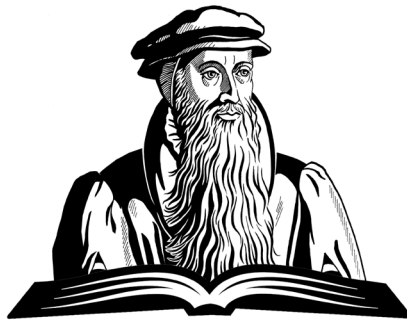


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

Biblical Eldership

by Rev. Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture #1
Introduction



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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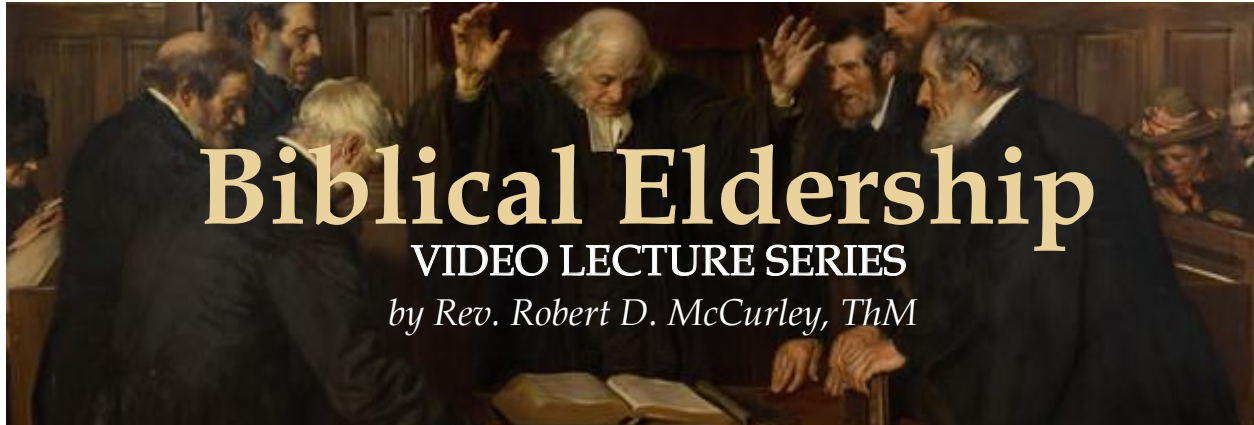
Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Authorized King James Version.

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Cover image: "The Ordination of Elders in a Scottish Kirk," 1891, John Henry Lorimer



1. Introduction

2. The Office

3. Qualifications

4. More Qualifications

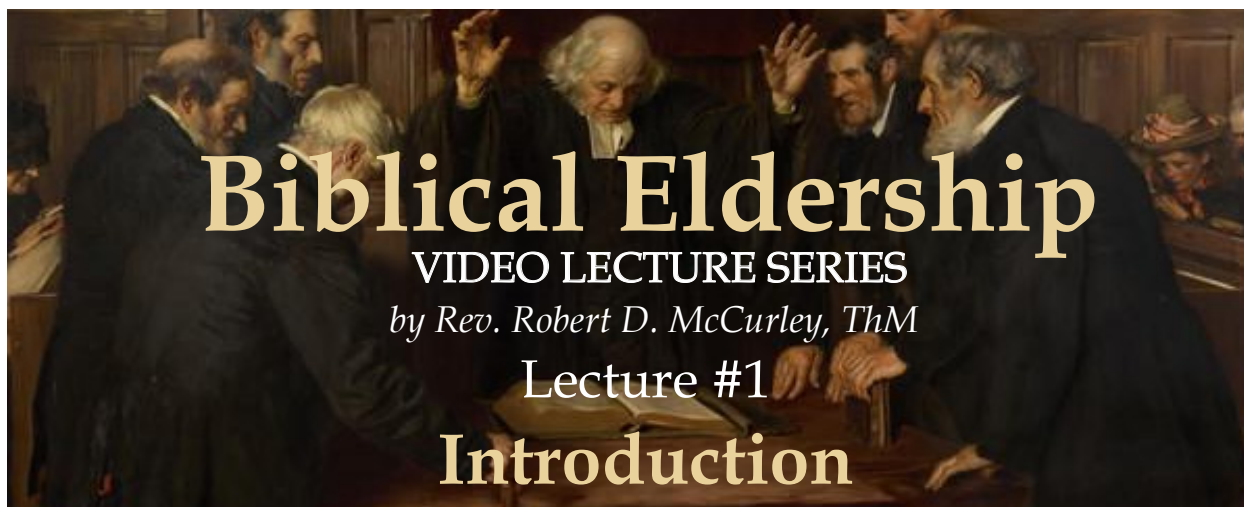
5. Doctrine

6. Shepherding

7.

8.

9.



Throughout history, great institutions have come and gone. We read of the rise and fall of one great nation after another. When they rise to their height of power, they seem invincible, even as if they will remain forever. But then they fall and disappear from the earth, only to be read about in history books. We could say the same about wildly successful businesses and companies, as well as powerful and influential families with international influence and connections. They all follow the same course. Only one kingdom remains truly permanent and indestructible. Only one institution endures through all the ages, while everything else withers and dies, and that is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said himself, in Matthew 16:18, “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” It endures throughout time and all of eternity. God reveals that the church is *the* central institution in the world, in history, and therefore, in our own understanding.

One important component in the design of Christ’s church was his appointment of church government and church officers, including men to serve as his representatives, and as helpers to the edification of his people. That includes Elders, which is the subject of these lectures. An Elder is an extremely high calling. A man can have advanced academic degrees in science, or hold political office, or serve as a CEO¹ of a giant corporation, but being an Elder is a far higher calling. Why?—because it is devoted to what matters most, and what lasts forever. Well, what exactly is it that endures forever in both time and eternity?—well, three things: the kingdom of Christ, the Word of God, and the souls of men. Elders pour the investment of their lives into precisely these three things. This is a truly glorious calling, and this should increase our excitement about all that we will explore in these lectures.

In this module, or course, we are concentrating our attention on the New Testament office of Elder. In the opening two lectures, we will consider the biblical foundations underneath the office of Eldership. In the middle lectures, we will explore what the Bible teaches about who an Elder is—the Elder’s qualifications, his doctrine, and his role, and related matters. In the final lectures, we’ll consider what an Elder does—the practical outworking of his responsibilities in the life of the church. Now while it may be tempting to move immediately to the practical matters, we will not profit from that instruction without understanding the biblical weight that lies behind it. We need the whole counsel of God, and the scriptural principles behind the Eldership to inform and influence a right understanding of the Eldership. Their function must flow from God’s design.

1. CEO stands for Chief Executive Officer.

In this lecture, we begin by exploring the biblical truth that the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a kingdom. We will consider her King, the kingdom itself, and the government of that kingdom. This is fundamental to a right understanding of the place and pursuits of an Elder within Christ's design of his church.

And so we begin, first of all, with the King. We learn throughout our reading of Scripture that God's plan of redemption in history reveals his intention to save a people for himself, as a means of displaying his own glory. He has erected a kingdom in the world that serves as the habitation of God. So that is essential to our understanding some of the salient features of how God designed the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. So you open your Bible, and the book of Acts provides us with God's inspired record of the early history of the church. And the New Testament epistles supply details of God's instructions about the life and function of the church under the New Testament. But beginning with the Old Testament, remember that at the heart of the promise to King David were three things: a mediator from the seed of David, the covenant of grace establishing the bond of God, and a kingdom representing God's throne and reign. Well, in the Old Testament period of the divided kingdom, we read of one king, after another, after another, after another. And each time, we're forced to conclude, he's not the one; he's not the great king that is promised. Another and greater king is still coming. In other words, we are left waiting and looking, until at last, Christ appears in the pages of the New Testament, as the true and ultimate heir to David's throne. Christ is the only King who is truly after God's own heart, because he is the divine Messiah. He would succeed in bringing about God's dominion, where Adam originally failed, and all the kings of Israel failed. We see this in the ascension of Christ foretold in Daniel 7, verses 13 and 14, where it says, "I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed." Jesus applies this text to himself in the Gospels. Earlier, in Daniel 2, God describes the kingdom of Christ in a dream to Nebuchadnezzar. We read in Daniel 2, verse 44, "And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever." These texts in Daniel 2 and Daniel 7 stand behind Christ's great commission, wherein he calls us to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, and to disciple the nations, in Matthew 28, verses 18 to 20.

Well, this Old Testament history supplies the background for the theme of the kingdom in the New Testament. Christ's kingdom excels all others, because Christ the King excels all others. He is the King of kings. His kingdom will extend throughout the earth. We read, in Revelation 11, verse 15, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever." You read of the ultimate success of the gospel among the nations and the description of heaven, in Revelation 21:24, where it says, "And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it." So Solomon's original prayer remains the heart cry of every true Christian—1 Kings 8, verse 60, "That all the people of the earth may know that the LORD is God, and that there is none else." And Psalm 67 remains our constant song. Well, this sets before us the preeminence of Jesus Christ—he is the King. At the center of the nature of the church is the New Testament doctrine concerning the headship of Jesus Christ. We read about this in Colossians 1, verse 18; Colossians 2, verse 10; Ephesians 4, verse 15; Ephesians 5, verses 23 and 24; and elsewhere.

The head of the church is not the Pope of Rome, who is a usurper and enemy of Christ. Nor is any earthly monarch, or president, or any other civil magistrate the head of the church. Christ is the only King and Head of the church, and all authority and power belongs to him. All that we are to believe and do regarding doctrine, and worship, church government, and the Christian life, must be derived from his authority alone, communicated to us in his Word.

So first of all, we see that Christ alone is the King of glory, and the only Head of his church. Our eyes must always be fixed upon him, our ears must always be attentive to his words, if our feet are ever to be directed into his ways. This is our fundamental starting point in understanding the Eldership.

So first of all, we have the King. Secondly, we have the kingdom. A king presupposes a kingdom over which the king reigns. Well, what exactly is that kingdom? It is Christ's church. We read of the fruit of the gospel, in Colossians 1, verse 13, "[God] hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son." Christ is erecting a kingdom in this world for his own name and glory. Jesus himself calls his church "the kingdom of God," in Mark 4, verses 26 and 30, for example. It is also called "the kingdom of Christ" (Ephesians 5:5). It's called "the kingdom of heaven," Matthew 13, in several places. Paul says that this the kingdom that Christ will deliver up to his Father at the end of time. First Corinthians 15, verse 24 says, "Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power." This is why the opening of *Westminster Confession*, chapter 25, paragraph 2, defines the visible church as, "The kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation."

Well, we need to define then the distinction between the invisible and the visible church, which is an important point of theological terminology. We're not talking about two different churches—there's only one church. Rather, we are looking at the one church from two different angles. The invisible church is all of the elect for all of time. The visible church is all professing believers and their children, to whom are given the ministry, and oracles, and ordinances of God. While all within the visible church enjoy precious privileges, not all are necessarily born-again. We see this distinction throughout both the Old and New Testaments. For example, Romans 2, verses 28 and 29, "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God."

Well, to his visible church Christ gave officers, and ordinances, and sacred institutions for the gathering and joining together of the saints. Ephesians 4, verses 12 to 15, teaches us that Christ gave all of this "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ."

God's purposes in history center on the redemption of a people for himself. God provided his Son as the foundation upon which the church is built, so that it might serve as the habitation of God. We sing about this, in Psalm 118, verses 22 and 23, "The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes." We read of the fulfillment of this, in Ephesians 2, verses 20 to 22, "And are built upon the foundation

of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.” So God dwells in his church, and he manifests his presence there. First Corinthians 14, verses 24 to 25, describes the experience of an unbelieving visitor to the public worship of God. It says, “There come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.” The church—Christ’s kingdom—exists for the display of Christ’s glory—Colossians 1:18, “And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.” We cannot abandon the biblical doctrine of the church or what the Bible teaches about church government without impugning Christ’s honor.

Well, all of this makes crystal clear that the church is not a practical human convention. It is not just a practical way of organizing God’s people in fellowship. It is the divine institution established by God for the advance of his cause, and the display of his glory in the world. And he has blessed that. We read in places like Acts 2, verse 47, “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” Consequently, the Bible does not permit believers to jettison, or detach themselves from his visible and divinely-appointed church. *The Belgic Confession*, Article 28, says this rather pointedly. It says, “We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God hath given them.”

Well, we have a King, we have a kingdom. Thirdly, we have the government of the kingdom. Just as a king presupposes a kingdom, so too, a kingdom presupposes a government of that kingdom. Christ provides divinely-appointed church government in the Scriptures. God has appointed different structures of authority in the world, each with its own symbol of authority. So you have the state, and it has the symbol of the sword. You have the church, and it is given the symbol of the keys—the keys of the kingdom; and the family and its family government, you have the symbol of the rod for discipline. Well, we’re concerned in this lecture with the government of his church. And just as with the ordinances of worship, so too, the structure and organization of the church is not left open to human innovation and creativity. It is unlawful for us to create such, or to add or subtract from what he has sanctioned. This appointment remains Christ’s prerogative alone. As Head and King of the church, Christ has prescribed a specific church government, and we are not free to depart from his appointment. Rather, we can only receive what he sanctions, and obey what he commands. All of the authority lies with Christ.

This can be seen in considering what the Bible says about the authority of the church, and church power itself. Think about it—the source of authority is Christ alone, as the Head of the church. The standard of authority is the Scripture alone, not the church or its traditions. So then, what power does the church have? That is to say, what power can officers in the government of Christ’s kingdom exert, in the exercise of their responsibility? Well, in brief, the Bible tells us a handful of things about the nature of church power.

It tells us, first of all, that it is declarative, not legislative. And so, by declarative, we mean that the church is able to come and say, “Thus saith the Lord.” The church is to uphold God’s Word.

The church does not have legislative power. It cannot fabricate new laws or new ordinances of worship, or new doctrines, or new rules that we are to follow. It merely has to declare what God has said.

Secondly, it is also ministerial, not magisterial. By ministerial, we mean it is given for service—it's given for serving the flock. It's not magisterial, it's not given to lord it over God's flock. So Peter makes this clear in the opening verses of 1 Peter 5, where it says we're not to lord over God's heritage.

Thirdly, this power is spiritual, not physical. So it pertains to matters that relate to the soul, and so on. It is given the keys of the kingdom, which exercise spiritual power, but not the sword, for example, which applies to the body—things like capital punishment and things like that, that godly states should uphold.

Fourthly, it is judicial or disciplinary. So it includes this element of exercising discipline within the appointed ordinances that God has given. We'll come to that in a future lecture.

Lastly, it is not discretionary—church power is not discretionary. The church is to consult the Scripture. It is not left to freedom of choice or judgment in matters of faith and doctrine.

Well, within these parameters, the exercise of church authority under Christ reflects real power. It is the power of Christ mediated through the representatives Christ has ordained to serve him. Jesus says, in Matthew 16, verse 19, “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” It is, however, a derived power from Christ, not inherent power residing in the church itself or its officers.

Well, all of this brings us to the question of what Christ the Head appointed and sanctioned for church government. He has ordained a specific church government for his people, through which his authority is exercised. We see that we are obligated to submit and follow the pattern he has instituted in the Scriptures. So the question, of course, then comes: What does the pattern include? What has he appointed or sanctioned? What is the church government that is given to us in the Holy Scriptures? Well, in the next lecture, we'll begin to answer these kinds of questions, by turning our attention to some of the details of the government of Christ's church, including the offices that he has prescribed or appointed. Part of that divine pattern includes Christ's appointment of Elders in his church.

But in this opening lecture, we've established that the church is Christ's kingdom. In starting here, we begin by putting Christ first, and giving him all the preeminence that belongs to him. We cannot do otherwise. He truly is the only Head and King of the church. And everything else about the church begins with him and flows from him.