

“Overseer” in the Usage of Friends Lloyd Lee Wilson – Sixth Month, 2006

The noun “overseer”, and the related verbs “to oversee” and “to have oversight” have a long history of use by the Religious Society of Friends. As a people of faith who believed themselves to be living in the New Testament times themselves, their adoption of the term undoubtedly sprang from Acts 20:28, which in the King James Version reads:

“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you *overseers*, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”¹

The KJV uses “overseer” in two other places, both in the Old Testament (Genesis 39 and 2 Chronicles 2), but this is the only New Testament usage. The meaning that Friends attached to “overseer” stems from this verse, addressed by Paul to the elders at Miletus. He is leaving, never to return; the elders of the church, having been chosen by the Holy Spirit for this responsibility, should be diligent to feed the church of God for (as the passage goes on to say), there will undoubtedly be dangers of several sorts in the days and years to come. This is a meaning quite distinct from the Genesis 39 text, where Joseph is made responsible for Potiphar's household and lands, and from the 2 Chronicles example, which uses “overseers” as a name for the supervisors over the workers in Solomon's employ.

George Fox used the term “overseer” frequently in his pastoral letters, beginning as early as 1655, in pastoral letter 83, written from London:

And all you whom the Lord has made *overseers* over his church in your several places, be faithful to the Lord, and watch over the flock of Christ with all diligence; you which are strong watch over the weak, and stir up that which is pure one in another; see that all your meetings be kept in order.

In more than two dozen instances of Fox's use of “overseer” in his pastoral letters alone, he sometimes uses the term to refer to Friends with specific responsibilities in Quaker meetings, and sometimes to Christ. In letter 83, above, he is clearly referring to individuals whom the Lord has singled out for special responsibility. In pastoral letter 279, Fox names Christ as an overseer, by whom Friends are overseen:

... and so Christ, by whom the world was made, is the rest of the living that he has made alive, and is their shepherd, to feed them with life, and with the springs of life, and is the bishop of their souls, that does *oversee* them, that they do not go out of the pastures of life, and from the springs of life, nor from the fold of life. It is a glorious pasture to be fed atop of all the mountains, in the life, in the pastures of life, by the living shepherd, and to be *overseen* by the living bishop, and to be sanctified, and to be presented to God by the living priest, and to be counseled by the living counselor to an everlasting inheritance, and to a kingdom, and to a world, that has no end, by an everlasting priest that sanctifies and offers you to God without spot or wrinkle, a perfect offering, who

1 Fox refers specifically to this verse in his Pastoral Epistles 350 and 372.

sprinkles your consciences and hearts with his blood, that you may serve the living God and not the dead works among the dead.

This construction of Christ as the bishop who oversees his people is the most common usage Fox makes of the terminology in his pastoral epistles, but not the only one. He makes the point that righteous women are overseers in epistle 291, directed to women's meetings:

And if the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the believing wife, then who is the speaker, and who is the hearer? Surely such a woman is permitted to speak, and to work the works of God, and to make a member in the church; and then as an elder, to *oversee* that they walk according to the order of the gospel.

In epistle 369, addressed to all planters, and men who are emigrating to America, Fox seems to indicate that any person may have responsibilities as an overseer:

My friends, that are gone, and are going over to plant, and make outward plantations in America, keep your own plantations in your hearts, with the spirit and power of God, that your own vines and lilies be not hurt.

...

That his name may be great among the heathen, or Gentiles; and you may see over, or be *overseers* with the holy ghost, which was before the unclean ghost got into man and woman. So with this holy ghost you may see, and *oversee* that the unclean ghost and his works may be kept out of the camp of God.

When after his death in 1691 Friends published his Journal, Fox was called an Overseer himself:

Howbeit, we knowing his unwearied diligence, not sparing but spending himself in the work and service where-unto he was chosen and called of God, could not but give this short testimony of his faithfulness therein, and likewise of his tender love and care towards us; who as a tender father to children, in which capacity we stood, being so related unto him, he never failed to give us his wholesome counsel and advice. And not only so, but as a father in Christ, he took care of the whole family and household of faith, which the Lord had made him an eminent *overseer* of, and endued him with such an excellent spirit of wisdom and understanding, to propose and direct helps and advantages to the well ordering and establishing of affairs and government in the church, as now are found very serviceable thereunto, and have greatly disappointed and prevented the false, loose, and libertine spirit in some, ...²

Fox was not the only Friend using this term. In his *Discourse Of The General Rule Of Faith And Practice*, William Penn names God an overseer:

And the Gentiles themselves called it, *The Immutable Law, the Everlasting Foundation of Virtue; no Lifeless Precepts, but immortal; a Sacred Good, God the **Overseer** ; the Living Rule, the Root of the Soul, that which makes the Good Man.*

2 Fox's *Journal*, 1831 edition, page 58; Digital Quaker Collection, accessed 6/12/06

Robert Barclay, in his *Apology*, uses the term "oversee" as one of the responsibilities of those persons who are particularly called to the ministry and fitted by the Lord for that work:

XXVI. As to the first part of the objection, viz., that I seem to make no distinction betwixt the minister and people, I answer, If it be understood of a liberty to speak or prophesy by the Spirit, I say all may do that, when moved thereunto, as above is shown; but we do believe and affirm that some are more particularly called to the work of the ministry and therefore are fitted of the Lord for that purpose, whose work is more constantly and particularly to instruct, exhort, admonish, *oversee*, and watch over their brethren; and that as there is something more incumbent upon them in that respect than upon every common believer, so also, as in that relation, there is due to them from the flock such obedience and subjection as is mentioned in these testimonies of the Scripture: Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:5.

Among the earliest Friends, as can be seen from the above quotations, use of the term "overseer" was scripturally based and referred to a particular relationship with and responsibility for the faith community. Christ was the model overseer, the "heavenly bishop, to *oversee* [Friends], that [Friends] do not go astray again from God."³ This role was also at times assigned by God to chosen individual Friends ("And all you whom the Lord has made *overseers* over his church in your several places..."),⁴ and at times it was a responsibility assumed by individuals who undertook certain other tasks or responsibilities, such as the planters addressed in epistle 369 above.

Moving to 18th century North America, one finds that the term "overseer" has developed several different meanings, depending on the context in which it was being used. For example, John Woolman, noted Quaker anti-slavery activist, uses "overseer" in at least three different ways in his *Journal*; as a particular role among Friends, as the supervisor of slaves, and as the persons responsible for printing materials authored by yearly meeting members (what today might be called the yearly meeting publications committee or editorial committee). In each case, the context indicated the meaning of the word overseer:

... as I proposed a visit to only ministers, elders, and *overseers*, he named some others whom he desired might also be present.

The correction ensuing on their disobedience to *overseers*, or slothfulness in business, is often very severe, and sometimes desperate.

From the consideration I felt growing in me for some years, I wrote part the second of a work entitled "Considerations on keeping Negroes," which was printed this year, 1762. When the *overseers* of the press had done with it, they offered to get a number printed, to be paid for out of the Yearly Meeting's stock, to be given away, but I being most easy to publish it at my own expense, and offering my reasons, they appeared satisfied.

Prominent Quaker anti-slavery activists in the 19th century appear to have made very little use of the

3 Pastoral Epistle 316.

4 Pastoral Epistle 83.

word in any context. Anthony Benezet uses “overseer” only once in his 1858 book, *Views of American Slavery*, and Levi Coffin uses the term only three times in *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, published in 1876. Although it is well known that anti-slavery activism was a central issue in the separation of Indiana Yearly Meeting, Walter Edgerton's *History of the Separation in Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends*, published in 1856, uses the term only twice, and in each case it refers to the station among Friends, not to the position of supervisor of slaves.

Caroline Stephens, in the much-loved *Quaker Strongholds*, published in 1891, uses the term "overseer" with a sense of the importance of that station to the spiritual health of the monthly meeting:

With regard to weightier matters, such as strict integrity in business, sobriety, and correctness of moral conduct, etc., there is still, I hope and believe, a considerable reality of watchful care exercised through specially appointed members. In every Monthly Meeting there are Friends holding the offices of elder and *overseer*. The business of the elders is to watch over the ministers in the exercise of their gift; that of the *overseers* to see to the relief of the poorer members, the care of the sick, and other such matters; to watch over the members generally with regard to their Christian conduct, to warn privately any who may be giving cause of offence or scandal, and in case of need to bring the matter before the Monthly Meeting to be dealt with as it may require.

Henry Cadbury, in an article titled "Negro Membership in the Society of Friends" published in the *Journal of Negro History* in 1936, recounts the story of David and Grace Mapps, African Americans who were accepted into membership at Little Egg Harbor Meeting, New Jersey, in 1799. Cadbury reports that David Mapps served his meeting as member of the School Committee and as an *overseer*. It is not reported that Mapps ever lodged a complaint against the terminology.

In our own yearly meeting, overseer has continued to be used as the name given to Friends with particular responsibility for pastoral care in the monthly meeting, from the Discipline of 1869 through the present day. In the 1983 Discipline a new name was given to the Meeting of Ministers, Elders, and Overseers: the Meeting of Ministry and Oversight. As the new Discipline was being considered, however, the yearly meeting minuted that use of the old name, Ministers, Elders and Overseers, could still be used appropriately.

Conclusion: Early Friends in England drew upon scripture to use the term “overseer” to identify a particular ministry within the faith community, and succeeding generations have continued to use the word in this way for over 350 years. When Friends encountered chattel slavery in America and elsewhere, and the use of “overseer” as the name for a supervisor of slaves, they did not abandon their previous usage, but used the term in multiple meanings, depending on the context of the usage to make the intended meaning clear.

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Appendix: Examples of Usage

George Fox

Pastoral Epistle 83.

Dear friends in the eternal truth of God,
whose minds by the light of Jesus Christ are turned towards God, meet often together in the fear of the Lord, and to the light take heed, that with it all your minds may be kept up to God, from where it comes.

And in all your meetings wait low in his fear, that you may come to know the life and power of truth one in another.

And all you whom the Lord has made *overseers* over his church in your several places, be faithful to the Lord, and watch over the flock of Christ with all diligence; you which are strong watch over the weak, and stir up that which is pure one in another; see that all your meetings be kept in order.

Be faithful unto the Lord where he has set you, and you shall not lose your reward.

Servants, be faithful unto your masters, not with eye service, serving them as men pleasers, but in singleness of heart, as unto the Lord; that you may come to undo the heavy burdens; being faithful in your places, where the Lord has set you, there is your right service.

And take heed of forward minds, and of running out before your guide, for that leads out into looseness; and such plead for liberty, and run out in their wills, and bring dishonor to the Lord; and the unbridled will gets at liberty, and an exalted spirit gets up, and pride, and haughtiness, and high words.

And such are they who add to the burden, and do not take it off.

Therefore all wait low in the fear of the Lord, and be not hasty nor rash, but see the way be made clear; and as the Lord does move you, so do, and return with speed, (when you have done), to the place where you were abiding, and be faithful there; that the truth of God be not evil spoken of through you, as they speak of vagabonds and wanderers, that it may not be so among you.

Those who run before their guide are vagabonds and wanderers.

And masters rule over your servants in love, with all diligence and meekness, knowing that you have one master in heaven.

And friends, in all places, where any go abroad, as they pass by examine them, where they are going, and what are their intentions?

And if they cannot give a good account, exhort them to return back, and abide faithful in their places until they see their way made clear.

So farewell in the Lord.

The eternal God of power and wisdom direct and guide you to his eternal praise, that his name may be honored and glorified in you and through you all!

Be diligent everyone in your places, where the Lord has set you, for the work of the Lord is great; and God Almighty keep you to be faithful laborers in his work.

From one who is a lover of your souls, and whose care is over the church of God, that it may be kept in order, and that all, that are guided by his spirit, may be led into all good order.

George Fox

London, the 15th of the 3d month, 1655

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection4.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 264.

An additional extract from other of G. F.'s Epistles, both of former and latter dates, more largely speaking to things contained in the paper foregoing, with some new matters; recommended to Friends by him, (from time to time), to be taken notice of at their Quarterly and other meetings.

...

Concerning marriage

...

all things being clear, and nothing appearing to the contrary; and their fathers, and mothers, or guardians, or *overseers* being satisfied, then they may have their liberty to appoint a meeting where they please, in some public meeting-place, where their relations and Friends may be present, and there get a certificate ready drawn up, with the day of the month, place, and year, how that such a couple did take one another in the presence of God, and in the presence of his people, who had laid their said intentions so often before them; and all things being found clear, according to the law of God and the practice of the holy men, recorded in the scriptures of truth, to live together in Christian, honorable marriage, according to God's ordinance and his joining, to be help meets together as long as they live.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection11.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 279 - The substance of a General Epistle.

... and so Christ, by whom the world was made, is the rest of the living that he has made alive, and is their shepherd, to feed them with life, and with the springs of life, and is the bishop of their souls, that does *oversee* them, that they do not go out of the pastures of life, and from the springs of life, nor from the fold of life. It is a glorious pasture to be fed atop of all the mountains, in the life, in the pastures of life, by the living shepherd, and to be *overseen* by the living bishop, and to be sanctified, and to be presented to God by the living priest, and to be counseled by the living counselor to an everlasting inheritance, and to a kingdom, and to a world, that has no end, by an everlasting priest that sanctifies and offers you to God without spot or wrinkle, a perfect offering, who sprinkles your consciences and hearts with his blood, that you may serve the living God and not the dead works among the dead. And now you having an everlasting preacher, whom God has anointed to preach, and an everlasting minister, that ministers grace and life, and salvation, and truth to you; an everlasting prophet that God has raised up, who is to be heard; all the living hear him, but the dead talk but of his fame.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection12.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 291 - To all the women's meetings, that are believers in the truth.

So the elder women and mothers are to be teachers of good things, and to be teachers of the younger, and trainers up of them in virtue, in holiness, and godliness, and righteousness, in wisdom, and in the fear of the Lord, in the church of Christ.

And if the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the believing wife, then who is the speaker, and who is the hearer? Surely such a woman is permitted to speak, and to work the works of God, and to make a member in the church; and then as an elder, to *oversee* that they walk according to the order of the gospel.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection13.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 300.

... and the peace of all earthly teachers must be broken, who are made of men by natural tongues, before they come to the heavenly teacher, and the tongue of the learned indeed; and the peace of all earthly bishops and shepherds must be broken before they come unto Christ, the bishop of the soul, and heavenly *overseer*, and heavenly shepherd, who feeds with his heavenly food;

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection13.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 304.-To Friends in Virginia.

And in his name keep your men's and women's, and all your other meetings, that you may feel him in the midst of you, exercising his offices; as he is a prophet, which God has raised up to open to you, and as he is a shepherd, who has laid down his life for you, to feed you, so hear his voice; and as he is a counselor, and a commander, follow him and his counsel; and as he is a bishop to *oversee* you, with his heavenly power and spirit; and as he is a priest, who offered up himself for you, who is made higher than the heavens, (and that is higher than all the priests that are made upon the earth), who sanctifies his people, his church, and presents them to God without blemish, spot, or wrinkle: so, I say, know him in all his offices, exercising them among you, and in you.

I am glad to hear of some of your diligence, in taking that great journey to Carolina through the woods; for if you visit them sometimes, it would do well: and there is a people at that place you call New Country, as you go to Carolina, who had a great desire to see me, among whom I had a meeting. I received letters, giving me an account of the service some of you had with and among the Indian king, and his council; and if you go over again to Carolina, you may inquire of captain Batts, the old governor, with whom I left a paper to be read to the emperor, and his thirty kings under him of the Tusrowres, who were to come to treat for peace with the people of Carolina: whether he did read it to them or not, remember me to major general Benett, and colonel Dew, and the rest of the justices that were friendly and courteous to me, when I was there, and came to meetings; and tell them, that I cannot but remember their civility and moderation, when I was among them: and so the Lord redouble into your hearts, and theirs, the love and kindness which they and you showed unto me. I have been a prisoner here about these eight months, and now I am premunired, because I cannot take an oath; but the Lord's seed and power is over all, blessed be his name forever, and glory and honor to him, who is over all, and is worthy of all.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection13.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 313.

For you may see in the scripture what worship was, and what worship is; such as were not to worship idols, they were not to lift up their hands nor eyes to them, nor to fall down to them, but to worship God, and to bow down to him, and to lift up their hands and eyes to him; for all men and women must lift up their eyes, hands, hearts, and spirits to the Lord, and to bow to him, and worship him; and ought in all their meetings, that gather in the name of Jesus, to wait upon the Lord for wisdom, counsel, and understanding, that by it they may be ordered and directed in his holy service and business, in his holy church, which Christ is the holy head of, as they are directed and ordered by the Lord's power and wisdom, to praise, and magnify, and glorify him, with thanksgiving, both in your men's and women's meetings, and all other meetings, in the name of Jesus Christ, for he is in the midst of them, their prophet, priest, teacher, shepherd, bishop, and counselor, opening with his heavenly power, feeding with his heavenly food, counseling with his heavenly counsel, sanctifying them, to present them to the holy God without spot, *overseeing* them with his holy power and spirit; that God may have the praise and the glory through Jesus Christ, in all, and through all, who is blessed forever .

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection13.html>, 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 316.

So in his name keep your meetings, in whom you have salvation; and these are the true meetings, and true gatherings, who feel Jesus Christ in the midst of them, their prophet, their counselor, their leader, their light and life, their way and their truth, their shepherd, that laid down his life for them, that has bought you, his sheep, who feeds you in his pastures of life; and your heavenly bishop, to *oversee* you, that you do not go astray again from God.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection13a.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 318.

And keep your testimony for Christ, your priest, who is made higher than the heavens, who laid down his life for you, and sanctified you, and presents you to God, without spot or wrinkle; who is holy, harmless, and separate from sinners. And so keep your testimony for your heavenly spiritual bishop, Christ Jesus, who is the bishop of your souls, who does *oversee* you with his light, power, and spirit.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection13a.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 320 -An encouragement to all the faithful women's meetings in the world, who assemble together in the fear of God, for the service of the truth. Wherein they may see how the holy men encouraged the holy women, holy in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel; though selfish and unholy men may seek to discourage them. But go on in the name and power of Christ, and prosper.

But some have said, that such meetings must not be, but as business requires or occasions them. As much as to say, you must not make up the hedges till the beasts have devoured your corn; and then the parish *overseers* must meet together to compute the damage.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection13a.html>, 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 323.- To Friends in Barbados.

So serve God in the spirit, and in the newness of life, which is over the old, that the Lord God's presence may be felt among you; and his son, a prophet to open to you, and a priest to sanctify you, a bishop to *oversee* you, and a shepherd to feed you; the rock of your age, and ages, the foundation of your generation, and many generations; and who are in him, who was elected before the foundation of the world, they build upon him, who is the first and the last, the beginning and ending; in him you have all life and salvation, who is the Amen.

...

And so that all your wells of life may be kept open, and everyone have a fresh spring springing up in you; so that in every one of you the living water of life may flow; so that you all may be refreshed with the fountain of life, and feel Christ a bishop to *oversee*, and a counselor to counsel and a king to rule in you hearts, and a prophet to open, and a shepherd to feed you the heavenly food.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection14.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 349. - An epistle to be read among Friends.

... that they do gather together in below the name of Jesus. And being gathered in the name of Jesus, he is in the midst of them, the Prince of life and peace, and captain of salvation, and a prophet to open the book of conscience, and the book of the law, and prophets, and gospel, and his book of life to them, and a bishop to *oversee* them, and a heavenly shepherd to feed them in his heavenly pasture of life, and a heavenly King to rule in their hearts, and in his glorious kingdom, among them that are born again; and that see and enters into his everlasting kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the holy ghost.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection15.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 350.-To all the men and women's meetings everywhere.

And the apostle writes to Titus, 'how he had left him in Crete, that he should set in order the things that were wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as he had appointed him.' And after he had spoken many things to Titus concerning *overseers* and teachers that they must be blameless; he said, that the aged men must be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, and in patience. And the aged women likewise, "that they be in behavior, as becomes holiness, not false accusers, but to be teachers of good things; and that they teach the younger women to be sober, to love their husbands, and to love their children, and to be chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient that the word of God be not blasphemed." And likewise Titus was to exhort the young men to be sober minded. And here you may see the apostle, who did forbid one sort of women to be teachers, who were usurpers of authority, which both the law and the gospel forbids; yet the law and Christ, and the apostles in the gospel, encouraged the honorable women to preach and to teach.

...

So every man and woman is to teach, instruct, and order their own children and families, as the Jews did in the old covenant; then much more they should train them up in the new covenant, which exceeds the old; so that in all things they might give thanks and praises to God, that in all things the Lord might be glorified in all their families. So all christian families are concerned in these particular services, before they come to the general service, (to wit), to be *overseers* and ministers, faithful men as fathers, and faithful women as mothers, and teachers of good things; and the young men and women as brethren and sisters in purity.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection15.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 358.- To suffering Friends at Horsham in Sussex

Dear friends, who suffer for your testimony, and to all the rest in your county, I am glad to hear of your faithfulness, and of your standing for the church which Christ is the head of, which is in God, and are become his living members; and therefore where ever you are in prison, or out of prison, where two or three are gathered in his name, there is a church, and Christ the living head in the midst of them; a prophet, to open to his church the things of his kingdom; and a bishop, to *oversee* his living members, that they be preserved in his light, grace, truth, spirit, and gospel; and he is a shepherd to feed them with heavenly food, who gives life eternal to his sheep, which he has purchased with his own blood; and a priest who has offered up himself a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, who cleanses, and washes, and purifies his church, his people; a high priest, made higher than the heavens. Heb. 7 v26

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection16.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 360.-To suffering Friends in Leicester.

What shall separate us from the love of God that we have in Christ Jesus? Shall tribulations, persecutions, powers, or principalities thrones or dominions? No, there is nothing able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus,' whom you have chosen: a priest that is from above, not from below, who has offered up himself to God for you, who is not like the Jews' priests, that had the tithes of the people for offering up their outward offerings, and such like services. So you have a priest from heaven, that is made higher than the heavens, and is the prophet that God has raised up like Moses, whom you are to hear in his light, grace, and truth. And he is your shepherd from heaven, who has laid down his life for his sheep, who is above all the earthly shepherds below; and this shepherd will feed you with that which is heavenly. And he is your bishop from heaven, to *oversee* you, that you may be kept from sitting down in any earthly place with your minds, spirits, and souls; but only to sit down in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, who is the heavenly and spiritual bishop, who lives forevermore, the first and last, the beginning and ending who is the first-born of every creature, and the first begotten from the dead, who does quicken, and makes alive, and begets from the death, and makes them to sit together (whom he has made alive) in the heavenly places in himself.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection16.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 369 - An epistle to all planters, and men who are transporting themselves into foreign plantations in America.

My friends, that are gone, and are going over to plant, and make outward plantations in America, keep your own plantations in your hearts, with the spirit and power of God, that your own vines and lilies be not hurt. And in all places where you do outwardly live and settle, invite all the Indians, and their kings, and have meetings with them, or they with you; so that you may make inward plantations with the light and power of God, (the gospel), and the grace, and truth, and spirit of Christ; and with it you may answer the light, and truth, and spirit of God, in the Indians, their kings and people; and so by it you may make heavenly plantations in their hearts for the Lord, and so beget them to God, that they may serve and worship him, and spread his truth abroad. And so that you all may be kept warm in God's love, power, and zeal, for the honor of his name. That his name may be great among the heathen, or Gentiles; and you may see over, or be *overseers* with the holy ghost, which was before the unclean ghost got into man and woman. So with this holy ghost you may see, and *oversee* that the unclean ghost and his works may be kept out of the camp of God. So that his camp may be holy, and all the holy may come into it; and he, who is holy, may walk in the midst of you his camp, and be glorified in and among you all, who is over all, and worthy of all glory, from everlasting to everlasting, blessed and praised forevermore.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection16.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 372 -An epistle to the household of faith. (OBEDIENCE)

It is well pleasing to the Lord, children to obey their parent. And the bishops or elders, were to rule well their own houses, and to have their children in subjection, with all gravity; and likewise, the deacons were to rule their own children and their own houses well. 1 Tim. 3, v12. And likewise you may see the good report of the widows bringing up children, which followed every good work, etc. And in Titus, such as were elders or *overseers*, their children were to be faithful, not accused of riot, or unruly; and the aged women were to be of good behavior, as becomes holiness, etc. and teachers of good things; and that they teach the younger women to be sober, etc. And that the word of God be not blasphemed.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection16.html>, 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 383 - To Friends in Holland. (Amsterdam, the 14th of the 4th month, 1683.)

Neither be ashamed of Christ your shepherd, who has laid down his life for his sheep, whose voice you are to hear; who does feed his sheep, and give them life eternal, and none is able to pluck his sheep out of his hand, his power. Neither be ashamed of your high priest, who has offered up himself for you, and does sanctify you, who is a priest made higher than the heavens. Neither be you ashamed of your bishop, and the chief shepherd of your souls, to whom now you are returned by his grace and truth, who does *oversee* you with his heavenly eye, that you do not go astray from God. So in him let your faith stand, who is the author and finisher of it.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection17.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 386. - To the suffering Friends of Dantzic.

Friends,

With my love in the Lord Jesus Christ to you, who is your savior and prophet, that God has raised up for you, to hear in all things; your shepherd, that has laid down his life for you, whose voice you must hear, who will feed you in his living pastures of life, who is your priest, that offered himself for you, who sanctifies you, that he might present you to God: so is become your high priest, who is made higher than the heavens; so is a higher priest than the priesthood of Aaron, and all the priesthoods upon the earth, that are made by men below: for he is a high priest, made higher than the heavens. Heb.7, v26. And so, is the chief shepherd and bishop of your souls, to *oversee* you, that you do not go astray from God, who is your sanctuary, in whom you are preserved from the destroyer; who destroys the devil, the great destroyer, and his works, and bruises his head, and breaks his power: he, namely, Christ, is your savior; in him you have rest and peace, Salvation and life eternal.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection17.html>, 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 387.-An epistle to Friends, against pride, haughtiness, and vain customs and fashions of the world.

And therefore learn of Christ, who is meek and low in heart: for he rules in the hearts of the humble, who is king, priest, and prophet, and a shepherd to feed them, and a bishop to *oversee* them, and an everlasting Father, who begets man and woman up into the image of God, and an everlasting Prince of peace. And so all that are in true humility, are the true subjects of Christ; and all the children of pride are subject to the prince of the air, the god of the world, who is the king of pride, in whom there is no truth.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection17.html>, 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 393.

For you know there is no other way to God but by Christ Jesus; and you know, that God has raised up Christ to be a prophet in his new testament to be heard in all things; and you know, 'he opens, and none can shut, and he shuts and none can open;' and you know, that Christ is the bishop of your souls, to *oversee*, that you do not go astray from God. And you know that Christ is the true shepherd, and has laid down his life for his sheep, 'and they know his voice, and they follow him, and he gives them life eternal.' And also you know, that Christ is your high priest, made higher than the heavens, by the power of an endless life, and by him you are made a spiritual priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection18.html>, accessed 6/11/06

Pastoral Epistle 396.To Friends in Wales.

Now, all dear friends, you know your teacher and leader Christ Jesus, and you know him your high priest, that is made higher than the heavens, by the power of an endless life; by whom you are made a royal priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God by Jesus Christ. And you know there is no other way to God but by Jesus Christ; and you know that God has raised him up a prophet in the new testament, who is to be heard in all things, who opens, and no man can shut; and shuts, and no man can open. And you know that Christ is the bishop of your souls, to *oversee* you that you do not go astray from God. And you know that Christ is the true shepherd, and has laid down his life for his sheep; and is to be heard and followed; who gives unto his sheep life eternal. And so abide in him who is your life eternal and everlasting; in whom you have peace with the everlasting God. Amen.

George Fox

London, the 10th day of the 7th month, 1685.

<http://www.georgefoxwritings.com/gfsection18.html>, 6/11/06

Pamphlet written by George Fox: *Concerning the antiquity of the people of God called Quakers; their worship; their mother, new and heavenly Jerusalem; their faith, and who is the author and finisher of it; their belief, their way, their original; their hope, distinct from the hope of the hypocrite that perishes; their gospel, the true ministers, their leader and teacher, and that which gives them knowledge; their mediator, their overseer, the church of Christ's prayer, and in what is their cross, and their baptism. By G. F.*

Digital Quaker Collection, accessed 6/12/06

John Woolman

Journal of John Woolman:

The prospect of a way being open to the same degeneracy, in some parts of this newly settled land of America, in respect to our conduct towards the negroes, hath deeply bowed my mind in this journey, and though briefly to relate how these people are treated is no agreeable work, yet, after often reading over the notes I made as I travelled, I find my mind engaged to preserve them. Many of the white people in those provinces take little or no care of negro marriages; and when negroes marry after their own way, some make so little account of those marriages that with views of outward interest they often part men from their wives by selling them far asunder, which is common when estates are sold by executors at vendue. Many whose labor is heavy being followed at their business in the field by a man with a whip, hired for that purpose, have in common little else allowed but one peck of Indian corn and some salt, for one week, with a few potatoes; the potatoes they commonly raise by their labor on the first day of the week. The correction ensuing on their disobedience to *overseers*, or slothfulness in business, is often very severe, and sometimes desperate.

...

The Yearly Meeting being now over, there yet remained on my mind a secret though heavy exercise, in regard to some leading active members about Newport, who were in the practice of keeping slaves. This I mentioned to two ancient Friends who came out of the country, and proposed to them, if way opened, to have some conversation with those members. One of them and I, having consulted one of the most noted elders who had slaves, he, in a respectful manner, encouraged me to proceed to clear myself of what lay upon me. Near the beginning of the Yearly Meeting, I had had a private conference with this said elder and his wife, concerning their slaves, so that the way seemed clear to me to advise with him about the manner of proceeding. I told him I was free to have a conference with them all together in a private house; or if he thought they would take it unkind to be asked to come together, and to be spoken with in the hearing of one another, I was free to spend some time amongst them, and to visit them all in their own houses. He expressed his liking to the first proposal, not doubting their willingness to come together; and, as I proposed a visit to only ministers, elders, and *overseers*, he named some others whom he desired might also be present. A careful messenger being wanted to acquaint them in a proper manner, he offered to go to all their houses, to open the matter to them, -- and did so.

...

From the concern I felt growing in me for some years, I wrote part the second of a work entitled "Considerations on keeping Negroes," which was printed this year, 1762.

When the *overseers* of the press had done with it, they offered to get a number printed, to be paid for out of the Yearly Meeting's stock, to be given away; but I being most easy to publish it at my own expense, and offering my reasons, they appeared satisfied.

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=WooJour.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all>, accessed 6/11/06

Robert Barclay

Apology for the True Christian Divinity ...

§XXVI. As to the first part of the objection, viz., that I seem to make no distinction betwixt the minister and people, I answer, If it be understood of a liberty to speak or prophesy by the Spirit, I say all may do that, when moved thereunto, as above is shown; but we do believe and affirm that some are more particularly called to the work of the ministry and therefore are fitted of the Lord for that purpose, whose work is more constantly and particularly to instruct, exhort, admonish, *oversee*, and watch over their brethren; and that as there is something more incumbent upon them in that respect than upon every common believer, so also, as in that relation, there is due to them from the flock such obedience and subjection as is mentioned in these testimonies of the Scripture: Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:5.

...

to whom moreover the very preachers and *overseers* of the reformed church had willingly sworn fidelity;

Published on-line at: www.qhpress.org/texts/barclay/apology/front.html

William Penn

"Discourse Of The General Rule Of Faith And Practice" In *Collection of the works of William Penn*(Volume 1) , 1726 , page 592

And the Gentiles themselves called it, *The Immutable Law, the Everlasting Foundation of Virtue; no Lifeless Precepts, but immortal; a Sacred Good, God the **Overseer** ; the Living Rule, the Root of the Soul, that which makes the Good Man.*

Digital Quaker Collection, accessed 6/12/06

Caroline Stephens

Quaker Strongholds (1891), page 19:

With regard to weightier matters, such as strict integrity in business, sobriety, and correctness of moral conduct, etc., there is still, I hope and believe, a considerable reality of watchful care exercised through specially appointed members. In every Monthly Meeting there are Friends holding the offices of elder and *overseer*. The business of the elders is to watch over the ministers in the exercise of their gift; that of the *overseers* to see to the relief of the poorer members, the care of the sick, and other such matters; to watch over the members generally with regard to their Christian conduct, to warn privately any who may be giving cause of offence or scandal, and in case of need to bring the matter before the Monthly Meeting to be dealt with as it may require.

Digital Quaker Collection, accessed 6/12/06

Anthony Benezet uses the term only once in his book, "Views of American Slavery" (1858)

Levi Coffin uses the term only three times in his "Reminiscences of Levi Coffin" (1876)

Walter Edgerton, in *History of the separation in Indiana Yearly meeting of Friends*, (1856) uses the term only twice, and both referring to the station in Quaker organization, even though the separation is largely over the issue of anti-slavery activism.

Digital Quaker Collection, accessed 6/12/06

David Mapps

David and Grace Mapps were received into memberships with Friends at Little Egg Harbor Meeting, New Jersey, in the 7th month, 1799, and became very respected members of the Society. David Mapps occupation was chiefly that of mariner at Green Rank, New Jersey. He also owned a farm there from which in later life he retired and took a house in Tuckerton. Their home was well known for its hospitality. They had a few extra rooms at which visiting Friends usually stayed. David Mapps served his meeting as member of the School Committee and *overseer*. His wife died December 16, 1833, aged about 69 years. He married again in 1835, "by the help of a magistrate," but was retained in membership. The date of David's death I have not ascertained from the records. It is said to have occurred in 1835. His will at least is dated in that year.

An instance of his Quaker fidelity is narrated by a modern local historian from tradition as follows, referring to the nearby village of Batso with its iron forge (1767-1848):

The next owner of Batso was Colonel William Richards, who had served with distinction in the war and was a personal friend of George Washington. Under the management of Colonel Richards the industries of the place prospered greatly. During the war of 1812 he successfully handled several large munition contracts for the U. S. government.

An incident of that time is worth relating.

The Colonel had finished an order for 50 tons of cannon shot which were to be delivered at New York. The only vessel in the river available for this service was a 60-ton schooner, owned and managed by a colored man, named David Mapps who with a crew of his own race, traded regularly between New York and Little Egg Harbor. David was a Quaker and stuck to the tenets of his faith like brick dust to a bar of soap. Proceeding to the wharf where the schooner lay, Colonel Richards called the dusky skipper on deck.

"David," said he, "I have a freight for you, one that will pay you well."

"And what may it be" queried David.

"I want you to take a load of cannon balls to New York as soon as wind and tide will get yell there," said the Colonel.

"Did thee say cannon balls?" asked friend Mapps.

"Yes," replied the Colonel, "they are for the defense of the country and the government needs them."

"I'd like to oblige thee," was David's mild but firm rejoinder, "but I cannot carry thy devil's pills that were made to kill people."

No argument could change his decision and Colonel Richards was obliged to find other means of transportation for his devil's pills." (104)

Toward the end of 1817 the Journal of Joseph Hoag records during a visitation of meetings in South Jersey: "We had a satisfactory meeting at The Bank, where we staid the night with David Mapes, a coloured man who is a respectable Friend." (105)

Above taken from "Negro Membership in the Society of Friends" by Henry Cadbury, in *Journal of Negro History*, 21, (1936) pp 151-213. This document is on [The Quaker Writings Home Page](#).

<http://www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qwhp/hcjnh2.htm>, accessed 6/11/06

Scripture

KJV Genesis 39:1-4

1. And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him of the hands of the Ishmeelites, which had brought him down thither.
2. And the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.
3. And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand.
4. And Joseph found grace in his sight, and he served him: and he made him *overseer* over his house, and all that he had he put into his hand.

KJV 2 Chronicles 2:17-18

- 17 And Solomon numbered all the strangers that were in the land of Israel, after the numbering wherewith David his father had numbered them; and they were found an hundred and fifty thousand and three thousand and six hundred.
- 18 And he set threescore and ten thousand of them to be bearers of burdens, and fourscore thousand to be hewers in the mountain, and three thousand and six hundred *overseers* to set the people a work.

KJV Acts 20:17-28

17. And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church.
18. And when they were come to him, he said unto them, Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons,
19. Serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews:
20. And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house,
21. Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.
22. And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there:
23. Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me.
24. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.
25. And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more.
26. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men.
27. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.
28. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you *overseers*, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.