

1 Corinthians 3:9

⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

1. Co-Workers

We must remember the grace of Jesus and how He called us to His ministry. In John 15:15, Jesus no longer refers to us as “servants,” but as “friends.” Similarly, in Galatians 4:7, Paul emphasizes that we are no longer servants, but sons of God. Furthermore, Hebrews 2:11 tells us that Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers. Because of this, He entrusts us with His ministry, treating us as He would a friend, a son, or a brother. What a glorious privilege this is! This understanding of service applies not only to church officers but to all believers. Every saint has been given the honor and responsibility of living as friends and brothers of Jesus, and as sons of God, working together to serve the kingdom of God. We are called to enjoy and testify to this reality within the church and its ministry.

Were we entrusted with all of this because we are perfectly capable? No. Jesus promised to be with us until the end of the world. He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in the church, enabling us to carry out the ministry of the kingdom of God through His grace alone. Do you remember how Jesus entrusted Peter, despite his many faults, with the responsibility of shepherding His sheep? This was because Jesus would be with Peter, equipping him with His grace. In the same way, Jesus calls us and entrusts us with His ministry. We should humbly obey His calling. Jesus cares for us through the Holy Spirit and the Word, but He also tends to His flock through the officers He has chosen within the church. This is how we should understand the calling of these officers.

In today's passage, 1 Corinthians 3:9, the Apostle Paul describes himself as a fellow worker of God. We are all called to be God's fellow workers or “co-workers.” How could Paul claim to be a co-worker with God? While it's true that God does not need co-workers, He invites His people to participate in the ministry of the Kingdom of God. He calls us to be His co-workers and allows us to take part in the work accomplished by the Triune God. Although we may feel inadequate, God provides us with the grace to fulfill His work. Importantly, the Apostle Paul not only refers to the apostles as God's co-workers but also includes all the saints in this calling. In particular, while Paul does not designate women as church officers, he acknowledges them as co-workers in the ministry as well.

Romans 16:3, “Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 4:2-3, “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.”

All saints, whether male or female, are called co-workers in the ministry. A notable example is Priscilla and Aquila, a couple recognized as God's co-workers, who served the church together with unity and purpose. It is important to remember that we are all called to serve the church, even if we do not hold official positions within it. While every individual is given different gifts, all saints, as God's co-workers, contribute together to Jesus' ministry. However, being called to serve does not imply that everyone can become apostles, pastors, elders, or deacons. It is essential to acknowledge the authority that Christ has granted to these officers. The fact that all saints are considered “co-workers” does not diminish the need for church officers. God has established the offices of pastor, elder, and deacon to serve until the end of

time. These leaders are charged with teaching, guiding, and serving the church under the authority of Jesus. The Apostle Paul exemplified this by maintaining his apostolic role and exercising the authority given to him without viewing himself as superior to other saints. He regarded them as brothers and co-workers, all working in tandem for the Kingdom of God. This perspective is rooted in the understanding that Jesus sees us as His brothers and co-workers, collaborating with us to fulfill the ministry of God's Kingdom. Even as we may falter, He fully accomplishes God's ministry. This is ultimately God's pleasing will for His church.

Remember that each of you is participating in the ministry of Theophilus Presbyterian Church. Ultimately, who carries out this ministry? It is Jesus, the head of the church, who does it all. He is the true and chief shepherd. However, He has called us together as one body in Christ so that we may serve Him and His Kingdom in our respective roles. The church is not a place where a few individuals lead alone. Its ministry cannot be fulfilled by just a select few officers. For the church to grow healthily, it requires a fellowship where all members care for and support one another, participating in the ministry alongside the pastor, elders, and deacons. Therefore, we must remember that every member plays a vital role as co-workers in the ministry of the church's leadership.

It is crucial that, although the officers of the church are ordained and installed according to God's will, there should be no division between the officers and other members. We are one church and one body. All co-workers must collaborate within their respective roles to support each other and work towards a common purpose as one body. While the officers should take on leadership roles, they must also demonstrate humility and serve as examples. Thus, the ministry of the officers and the lives of each member should not be viewed as separate. Everyone must participate as one body and grow together. The officers cannot effectively carry out their ministry without the cooperation and submission of all the congregants. It is important to remember that we are all precious and essential to one another as we strive together to reach the full stature of Jesus as one body. The apostle Paul expresses this in the book of Philemon.

Philemon 1: 5-7, "because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. 7 Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people."

These are the words that the Apostle Paul spoke to Philemon, a believer in the Church of Colossae at that time. While it is uncertain whether Philemon held an official position, he opened his home to gather the church and foster fellowship through faith and love. Philemon, his wife, and his entire family became co-workers with God, working together in one faith. Though it may seem small or insignificant, the acts of love they performed within the church had a profound impact. Their understanding that they were co-workers with Jesus allowed the entire congregation to grow closer to Him. Therefore, let us remember the kind of life we have been called to live. As co-workers of Jesus, may we embrace His heart, bear witness to His life, and serve joyfully in our respective positions and callings. The church should encourage everyone to serve actively with the gifts given by Christ, as our efforts in the Lord are not in vain. God desires for us to grow toward Christ as one body, where leaders and officers set examples for others to follow.

The church is a place where all believers participate in the ministry of Jesus and are called to testify about His kingdom. When God looks at the church, He sees us as He sees Jesus, despite our shortcomings. Therefore, the world must see Jesus in us, reflecting the testimony we bear. It's essential for us to preach, testify, and display the character of Jesus, engage in His ministry, and serve as He did. We are called to

proclaim the kingdom of Jesus through the church. If Jesus is not evident in the church's ministry, or if the ministry does not focus on testifying about Jesus or leading people to Him, then it is not the ministry that pleases God. Consequently, we must commit to prayer, rely on the grace of Jesus, follow His teachings, and carry out the ministry of Jesus collaboratively with church leaders. In this context, let us reflect on the calling of elders, who have been entrusted with authority by Jesus to carry out His ministry.

2. Ministry of the Officers - Elders

The calling of an elder involves the ministry of ruling and governing. Pastors, who are teaching elders, also participate in this ministry. But what exactly is the ministry of ruling? The term "ruling" may sound authoritative, and some individuals might feel uncomfortable with it or believe it's out of place in today's society. We live in an age that tends to resist authority, and many Christians are becoming increasingly individualistic, often wishing to practice their faith independently from the community and without the church's guidance. As a result, the role of elders is becoming more challenging and requires significant wisdom. There are churches without elders, and an increasing number of people are leaving the church to pursue their faith on their own. However, is the ministry of ruling merely about exercising authority? Is the role of elders just about receiving reports, making important decisions for the church, identifying issues in the lives of congregants, correcting them with authority, or acting as representatives of the congregation, similar to a CEO in a corporation? No, it is much more than that. Many misunderstand church authority, leading to various problems. The ministry of governing should be viewed as shepherding or overseeing God's people. Just as Jesus asked Peter, "If you love me, feed my sheep," this ministry involves loving, caring for, protecting, and serving Jesus' followers. It is about actively leading them to Jesus, the true shepherd. To fulfill this calling, we must humbly serve as servants, pray earnestly with the heart of Christ, and lead with love, even to the point of personal sacrifice.

We do not allow Jesus' sheep to live without a shepherd. Therefore, the role of elders is to shepherd and oversee the community. This responsibility includes not only governance but also care. In addition to guiding the members along the right path, we are called to bear their burdens, look after them with love, and serve them humbly. The ultimate goal is to lead them to Jesus, the true shepherd. This should be achieved by resting in the words and love of Jesus Christ. Like a true shepherd, Jesus took on the burden of our sins and humbled Himself to the point of death to serve and guide us. Consequently, elders must care for Jesus' sheep diligently. They are called to lead with willingness, serving as examples of Christ to the flock. The OPC Book of Church Order outlines the ministry of elders as follows:

"Ruling elders, individually and jointly with the pastor in the session, are to lead the church in the service of Christ. They are to watch diligently over the people committed to their charge to prevent corruption of doctrine or morals. Evils which they cannot correct by private admonition they should bring to the notice of the session. They should visit the people, especially the sick, instruct the ignorant, comfort the mourning, and nourish and guard the children of the covenant. They should pray with and for the people. They should have particular concern for the doctrine and conduct of the minister of the Word and help him in his labors."

Elders must continually reflect on their calling and move forward to serve, while the congregation prays and cooperates to enable the elders to fulfill their ministry. This work cannot be accomplished by one side alone. When we consider the role of elders, we recognize their partnership as co-workers in Jesus' ministry of caring for and guiding His beloved sheep. This ensures that Jesus' sheep do not live like those without a shepherd until they reach heaven. Jesus is the only true shepherd, and He continues to fulfill

His role as the perfect shepherd. However, He allows elders to participate in His shepherding ministry. Therefore, it is inappropriate to view the office of elder as a source of worldly honor or pride. Elders should live among the congregation, caring for them alongside one another. Even if they go unrecognized, face rejection, or feel lonely at times, they should look to Jesus, volunteering wholeheartedly and joyfully in their ministry. Constant fellowship with Jesus is essential, as their strength and wisdom come from Him. How should elders carry out their ministry? Let's look at two passages. We must keep these words in mind.

3. The Life of Elders

Acts 20:28-31, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears."

1 Peter 5:1-4, "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."

First, the elders are instructed to take care of themselves. Before they can lead the congregation on behalf of Jesus, they must regularly reflect on their own lives through fellowship with Him. By engaging with the Word and through prayer, in conjunction with the love and grace they have received, they should examine themselves first. Once they have done this, they are then tasked with watching over the flock. They are encouraged to imitate Jesus by feeding, caring for, guiding, teaching, admonishing, exhorting, and correcting the congregation with love, much like a shepherd or a spiritual father. Additionally, they have the responsibility to protect the church from harmful influences, specifically from false teachings and vicious wolves. It is crucial for the elders to uphold sound doctrine and to admonish those who may believe incorrectly. This requires them to stand firm on sound teachings so that they can effectively discern and share the Word. Ultimately, they must safeguard the church and its members by ensuring adherence to the sound doctrine of the Word.

Elders are called to shepherd the flock not out of necessity or compulsion, but willingly and joyfully. Their service should not be motivated by personal gain, but rather by the desire to fulfill the pleasing will of Jesus. Therefore, there must be a sense of joy in their ministry. This joy should come from a deep enjoyment of Jesus, the true Shepherd. Even in the face of misunderstandings, rejection, and ambiguous suffering, elders are encouraged to keep their focus on Jesus. They should remember that there will be times when they feel alone, much like Jesus did. During their lowest and most challenging moments, these experiences can serve as opportunities for them to grow and become more Christ-like. Elders are to serve humbly and lead by example. To effectively carry out their responsibilities, they need to maintain constant fellowship with Jesus through prayer and engagement with the Word. They must be filled with His love and grace to care for His sheep in alignment with His heart, just as Jesus did. When elders rely solely on their own strength and wisdom, challenges will inevitably arise, leading them to feel discouraged

or overwhelmed. It is crucial for the congregation to pray for them, supporting their efforts so they can minister with joy.

Although the elders serve as shepherds who care for Jesus' sheep, it is essential to remember that Jesus is the chief shepherd. Our ministry as shepherds should lead people not to ourselves but to Jesus, the chief shepherd. Like John the Baptist, who confessed that he must decrease while Jesus increases, we too must focus on guiding the congregation toward Jesus, even if it means we become less recognized or esteemed. The question arises: until when will we continue in this ministry? Our work will persist until the chief shepherd, Jesus, returns. It is vital for church officers to remain aware of the hope in Jesus' second coming and eagerly anticipate the day they will go to heaven. When Jesus comes to take His people to heaven, the elders' shepherding ministry will come to an end. Therefore, patience is essential in the ministry of an elder. We must live our lives in a state of reflection until the very end. Additionally, we must remember the authority that God has entrusted to the session of the church, which is composed of the elders.

Matthew 16:19, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be[a] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be[b] loosed in heaven."

Matthew 18:18-20, "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

These verses tell us that authority has been granted to the church session. Roman Catholics interpret this authority as being given specifically to Peter, whom they believe was the first pope and to whom the keys to the kingdom of heaven were entrusted. However, in Matthew 18, it states that the keys to the kingdom of heaven are given to any group of two or three gathered in His name. This implies that the authority is extended to the session, as God has entrusted the keys of the kingdom to it. It is important to clarify that this does not mean the session has the power to grant or deny entry into the kingdom of heaven—only Jesus holds that authority. Instead, He fulfills this role through the gospel ministry of the church. The session is responsible for receiving church members through their confession of faith and baptism, administering discipline when necessary, and testifying to the ministry of Jesus. Thus, the authority to represent Jesus is vested in the session, and we must all recognize and remember this authority.

To become a member of the church, you must first attend membership classes with the pastor. After completing these classes, you will need to make a confession of faith in front of the church session. This confession must be confirmed to align with biblical teachings. Following this, you will be baptized and make a vow before God and the congregation to officially belong to the church. It is inappropriate for someone to claim to be a believer if they do not follow this biblical process, do not make a proper confession of faith in front of the church, and do not receive baptism. It is the responsibility of the elders to protect the church from those who do not truly believe and to ensure that the church remains focused on Jesus. Additionally, the session must care for the well-being of existing members, ensuring that their confessions of faith and practices are consistent with biblical teachings. Because of this responsibility, elders who are knowledgeable in the Word and possess discernment must be appointed to these roles.

The work that elders do is incredibly precious and important. Their responsibility is heavy, as it is challenging to care for church members spiritually while also providing loving guidance and discipline. Making decisions for the church requires discernment, ensuring that they align with what Jesus desires rather than simply catering to people's wishes. This task is not something we can accomplish through our

own strength alone; we need God's grace and wisdom. That's why it is essential for us to seek the prayers of all the saints. The office of elder is a precious gift from God to the church, demonstrating His love for us and affirming that He will not leave us as orphans until the day He returns, but will continue to care for us. Therefore, please pray that God will raise up elders who reflect Jesus. Also, pray that the session can joyfully fulfill its ministry with the cooperation and submission of the congregation.

Hebrews 13:17, "Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you."

Remember this word, Elders should work for the benefit of the souls of Jesus' followers, guiding them toward Him. Saints, in turn, should commit to supporting and submitting to the elders as co-workers, allowing them to serve with joy. Remember, this effort is for the entire church, and we give all glory to our Lord Jesus alone. We must not be discouraged; instead, let us strengthen one another and look forward to the joy and glory we will experience before Jesus on the final day. Let's faithfully fulfill the ministry of the church that has been entrusted to us according to the Word.