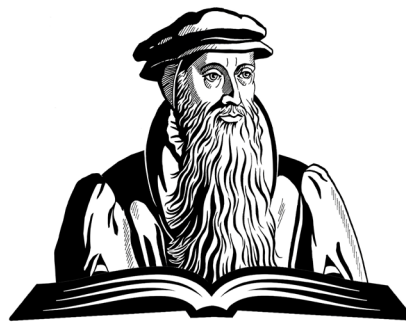


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

Biblical Eldership

by Rev. Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture #2 The Office



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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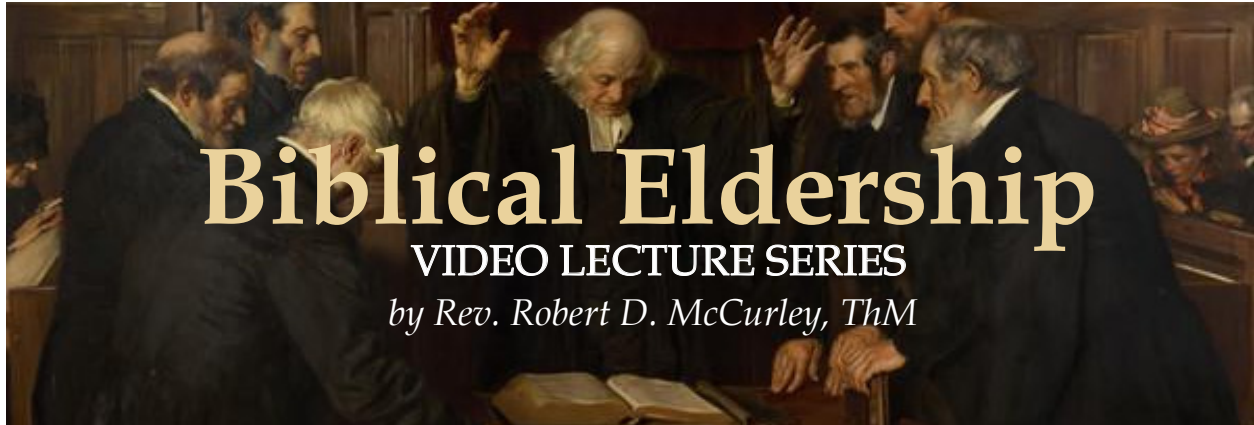
Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Authorized King James Version.

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



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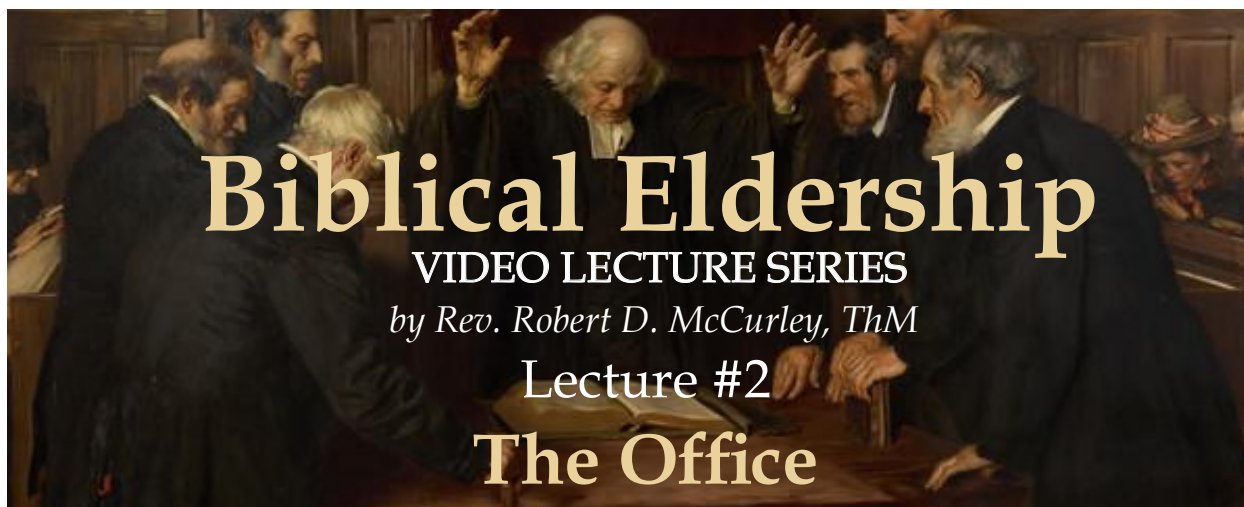
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Most people enjoy stories of powerful kings, beautiful castles, and vast kingdoms. We find awe-inspiring the accounts of heroism of knights and generals, and victories and defeats. And it is intriguing to trace the tangled path associated with the rise and fall of these great men. But Christians know that the great men of this world are not the main focus of history. History is God's story, and he has placed at the center of his story his King and his kingdom. That means that men, both great and small men, are measured by their attachment to Christ, and service to his interests. Psalm 2 speaks about the "kings of the earth" setting themselves, rulers taking counsel "against the LORD, and against his anointed" (verse 2). But God answers them, "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion" (verse 6). And all men are called to "Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (verse 11).

Those who come by saving faith to Christ are enlisted as good soldiers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Within the Lord's spiritual army, he has assigned different roles within the ranks. That includes officers in his church, who are called upon to advance the interest of Christ, by serving the edification of precious souls. This lies at the center of what matters most. Everything in the world ultimately revolves around the advance of Christ's glorious kingdom, through the unfolding of God's plan of redemption. Everything in history serves God's gospel purpose.

In this module, or course, we are considering what the Bible teaches about the New Testament office of Elder. In the opening two lectures, we're exploring the biblical foundations that are underneath the office of the eldership. In the remaining lectures, we'll delve into the details of the calling, function, and practical outworking of what it means to be an Elder. In the previous lecture, we learned that Christ is King of his church. His church is the realm of his redemptive kingdom, and he has divinely appointed a government for the church in his Word. In this lecture, we narrow our scope to consider the citizenry of this kingdom, and the offices he prescribed to serve and lead that citizenry. And so we'll begin first of all, with the citizens of the kingdom.

Elders are called to serve souls. So the church must be comprised of people over whom the Elders exercise oversight, shepherding, and governance. The necessity of membership in the church flows from what we have seen about the nature of the church. Some have insisted that church membership is nothing more than an extra-biblical invention, without any warrant in the Word of God; or that at the very least, the use of a communion role or membership role is a pragmatic concession that can be ignored. But as we will see, being a Christian in the Scriptures includes

admission into a visible body, with the ministry, doctrine, ordinances, discipline, organization, and authority entrusted to it by God. Consider the biblical warrant that we find in Acts and the epistles. I will mention numerous passages of Scripture, which I strongly encourage you to write down and look up. It's important that our consciences are grounded in the Scriptures themselves.

First of all, we see that members of the church were baptized and added to a local, visible church, and required to be committed to it. We see that in Acts 2, verse 41 and verse 47. We see it in Acts 4, verse 4; chapter 6, verse 1 and verse 7; chapter 16, verse 5; 1 Timothy 5, verse 9; and we could go on. And of course, there were others at the time who refused to join the church. We see that in Acts 5, verse 13. A public profession of faith was mandatory. Jesus made that clear already in Matthew 10, verses 32 and 33.

Secondly, the members of the church could be numbered, or counted, and were thus visible and distinct. Now, whether they're counted on paper or counted on fingers doesn't matter. But we see that they were counted: Acts 1, verse 15; Acts 4, verse 4.

Thirdly, there was a repeated New Testament distinction between those who were outside, from those who were inside. Think of Colossians 4, verse 5. So mere attendance at the public assembly did not qualify, because the apostles even made the distinction in those gatherings. I mean, you think of 1 Corinthians 14, verse 23, it speaks about those coming into the worship who were from outside. The Bible also speaks about the household of faith, as distinguished from the world, in Galatians 6, verse 10. And membership in a household is obviously basic to the whole concept.

Fourthly, there was a distinction between those who were under the rule and oversight of the Elders who were responsible to know and care for them. Elders did not have authority over any and all persons, but over a select group of people—so Hebrews 13, verse 7 and verses 17 and 18; 1 Corinthians 16, verse 16; and a whole string of other passages. Think, for example, in 1 Peter chapter 5, verse 3: *klerōs*, the Greek word, means “assigned by lot.” So there were people that were assigned by lot to their Elders. Acts 20, verses 28 and 29. Paul's speaking there to the Ephesian Elders, and he speaks about taking heed to the flock, and that means, in that passage, knowing whether one of the flock is attacked by wolves or not. Hebrews 13:7 shows that Elders are held accountable for specific saints entrusted to their oversight.

Fifthly, church discipline involved being taken away from among you, to use the language of 1 Corinthians 5, verse 2—you see the same thing in Matthew 18—which would be impossible if there was no distinct membership from which to be taken away. Those who repented could also be reinstated, as you see in 2 Corinthians 2, verses 6 and 7.

Sixthly, members travelling to areas where they would be unknown were given letters of reference and commendation. You see that in Acts 18; you see it in Romans 16; 2 Corinthians 3 and 8; Philemon; 3 John; 1 Corinthians; and it goes on and on.

Seventhly, the biblical titles for the church would not make sense without membership in Christ's visible church. Think of the language of the church being a house, or a body, or a building, or a family, a kingdom, a city, a flock, branches that are a part of a tree, a community, and so on.

Eighthly, the church has a responsibility to verify or falsify the credibility of a person's claims to be a Christian. After all, the man in 1 Corinthians 5 still thought of himself as a Christian. You see similar things in the writings of John, in 1 John 1, verses 5 to 10; and chapter 2, verses 9 and 10.

Lastly under this point, we stated in the previous lecture that the church consists of professing Christians and their children. This truth flows from the household principle that you'll observe throughout the Old Testament and into the New Testament. God deals with his people as households. And so, you have Noah, who was a preacher of righteousness and a man of faith—

he and his household are brought into the ark. That's early in the book of Genesis. But then you go through—Abraham, who's given blessings as a believer and privileges that are given to his household, his children, and so on. We could march all the way through the Bible and observe this household principle. You'll notice, for example, the reference to household baptisms in the New Testament. About one quarter of the baptisms mentioned were household baptisms, paralleling the pattern of circumcision in the Old Testament. Both baptism and circumcision share the same significance and meaning, which includes, among other things, incorporation into the visible people of God. Both are a sign and seal of the covenant of grace which accompany the promise of believers and their children. Just as the Lord's Supper replaces the Passover, so baptism replaces circumcision. Neither circumcision or baptism presume that the child is regenerated, but they seal the promise and reflect the substantial privileges of membership in the visible church. A thorough exposition of the biblical doctrine of infant baptism, of course, is beyond the scope and time we have in this lecture. But the point—the point we need to understand—is that the children of those in the congregation are also members of the visible church, as baptized members of the congregation. As *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 25, paragraph 2, says, “The visible church”—and it goes on—“consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, and of their children.” And so, we're thinking about the citizens of the kingdom, or the members of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we can then turn our attention to the officers. So the word “officers” refers to those who occupy a divinely-appointed position of authority, trust, and service within the church. Christ ordained church offices so that, in the words of 1 Timothy 3, verse 15, “Thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” Well, in this module, we're focusing on the office of ruling Elder. After the expiration of the offices of apostles and prophets, the Lord appointed three primary offices, to continue until the end of the age. The first was that of ministers—gospel ministers or pastors. Christ calls ministers to the primary responsibility of preaching and teaching, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Their office includes the responsibilities of an Elder, who share with the ruling Elders the responsibility of government, shepherding, and overseeing the flock. Peter, who was an apostle, as well as a minister, also still referred to himself as an Elder. You can look at 1 Peter 5, verse 1 and following. But the minister also has a distinct calling, ordination, and gifts connected to the ministry of the Word. First Timothy 5, verse 17, says, “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.” So you have this class of Eldership, which includes both ruling Elders and the office of the gospel ministry. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question #158 says, “By whom is the word of God to be preached?” The Answer is, “The word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office.” You can see that in Romans 10, verse 14 and 15; Ephesians 4, verses 11 and following; 2 Corinthians 5, verse 20; and other places. So that's the first office, the gospel ministry or pastors.

The second is the ruling Elders, and here we will only touch on a simple overview, because the remainder of this module will be devoted to discussing the details of the office of ruling Elder. But Christ calls ruling Elders to serve as overseers in shepherding the flock of God. We see this in 1 Timothy 3, verse 5; the passage we just mentioned in chapter 5, verse 17; 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 12; Hebrews 13, verse 7; verse 17; verse 24. And you'll notice something here. And this is important, if you're studying the Scripture carefully. There are two terms. There is the term in Greek, *episkopos*, which is the term for “overseer,” sometimes translated “bishop;” and there is

the Greek term, *presbyteros*, which is the term for “Elder.” And you’ll see that these two—overseers and elders—don’t refer to two separate offices, but are synonymous for the same office. You say, well, how do we know that for sure? The answer is, because they are used interchangeably in the New Testament. So an example would be Titus 1, verses 5 to 7. There, Titus is appointing Elders in Crete, and they’re also described as overseers. Or, you can think of Acts 20. There’s Paul, when he comes to meet with the Ephesian elders, he calls them together—verse 17—as Elders, but then in verse 28, he refers to them as overseers. And so, the same people are given two different titles. We can give other examples of this, but you’ll notice the point, that Elders are both called bishop or overseer, as well as Elders. And Elders have responsibility for shepherding, for oversight, for rule, for governance, as watchman, providing protection, care, feeding, and consoling the Lord’s people.

Both minister and Elders serve with complete equality. So there’s no hierarchy in matters related to governing, ruling, and overseeing the flock—1 Peter 5 makes that clear. So collectively, as a body, pastors and Elders, who are all within the class of Elders, they have authority to exercise church discipline—1 Timothy 5, verse 20; and to resolve conflicts—you see that in Acts 15. They do so in the authority of Christ, an authority that is for edification, as 2 Corinthians 10, verse 8 says, “For though I should boast somewhat more of our authority, which the Lord hath given us for edification, and not for your destruction, I should not be ashamed.” And so it includes the exercise of real authority for the eternal good of souls. Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.”

So we have the office of the gospel ministry, we have the office of ruling Elder. Thirdly, we have the office of deacons. These were appointed for the purpose of tending to the practical works of mercy and compassion. You’ll see how they come into existence in Acts 6, verses 1 and following, and you’ll see more about them in 1 Timothy 3, verses 8 to 13; and references in places like Philippians 1:1, and elsewhere. Well, these responsibilities would include the physical, material, and financial care of widows, orphans, and others in need within the church. In tending to these practical needs, they thereby free the Elders to focus their attention on spiritual needs.

In all three offices, like all positions of authority, they are given for the sake and benefit of those committed to their care, and not for the benefit of themselves—not for self interest. Again, Peter is really pressing this very point when he writes, in 1 Peter 5, verse 1 and following. Well, this places the proper biblical emphasis on being servants of the people. So we can distinguish biblically between Scriptural authority and authoritarianism. So biblical authority would be positions of authority that God gives for the benefit of those who are under the authority. Authoritarianism can be defined in at least two ways. 1) It oversteps the parameters God has given for it. So all authority is derived—it’s not inherited. God’s the one with ultimate authority, and he draws the circle—the parameters for how that authority is to be exercised. When we exceed those parameters, it’s no longer a biblical use of authority, but it’s authoritarianism. 2) The other thing that makes authoritarianism distinctive is that it is not viewed in terms of service. So you think, magistrates are to serve the people—Romans 13. We have seen the same with regards to Elders. You see the same with regards to husbands, and fathers. They’re to serve and care for the people under them. Their authority is not for themselves, but for the benefit and privileges of those under them. So when a person uses their authority for themselves, their own interests, and their own rights and way, they are now transgressing God’s law, and they’re exercising authoritarianism, rather than biblical authority.

Well, another thing that we need to touch on is that no one has the right to take upon himself an office. So a man can't appoint himself to office in the church. This comes out in reference to Old Testament, even to Christ in Hebrews 5, verse 4. We see it in John 3, verse 27; Romans 10, verse 14 and following—how can they go, unless they've been sent by the Lord?—and places like 2 Corinthians 10, verse 14; chapter 11, verse 12 and following.

So there are two biblical principles that must both be applied and upheld in the election and ordination of officers in the church. So we've said, men can't appoint themselves. Well, how does it happen then? What has God said in his Word? First of all, men are to be examined by those who will ordain them. In 2 Timothy 2, verse 2, it speaks about having received, we're to commit that unto faithful men. Or you think of 1 Timothy 3, verse 7; verse 10; chapter 5, verse 22; and elsewhere. So existing Elders are responsible to protect the flock from false teachers and false leaders. And so, as a consequence, those men need to be tested, they need to be examined. Paul tells the Ephesians elders that in Acts 20, verses 28 and 31; 2 John 10 says the same thing. And so there must be qualifications of piety and doctrine that God has prescribed, and it's necessary for the other Elders to assess whether those qualifications of piety and doctrine are met. And we'll be considering those qualifications in a couple of lectures to follow.

So the first principle is that men must be tested, examined, and proved by Elders. Secondly, men must be selected by popular election among the members of the congregation. You see this in Acts 1, and Acts 6, and Acts 14, verse 23. In other words, no officer can be forced upon a congregation without their consent. You can't have a ruling body of Elders who say, "Well, we're going to make this man Elder," and then just force him on the people, no. The members must see his gifts, and desire for the man to serve them in this capacity. So both of these biblical principles have to be upheld. The Lord uses both of these means: both the overseeing body and the members to guide the commission of men into office.

Furthermore, we should remember, in terms of the structures of government, that there is a privilege of appeal to higher assemblies of Elders, and a right of government by them. So, you have a local body of Elders, and a problem arises that can be appealed to a larger body of Elders. You see that happening in Acts 15—that's what's taking place there. So at the local level, you have what we call a "session" or "consistory"—those are the Elders in a local congregation. But then beyond that you can have what we call a "presbytery" or a "classis." And this is Elders made up of numerous sessions in a given geographical location, who work together in overseeing the flock. And then, above that you can have a "synod" or a "general assembly," and this would include all the Elders from all the presbyteries or classis in a given denomination.

Well, what do we see here? We see how the Lord is putting the pieces together. There are people that gathered together that comprise a congregation—there's a constituency, a citizenry, membership within the church that has to exist first. And then the Lord has appointed in the divinely-ordained government of his church officers—ministers, elders, and deacons—to serve his people in ways that are edifying. We're focused in this course, of course, on the office of ruling Elder.

So in this lecture, we've considered the biblical warrant for membership, the biblical warrant for officers in the church of Christ. Now that we've laid some foundational truths, we must go on to explore what the Scriptures teach about the Elder's calling, function, and practical responsibilities. So in the next lecture, we'll turn our attention to the biblical qualifications for the office of ruling Elder, and we'll consider that over two lectures. What godly character and spiritual gifts does God require for a man to be called to serve in this office of Elder?