptitude for applied sound doctrine.

*“a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).*

This aptitude for sound doctrine has four components to it:

First, the pastor must understand sound doctrine (2 Tim. 2:15; Titus 1:9). From Titus 1:9, we can see that the elder must personally understand “the trustworthy word as taught.” A man only barely able to grasp the basics of Christianity will likely be unable to lead others in understanding and believing what the New Testament calls “sound doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:9; 2:1). Having an aptitude for doctrine would also include indications that the man is a proven student of the Bible (2 Tim. 2:15).

Second, the pastor must believe sound doctrine. This calls attention to the potential elder's personal faith and confidence in orthodox Christian belief. The challenges of the office require that a man “hold firm” (Titus 1:9) to his own faith if he is going to be able to shepherd people wrestling with theirs.

Third, the pastor must be able to teach sound doctrine (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 3:16-4:2; Titus 1:9). In 1 Timothy Paul says that the elder must be “able to teach” (3:2), but in Titus we get a sense of the purpose of this aptitude. It is “so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine” (1:9). The teaching he received and believes, he is thus to pass along to others. Such an ability to teach implies a basic ability to organize ideas, accurately exegete the biblical text, and communicate this in a way that encourages, instructs, and even inspires other believers.

Fourth, the pastor must be able to defend sound doctrine to those who challenge or contradict it (Acts 20:28-30; Titus 1:9). Paul expresses this in Titus 1:9: “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.”

Throughout the pastoral epistles, we learn of an array of opponents of the gospel (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 2 Tim. 2:14-19; Titus 1:10-16), and throughout the New Testament, we see that the gospel is always being attacked (e.g., Phil. 3:1-12; 2 Pet. 2:1-22). This ability to defend the gospel against its opponents is part of the shepherd's (pastor's) role in guarding the flock entrusted to him from “fierce wolves” both inside and outside the church (Acts 20:28-30).

The skills involved here include (1) discerning the theological issue in question; (2) understanding the truth to combat the lie; and (3) communicating God's truth graciously, which is to find the right word for the moment (Eph. 4:29), or at least

a reasonable one. A man cannot be expected to defend all doctrines equally well, but he needs to demonstrate facility with the central doctrines of the church.

This aptitude will likely grow as the man performs the duties of an pastor, but to be qualified for ordination to the office, there must be some basic ability to do this. The oral exam of the ordination process, conversation about theological topics, and asking a man how he would respond to hypothetical situations all shed light on a man's ability here.

Pastors must also possess the gift of leadership. He is an “overseer” in God's church, leading, managing, and governing the local church according to the revelation of Scripture and Christian prudence, all for the good of the members of the church and the glory of God.

The pastor's responsibility to lead means that he must possess the necessary gifting to lead. This gifting includes having sufficient wisdom to make good decisions in small and large matters, the ability to communicate and implement those decisions, and biblical wisdom to speak into the affairs of the church.

The pastor's leadership will involve thinking theologically about the needs of the church and the future direction of the church. Leadership involves a certain amount of casting vision to the church or a segment of the church. A given pastor will likely have more gifting in certain areas of the life of the church than in others, but there must be a basic level of leadership to serve as an pastor.

There are three places to look when determining a man's fitness to lead in God's church. The first is the most critical: his family (1 Tim. 3:4-5). The second is his current service in the church. How has he demonstrated responsibility, initiative, care, a command of the Scriptures, and a zeal for God in his volunteer work for the church? A third area is his personal and professional life. Is he self-controlled? Conscientious? Able to handle delegated responsibility? Does he have a well-managed life? Such questions can be helpful when ascertaining a man's leadership gift.

### 3. The Pastor as Christian First

It is critical for both the church and its pastors that leadership is seen in a proper light. Pastors and churches suffer when pastors are seen in an inflated manner or as some “professional” class of Christians far removed from “the rest of us.” Here are several ideas that should inform a church's view of its pastors and the pastor's view of himself:

Pastors are men under authority before they are men entrusted with authority (1 Cor. 11:3, Rom. 1:1).



Pastors are “brothers in Christ” with all those in their church before they are “fathers in the faith” to anyone (Romans 12:10, John 1:12).

Pastors are also sheep before they are shepherds (John 10:1-15; 1 Pet. 5:4).

Pastors are servants before they are “leaders” (Heb. 13:17, 1 Tim. 3:4-5).

Pastors must see themselves as only one part of the body of Christ with Christ alone as the head (Eph. 1:23; 4:15-16; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:19).

#### 4. The Role of a Pastor

The elder-pastor-overseer has four broad responsibilities within the local church.

First, pastors are to “feed” the flock entrusted to their care (John 21:15). Pastors are “teachers” (Eph. 4:11) who build the church in their care by “preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). This is why a pastor must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). Teaching happens through the ministry of the Word on Sunday mornings but also in the more private “reproof...correction...training” (2 Tim. 3:16), and exhortation (4:2) that happens in the pastor’s ministry to individuals.

Second, pastors are to oversee the flock entrusted to them (1 Tim. 3:1). Pastors provide leadership and thus manage “God’s church” (1 Tim. 3:4-5). This leadership requirement is seen by the use of the title “overseers” to describe an elder (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7). Further, the use of the term “manage” in 1 Timothy 3:5 and the reference to “ruling” (Gr., *proistēmi*) in 1 Timothy 5:17 also support the notion that elders govern the church in a leadership capacity (cf. Rom. 12:8; 1 Thess. 5:12; etc.). Hebrews 13:17, which uses the more general term “leaders” (participle from *ēgeomai*, “lead, guide”), commands Christians to “obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls,” which seems to provide corroboration regarding the management and governing responsibilities of elders. Additionally, 1 Peter 5:2 reminds pastors that they are to be those “exercising oversight, not under compulsion.”

Third, pastors are to care sincerely for the flock entrusted to them by God (Acts 20:28). Just as the great commandments are to love God and to love our neighbor (Matt. 22:36-40), and apart from love we accomplish nothing and are nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3), so a shepherd must “be genuinely concerned” for the “welfare” of every member of his respective church, not seeking his own interests, but “those of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 2:19-21).

Fourth, pastors protect the flock, looking out for “wolves” that can come from without or within the church (Acts 20:28-30). Pastors are to “pay careful attention” and to “be alert” (vv. 28, 30). This is not to give an elder a suspicious heart, but a watchful one; not a cynical heart, but a cautious one. For example, the pastor must know the difference between someone who disagrees with him and a

divisive man who is actually a “wolf” (Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:10). Such attentiveness and discernment is part of the role.

## 5. The Plurality of Pastors

Pastors are to serve as a plurality, not alone; though how many pastors constitute adequate plurality is not given in the New Testament. It teaches this by precedent, which we see in the fact that all mentions of “elder” are in the plural (e.g., Acts 14:23; 15:2-16:4; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 4:14; etc.).

Plurality is a means of acknowledging that God gives a diversity of gifts to his people (1 Cor. 12:7-11). No one man has all the gifts necessary to lead a local church. While all elders must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2), some will be more gifted than others. While all of them must have leadership to “manage the household of God” (1 Tim. 3:4), some will have gifting along administrative lines and others along more strategic lines.

Plurality will often mean that different pastors will have different responsibilities in the church that line up with their gifting as much as is feasible. Further, when decisions are made in the life of the church, often one man possesses more wisdom in a given area than the others. At such times, there is a kind of mutual deference that is most prudent. Even the role of senior pastor or lead elder is merely an extension of this principle.

Plurality is one of the key means by which elders are held accountable in an ongoing manner. A man who ministers alone is in a precarious position, able to lean on his own understanding too much, and potentially able to walk in secret sins for a length of time. Plurality does not eliminate these dangers, but it does make them less tempting in the normal flow of life.

The New Testament certainly can envision an authentic church without a plurality of elders (e.g., the period of time prior to Acts 14:23). However, we see this as a temporary necessity that is to be remedied as quickly as possible (without making the opposite error of “laying hands on too quickly”). The precedent of a plurality in the New Testament cannot be an excuse to overlook the requirements of the man who is to be an elder. These are too clear to be overlooked or minimized, and a church will likely suffer more from elders who are unqualified men than it will from having too few elders in office.

## 6. Bi-Vocational Pastors

Pastors needn't serve full-time nor be compensated to be considered true pastors. Although they must meet biblical qualifications, they do not need to possess formal theological training. They may serve part-time with or without compensation.

Although we call such pastors bi-vocational pastors (the term “lay elders” is also used) as a convenient way to distinguish them from full-time pastors, this in no way communicates a diminished role or importance in the church. The Bible allows us to ordain part-time pastors or those who will be uncompensated for their service. Christian prudence, the needs of the church, the lack of finances, as well as a desire to achieve plurality with well-qualified pastors who are already vocationally employed in other roles are some viable reasons to employ bi-vocational pastors.

As desirable as this role may be for the health and mission of the church, we should aspire for pastors to be compensated commensurate to their workload when possible (1 Cor. 9:6-14; Luke 10:7/Matt. 10:10; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). The New Testament teaches that this is so pastors can be free to devote themselves to their ministries.

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

Paul's first point here has to do with the relative levels of gifting (“rule well”), scopes of responsibility (“especially those who labor in preaching and teaching”), and apparently financial compensation (“double honor”) of elders in a given church. That they are compensated seems assumed by the mention of “double honor,” and especially by the next verse about “the laborer” deserving his “wages.”

His second point is about the need to compensate the elder financially. He is the “ox” who should not be “muzzled” by refusing to compensate him; he is the “laborer” who “deserves his wages” (v. 18). To fail to support him financially can limit his ability and is thus “muzzling the ox.” That is a bad thing according to Paul, for it means appointing him to do the work and then hindering him from doing it.

Of course, a church may be unable to fully financially support a pastor and there is nothing that forbids a pastor from other employment. Additionally, serving bi-vocationally may best serve the needs and mission of the local church depending on the particular pastor, his gifting, life-situation, and availability to serve full time. Viable alternatives to full-time compensation include providing stipends for preaching and teaching, providing a book allowance, or compensating at a part-time level. In some cases, a pastor may simply enjoy being able to serve free of charge. However, if this is not the case and the church is financially able to remunerate him, then the local eldership and congregation should give due consideration to the biblical onus to “not muzzle the ox” and consider financial compensation.

As helpful, wise, and fitting as it may be to employ bi-vocational pastors with alternative compensation arrangements, there is no clear biblical warrant to withhold pay from an pastor merely to create a certain number of volunteer pastors for the sake of balancing the amount of compensated pastors. Some have believed this provides accountability for compensated pastors who may experience a conflict of interest due to receiving compensation from the church they serve. While the concept of a balance of power is a good thing when it comes to civil government, the Scriptures never teach that a special category of volunteer or “lay elders” should be appointed for the purpose of “balancing” the power of the compensated pastors. A biblical answer to such a need is a plurality of pastors.

## 7. The Senior Pastor

The role of “senior pastor” or “lead pastor/elder” is supportable by biblical precedent and practical wisdom. It is not a biblical office per se and therefore not absolutely required in this polity. Nonetheless, the Bible presents numerous examples of groups in the Bible where a man is or becomes the leader, or at least the spokesman. Whether it is Moses over Israel, heads of tribes and clans in Israel, judges and kings over Israel, Peter over the Twelve apostles, or James in the Jerusalem church, it seems that biblically there is typically a man identified as the leader or spokesman (e.g., Acts 1:15; 15:13ff.).

Further, practical wisdom tells us that a group is served when one individual is identified as the primary leader or spokesman, even if he is technically a “first among equals.” He is an equal among his fellow elders in the exercise of authority, not another class of elder, but his role is distinct in that he serves as a leader of his fellow elders.

The lead elder is part of a plurality of elders, and his character and gifting are not necessarily uniformly greater than that of the other men. What is distinct is his measure of gifting and capacity in those areas (teaching, leadership) most central to pastoral leadership. The precise nature of the role of the lead pastor may vary depending on the maturity of an eldership, the range of gifts on the team, the level of specialization on the team, etc. The elders decide who will serve in this capacity.

## 8. Accountability for Pastors

Because significant authority is entrusted to pastors, it is critical that these men are accountable. They are accountable in several ways:

First and most importantly, pastors are accountable to God. They are appointed to their office ultimately by God and must perform their office with a keen awareness of God's watchful eye on them. They are to perform their duties now in light of a coming judgment.

*“The Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28)*

*“When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet. 5:4).*

*“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:1-2a)*

Second, there is protection and accountability built into the ordination process. There is no immunity to sin or temptation this side of our glorification, but we do a great service to the church when we refuse to appoint anyone to this office who does not explicitly fulfill all the prerequisites given in the New Testament. This is a preemptive measure, but an important one. If we are careless about whom we ordain to the office in the first place, any accountability structures we implement will be of limited value.

There is accountability that happens within a biblical plurality of elders. If a church has faithfully appointed a plurality of elders to the office, there is a great accountability that occurs. Some of this accountability will happen through formal, scheduled times of speaking into each other’s lives; asking about specific areas of obedience must be a part of a healthy plurality. Accountability also happens in the ongoing flow of ministry as sinful patterns emerge in a man’s leadership or lifestyle or in isolated incidents that occur before others. A healthy awareness of each other’s behavior and an expectation of input and observations from others will supplement the formal accountability in a helpful way. Truly, to serve in a plurality of elders involves a commitment to ongoing accountability.

Third, there is a critical layer of accountability that comes from the congregation when it brings observations and appeals to elders or charges against elders. Just as the man to be qualified as an elder must have a general openness to input, so must the elder remain open to the observations of those in the church. At times an elder might even be engaged in a matter of personal sin against another person in the church, one that requires a Matthew 18:15-20 process of rebuke, repentance, and reconciliation.

*“Fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7)*

A critical point of accountability is what Paul labels “a charge against an elder” (1 Tim. 5:19). He is not specific about whether this accusation comes from an apostle or a member of the congregation or another elder, but we should probably assume that all three are possibilities. A member of a congregation must be enabled to pursue such accusations against leaders. Without this layer of accountability, the possibility of some version of tyrannical leadership is easy to imagine. Further, denying such due process to the congregation opens us up to a situation where a person could observe an elder failing in his office and be

unable to act on it. Of course, the right to do this does not mean that they can do this without any restraints.

*“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” (1 Tim. 5:19)*

Fourth, there is accountability that happens through the broader body of the Sovereign Grace churches. In all of the ways specified in the Sovereign Grace Churches (SGC) Book of Church Order, elders in a local church are accountable to the other elders in their Region and ultimately to all the elders in Sovereign Grace. Regional Assemblies with their Judicial Review Committees and the Council of Elders, along with the Sovereign Grace Court of Appeal, provide accountability for the life and doctrine of elders in Sovereign Grace.

## **The Ordination of Pastors**

### **1. The Process of Ordination**

Before a man is ordained to the office of pastor he has been first called, gifted, and chosen through divine initiative (Acts 20:28, Eph. 4:11). Appointing a man to the office of pastor involves a collaborative effort between the pastors and members of a local church and the SGC Regional Assembly of Elders.

The purpose of a process for ordination is simply to appoint men to this office who resemble the New Testament criteria for the office (especially 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). We are not omniscient and do not know the future, but a process helps us not to miss obvious deficiencies in a man who desires this office.

A. The local eldership chooses a man who is qualified as much as they can determine.

The local eldership bears primary responsibility for examining the life and doctrine of candidates for pastoral ministry in order to determine whether the candidate meets the biblical character qualifications and fully agrees with the SG Statement of Faith. The elders will together establish if the man is qualified as far as can be seen.

In this initial stage of evaluation, input will be solicited from the deacons and congregation on an ad hoc basis.

Elders will also pay close attention to his current service. A formal examination of his gifting (i.e. Pastoral Internship) and his fitness to serve on the existing eldership (i.e. Pastoral Residency) may be implemented.

Appropriate counsel may also be sought from the SGC Regional Leader or other elders in the region.

The man must be a member of the church in good standing.

B. The candidate is informed and consents to the process of ordination.

The pastors will prepare and counsel the candidate, helping guide him towards an informed and prayerful decision. Should he choose not to pursue ordination, the pastors will fully support him in this and commend him to all who have been involved.

C. The congregation is informed and input is invited.

Once the pastors and the candidate are all supportive of pursuing ordination, they will notify the church and invite their further input over the next 14 days. The active involvement of the congregation is necessary in the confirmation of an pastor's call and, at a minimum, should require extensive informal interaction with the congregation regarding the suitability of the pastoral candidate.

During the ordination process, members of the church are asked and given opportunity to submit in writing their observations, affirmation, or critique of the man in question. This is not to propagate gossip and slander, but to allow opportunity to stop the process if there is information the pastors lack in evaluating the man. Additionally, affirmation will help confirm the selection of the candidate. Such feedback is an important opportunity for the congregation to assist in the ordination process.

The feedback of members of the church will not be understood as a binding vote on the ordination of the candidate but may be a deciding factor in his qualification. It will be up to the pastors to handle the feedback as they deem most appropriate.

D. Successful Completion of SGC ordination requirements.

Only the eldership of a local church can ordain new elders. Therefore, the local eldership bears primary responsibility for selecting candidates for pastoral ministry and examining their life and doctrine in order to determine whether the candidate meets the biblical character qualifications and fully agrees with the Sovereign Grace Churches (SGC) Statement of Faith.

However, since the quality and unity of all elders within SGC is fundamental to the nature and health of the SGC ecclesiastical union, the candidate must meet

standards for ordination as prescribed by SGC and be approved by the Regional Assembly of Elders according the SGC Book of Church Order.

As stipulated by the SGC Book of Church Order, the Regional Assembly of Elders (RAE) and it's subcommittees must demonstrate just cause to reject a candidate who has been previously vetted by his local church and has passed the required ordination examinations. Just cause consists exclusively of heterodoxy (i.e., deviation from the SG Statement of Faith) or scandalous or serious sin.

Prior to taking ordination vows, the candidate must inform his local eldership and the RAE of any and all reservations or disagreements he has with the SGC Statement of Faith. (He shall put these exceptions down in writing; each elder's exceptions shall be kept on record with the local eldership, the RAE, and SG). The local eldership shall first investigate the exception before presenting the candidate to the RAE. The RAE shall determine the significance of the candidate's scruples. If the exception is a trivial semantic scruple and not a substantive difference with any doctrine in the SGC Statement of Faith, then the candidate may subscribe to the SGC Statement of Faith. However, if it is determined that the candidate substantially disagrees with any of the doctrines of the SGC Statement of Faith, he may not subscribe. If the candidate's exceptions to the SGC Statement of Faith prevent him from subscribing to it, the RAE Ordination Committee shall recommend to him a course of study on the relevant doctrines, if the candidate is willing, in the hopes that his scruples might be overcome.

If the RAE approves the candidate, then the candidate shall subscribe to the SGC Statement of Faith and submit to the SGC Book of Church Order by signing two copies of the following statement:

*"I declare sincerely before God that I believe that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith fully agree with the Scriptures, and I own that Statement as the statement and confession of my faith. I promise to teach and defend these doctrines in public and private. I promise further that if in the future I come to have reservations about any of these doctrines, I will share these reservations with my eldership and the Regional Assembly of Elders.*

*I submit without exception to the explicitly mandated polity practices of the Sovereign Grace Book of Church Order. I affirm that the form of government contained in the Sovereign Grace Book of Church Order is a wise and suitable application of Scriptural principles."*

One copy will remain in the personal safekeeping of the candidate and one copy will be sent to Sovereign Grace for archiving. Photocopies of this signed



document will be sent to the Region's Ordination Committee and to the Director of Church Care.

#### E. Date Set for Ordination

Once the man is established as qualified for this office and the church desires to appoint him to this office, a date is set for the ordination service and is announced to the church.

#### F. Final Written Feedback

Written feedback is allowable throughout the evaluation and ordination process but should be finalized at least 30 days in advance of the ordination service.

#### G. The Ordination Service

Local church elders will be present at the ordination service, as well as the RAE Regional Leader (or his representative) who will officially commend the candidate.

During the ordination service the presiding pastor(s) will include the following questions for the candidate to answer in the affirmative ("I do, God helping me."):

*Do you promise to shepherd the flock of God not under compulsion but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge but being an example to the flock? (1 Pet. 5:1-4)*

*Do you promise to faithfully guard the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you an overseer, and do you promise to protect that flock from false teaching, division, and dissension? (Acts 20:28-31)*

*Do you promise to care for the flock of God, not as a hireling, but as an under shepherd of the Great Shepherd, caring for his sheep as the precious ones for whom he died? (Ezek. 34)*

*Do you, in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and this congregation, promise to preach the Word in season and out of season, and do you promise to reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience, enduring suffering, while remaining sober-minded in all of your preaching and teaching, and will you do the work of an evangelist among those whom God has given you charge? (2 Tim. 4:1-5)*

*Do you declare sincerely before God that you believe all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Sovereign Grace Churches Statement of Faith fully agree with the Scriptures? Do you own that Statement as the statement and confession of your faith? And do you promise to teach and defend these doctrines in public and private?*

*Do you promise further that if in the future you come to have reservations about any of these doctrines, you will share these reservations with your eldership and the Sovereign Grace Churches Regional Assembly of Elders?*

*Do you promise to keep a close watch on yourself and to walk humbly before others, to be self-suspicious of your own motives, to invite criticism from others, and to make yourself accountable to those whom God has put in your life?*

*Do you submit without exception to the explicitly mandated practices of the Sovereign Grace Churches Book of Church Order, affirming that that form of government is a wise and suitable application of Scriptural principles?*

*Do you promise to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel and to show yourself in all respects, in action and in speech, to be a model of good works, integrity, and dignity so that neither the church, nor our Savior Jesus Christ, nor the gospel may be brought into reproach? (Titus 2:7-8)*

*Do you promise to continually seek the gifts of the Spirit that you might serve God's people, not in the energy of the flesh, but in the power of the Holy Spirit and to carry out your ministry without fear of man?*

The candidate having answered in the affirmative, the presiding elder(s) will ask the church the following, expecting an affirmative reply:

*Do you, the members of Sovereign Grace Church, receive \_\_\_\_\_ as your pastor?*

*Do you promise to receive the word of truth from him with meekness and love and to submit to him in the due biblical exercise of his leadership?*

*Do you engage to supply him with sufficient material maintenance and to furnish him with whatever you may see needful for the promotion of the gospel and for his comfort among you?*

*Do you promise to encourage him in his labors and to assist his ministry and leadership for your spiritual edification, the evangelization of the lost, and the promotion of God's glory?*

The local eldership and the RAE Regional Leader will lay hands on the candidate and pray for him. The process of "laying on of hands" is a public affirmation and recognition that this individual has been set apart for gospel ministry, and that the ongoing mercy and attendance of the Spirit of God will be necessary to satisfactorily fulfill the requirements of ministry.

## 2. The Duration of the Ordination

It is assumed that when a man is ordained to this office, he will serve as long as he is qualified and it is in the best interest of the church and his family. In other words, there is no set term on a pastor's service. Term limits seem to be a contradiction to the way that God gifts his people and the example he gives us in the New Testament.

### 3. Qualification of an Pastor Versus Removal of an Pastor

1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 are given to help us know what to look for in pastor candidates in the church. These passages also present the gifting and character traits that called men should continue to cultivate in ministry. The description in these passages should not be viewed as a rigid standard that acts as some trigger to automatically and immediately disqualify a man should he be seen to fall short. If a pastor is found to no longer fit the description in the text, the local eldership should explore the situation to determine the reason this is the case.

There is an important difference between the selection process and the removal process for pastors. 1 Timothy 5:19-21 and the SGC Book of Church Order provide the proper approach for addressing charges against an elder.

*“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.” (1 Tim. 5:19-21)*

### 4. Taking New Exceptions to the SGC Statement of Faith

Any time that an pastor registers new exceptions to the Statement of Faith, the RAE must examine them and rule upon them as described in the SGC Book of Church Order.

### 5. Temporary Local Eldership

In the event that our church is without a pastor (e.g., because all of our pastors have resigned, been disavowed, or died), the responsibilities and authority of our local eldership shall devolve upon the RAE. Under the coordinating direction of the RAE Regional Leader, the members of the RAE shall supply the pulpit and fulfill the church's pastoral needs as an expression of their unity and commitment to the care for us.

In close consultation with our congregation (in accordance with the SGC Book of Church Order), the RAE will select an elder for our church by a simple majority vote. The RAE should honor the church's previous practices concerning the affirmation of elders. At that time, all of the responsibilities and authority of the church's local eldership shall revert from the RAE back to our local eldership.

## 6. Transfer of Ordination Status across Regions

Ordination and discipline in any SGC church is valid and recognized by all other SGC churches. An pastors who accepts a call to serve at another church need not, therefore, re-take the ordination exams or repeat any other part of the ordination process.

However, when an ordained SGC pastor is called to serve a church in another SGC Region, his registered exceptions to the SGC Statement of Faith shall be reviewed by the receiving RAE. The receiving RAE shall rule upon the exceptions as described in SGC Book of Church Order, and if they rule that the pastor substantially disagrees with any doctrine of the SGC Statement of Faith, they may refuse to receive the pastor into the Region.

## 7. Resignation

A pastor is free to resign his office at any time and for any reason. The local eldership will work with him to ensure their ministry is stable and will notify the congregation in a timely manner.