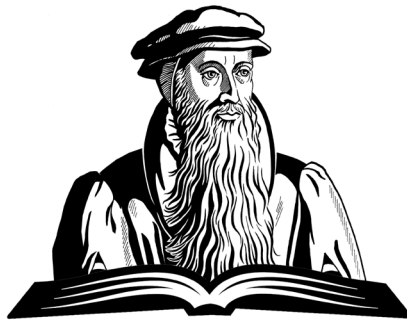


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

Biblical Eldership

by Rev. Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture #5
Doctrine



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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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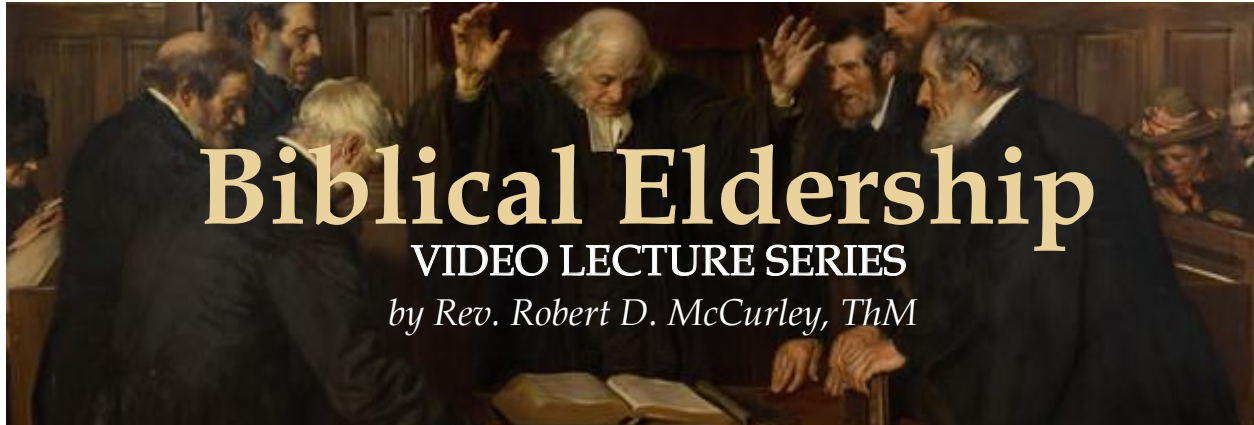
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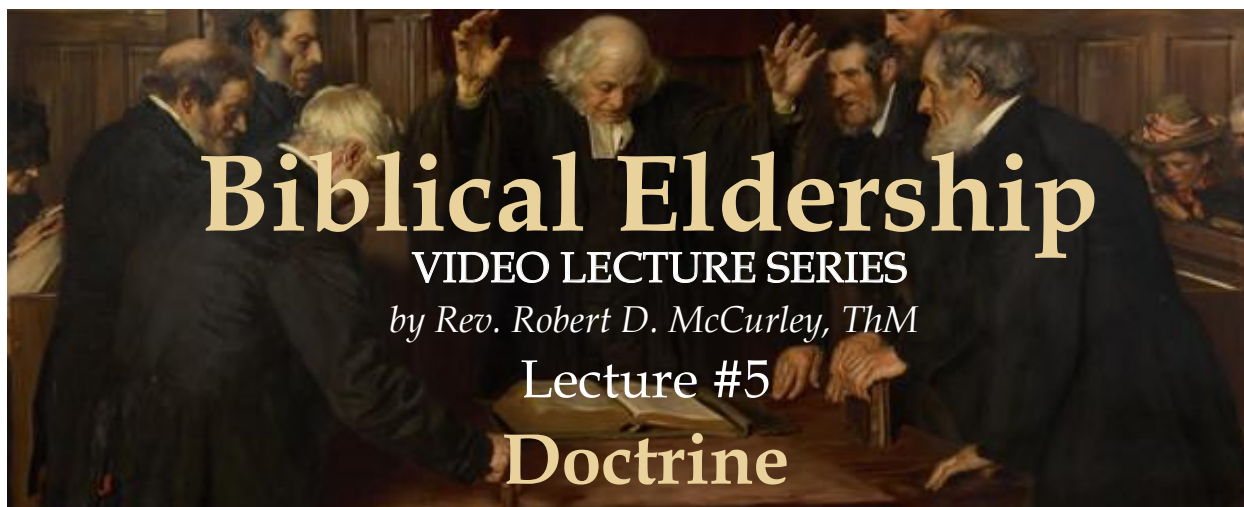
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Cover image: "The Ordination of Elders in a Scottish Kirk," 1891, John Henry Lorimer



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Biblical Eldership

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Lecture #5

Doctrine

As we cast our eye over the landscape of the world, we discover places where the church once thrived, but are now devoid of any gospel witness. Some of the places mentioned in the New Testament illustrate this reality. Paul, Timothy, Apollos and others served a vibrant church at Ephesus, but now that location represents a spiritual wasteland. In other parts of the world, the landscape is littered with churches still, churches that once bore a bright witness to the gospel, but now, though the churches still exist, they have long since abandoned the truth of Scripture in their pulpits. They're a hollow shell of their former glory.

In the opening of the book of Revelation, Christ calls his churches “candlesticks,” and tells us that he himself walks among them. He is present in the assembly of his people. The church functions as a light set upon a hill shining amid a dark world. But the light of a church can go out. Christ can remove the lampstand, the candlestick, of which he warns us in Revelation 2 and 3. Places that formerly knew the presence of the Lord can have “Ichabod,” which means, “the Lord has departed,” written over their door. Well, history testifies to this danger. The pressing question is, why does this happen? How do godly churches become places where the gospel and truths of Scripture are no longer believed, loved, and preached? In many cases, the answer is actually quite simple. Men, specifically Elders in the church, failed to keep their promises. Well, what do I mean by that?

Historically, in Presbyterian and Reformed churches, when Christ sets apart Elders to serve in his church—they're elected by the congregation, and ordained, and installed—upon entrance into their office, they pledge themselves by vows to uphold the whole biblical doctrine contained in the confessions and catechisms of that church. They are bound by God and conscience to assert, defend, and maintain these precious truths of Scripture. But pressures arise, so to modify and adjust their commitments. New ideas emerge claiming fresh insight and new light that call for abandoning adherence to former truths. Men begin to loosen their grip on old truths, in favor of the trends currently in vogue. The change takes place in their mind before it is manifest in their mouth. Silence ensues. Old truths remain in the vows, but men stop proclaiming them. Then they start contradicting them. Finally, they abandon them altogether. They entered the eldership with one set of vows, and while in office, they broke their promises and betrayed the trust given to them. Well, what does this teach us? It underlines the importance of biblical doctrine, and specifically what an Elder believes and teaches. Elders must be men who hold to sound doctrine, sound biblical

doctrine, with an unwavering devotion.

In this module, we are considering, as you know, what the Bible teaches about the New Testament office of Ruling Elder. In the third and fourth lectures, we addressed the biblical qualifications that the Lord requires in men who are called to serve as Elders. In this lecture, we continue our focus on the office of Ruling Elder itself, exploring what the Bible teaches regarding an Elder's doctrine.

So first of all, *Holding Fast to Sound Doctrine* . The Bible speaks directly to an Elder's doctrine in connections with their qualifications. In a lengthy section from Titus chapter 1, verse 9 through chapter 2, verse 1. Paul says, in Titus 1, verses 9 to 11, "Holding fast the faithful word that he"—that is, the Elder—"has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake." Notice that it speaks first of "Holding fast the faithful word." Paul himself, an example of a godly Elder, could say at the end of his life and ministry, that he had "fought a good fight" and "kept the faith"—2 Timothy 4:7. He preserved and maintained the truth. "Holding fast" means holding on for dear life with all of our force and strength. If a father hikes through the mountains with his child, he may hold loosely the child's hand, until the child begins to slip. Then he will grip it tightly, perhaps with two hands, because the life of the child is precious to him. Or you can think of two young people fighting over a rope, pulling from both ends. The opposition of the other person causes them to grip tighter and pull harder. So it is with biblical truth. An Elder must squeeze tightly the truth, refusing to have it taken away from him.

But an Elder must hold onto the truth with both their head and their heart. They must know well the biblical basis for the doctrines they believe, but even more, they must love and cherish that truth with their heart, as something precious to them. Why? Because it is God's truth. As Paul said to the Galatians, they were to be so confident in the truths of the gospel of Holy Scripture that even if an angel from heaven were to contradict them, they would not let the truth go. Samuel Rutherford, a godly theologian from the seventeenth century, said, "Serve Christ; back him. Let his cause be your cause. Give not a hair breadth of truth away, for it is not yours but God's." God and his truth are faithful, omnipotent, wise, pure, searching and good. You know that "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Souls depend on the truth of Scripture, on sound doctrine for conversion and sanctification, for comfort and holiness. We will die, but God's truth will never die. And it will continue to be preached and vindicated for as long as the world lasts. And so, Elders must hold it so that it is not ripped from their hands, or their hearts, or their heads. They're to hold fast to sound doctrine. All the temptations of danger, or power, or popularity, or subtlety must not move them. If the Elders do not hold fast the sound doctrine, then how will their people maintain it?

Notice that Paul says to hold fast, "as he hath been taught." So Elders must first learn sound doctrine, know sound doctrine, maintain sound doctrine, in order to be able to teach sound doctrine. Elders must study to show themselves approved as students of the Word of God, and this requires diligence and hard work, and this is also a privilege. They've been entrusted with a treasure worth far more than gold and silver. Seeing the value of true doctrine will prevent the neglect of it. The appetite to feed on God's Word must grow, and not be satisfied with the minimal amount of light that we already have. And this can begin with the aid of studying faithful catechisms and confessions of faith which serve as a great tool in the systematic instruction of what the Scriptures teach us. But the aim is faith. The aim is mixing our hearing with faith, receiving the engrafted Word with meekness, believing and loving it. Otherwise, we can be in danger, as Paul says, of "ever learning,

and never coming to the knowledge of the truth.” In order to be teachers—which Elders are, as we’ll see in the future lecture—we must first be learners. Eager learners actually make excellent teachers. And do not entertain excuses and objections at this point. Some say that they do not have the time. They don’t have time to read. They don’t have time to study. But people always do what they want. They find time for what pleases them. The problem is changing what we actually want. We see the value of sound doctrine, and we’re to be holding fast to that sound doctrine.

Secondly, we’re to be *Handling Faithfully Sound Doctrine*. In Titus 1, verse 9, Paul goes on to say, “that he”—that is, the Elder—“may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” You see here part of the purpose of holding fast the truth. You must first have the truth, in order to use the truth for the benefit of souls. This exhortation is really twofold. First, Elders must confirm the truth from the Bible, in order to skillfully persuade them of the truth. But secondly, they must be prepared to contradict error—to confront it, to oppose it, to refuse it, and to silence false teaching. Recall that when Nehemiah was building the walls of Jerusalem, his men had in their hands both a sword and a trowel. They were both defending God’s people, and building the walls of Zion.

The passage speaks about exhorting. “To exhort” means to provoke, to stimulate, to insight, to challenge people to the practice of truth. Paul speaks of “sound doctrine,” that is, wholesome doctrine, as you see in 1 Timothy 6, verse 3, “If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to *wholesome words*, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness.” So sound doctrine is wholesome doctrine, doctrine that is according to godliness, food that nourishes the soul with spiritual health. It is a great sin to mix Scripture with foolish vanities and errors. Remember the language of Hebrews 4, verse 12?—“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” And this requires a reverent handling of Scripture, not a flippant, not a casual approach to it, as if it was not a weighty matter. It’s the most weighty matter. To believe what is false is a serious sin. People think that sins in their life, their actions are one thing, and somehow they think that the sin of believing what is false is a lesser sin. It’s not, and this is important for Elders. But exhortation also means to stir up people to taste the sweetness of good doctrine. Wholesome doctrine must always be joined to exhortation, the practical application of the truth to the heart and life. And what are the consequences? Well, ultimately, heaven and hell. Those who do not feel the force of truth now will be faced with its reality in a lost eternity. Elders watch for souls. And beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings

The Elder’s doctrine—sound doctrine—will meet with opposition—opposition from Satan, and sins, seducers within the church, and the world outside of the church. Wolves come into the church with unsound doctrine—false teaching. Paul describes them as gainsayers—those who deny and contradict, and resist the truth. They’re not just indifferent to the truth, they’re bold in falsifying Christ’s message, in open war against it. They won’t endure having sin exposed, and their lusts curbed. They may be as irritated as Ahab was by Micaiah, in constant danger of “grievous wolves,” as Paul calls them, “speaking perverse things,” and imposing falsehood. He warns the Ephesian Elders, in Acts 20, of this. We see it in Galatians 1, and the book of Jude, and 2 Peter 3. In the Old Testament there were false prophets; in the New Testament there are false teachers. Paul warns of those who teach the doctrines of the devils—1 Timothy 4:1. He says, “For the time will come they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth”—1

Timothy 4, verse 3. So the Elder's sound doctrine involves spiritual warfare. Disputation and debate over the truth may arise. We're told of Paul, in Acts 17, verse 17, "Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him." The same was true of Apollos, in Acts 18, verse 24, "And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus." It goes on to say, "For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publickly, shewing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ." But remember the qualifications we learned in a previous lecture—an Elder must contend for the truth without being contentious. He must maintain a dogmatic adherence to the truth without having a dogmatic disposition. He should set forth biblical arguments without being argumentative. Second Timothy 2, verses 24 to 26, "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will." So there's holding fast the truth, and then there's rightly handling that sound doctrine.

Thirdly, we have *The Heritage of Sound Doctrine*. Notice that the particular emphasis in this context in Titus 1 is placed on maintaining the apostolic truth that both Timothy and Titus have received. When he's writing to Timothy, he forewarns that "perilous times" would come—chapter 3, verse 1. One mark of those fast-approaching times was that men would "resist the truth"—chapter 3, verse 8. This included professing Christians who would "not endure sound doctrine," and "turn away their ears from the truth"—chapter 4, verses 3 and 4. Even as the apostle wrote, some of his fellow co-laborers were abandoning that truth. You see that in chapter 1, verse 15, and chapter 4, verses 14 and 16. Timothy's attachment to the truth was indispensable for both Timothy and the church he served. Paul said to him, in 1 Timothy 4, and verse 16, "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee." Elders are held accountable for faithful doctrine. This is repeated over and over through first and second Timothy, and Titus. Paul tells Timothy, in 1 Timothy 1:3, to charge these men "that they teach no other doctrine."

Well, historically, the church has done this through the Elders' explicit commitment, by vows to uphold orthodox creeds, confessions and catechisms. The English word for "creed" derives from a Latin word *CREDO*, which means "I believe." So a creed is simply a statement of what we believe the Bible teaches. Similarly, the word "confession," like the Belgic Confession, or Westminster Confession of Faith. "Confession" means "an acknowledgment." So a confession of sin, for example, is an acknowledgment of our sin, or saying about our sin what God says about it. Likewise, a confession of faith is an acknowledgment of true doctrine, or saying the same thing about doctrine as what God says in the Scriptures. Well, as you can see, creeds, and confessions, and catechisms, they refer to the same thing—authoritative documents that affirm the true doctrines taught in the Bible, and that therefore distinguish those true doctrines that we must believe from false doctrines we should reject. The word "orthodox" means "straight thinking" over against crooked thinking. So orthodox doctrine refers to true biblical doctrine upheld by the true church throughout the ages. So creeds and confessions provide a foundation for church unity built upon the uniformity of true doctrine. Amos 3, verse 3 says, "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" We must be unified in the truth of God's Word. First Corinthians 1, verse 10 says, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." This language of having the same mind, and speaking the same truths

occurs repeatedly in the New Testament. Romans 15, verse 6, “That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Well, creeds and confessions provide a standard for testing faithfulness to the Scripture. If a person says, “Well, I believe the Bible,” well, what do you believe about the Bible? What do you believe the Bible teaches? What do you believe about what the Bible teaches on this particular point, and this particular point, on specific doctrines? Creeds and confessions provide a standard, whether they’re actually holding faithful to the Scriptures. This is important—it’s important that creeds find their place in the church. Second Timothy 2:2, “And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.”

It’s also important for our message outside the church. Jesus says, “Go into the whole world, and disciple the nations, teaching them everything I’ve commanded you”—Matthew 28, verse 19 and following. Creeds and confessions are important for examining new ideas and doctrines that arise. First Thessalonians 5, verse 21 says, “Prove”—that is, test—“all things; hold fast that which is good.” So these creeds and confessions, they strengthen clarity, and conviction, and commitment to biblical truth. In 2 Timothy 1:13, we heard, “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.” And so there’s this heritage within the church, the heritage of sound doctrine, and the obligation from one generation, to the next generation, to the next generation to pass along, and to preserve or maintain that same body of biblical truth. In the language of Jude verse 3, to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” And so, the Lord has given to Elders this responsibility, to pledge themselves to maintaining the purity of biblical doctrine, in their office as Elder, in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to ensure that those who follow them are bound by conscience to do the same.

At the beginning of this lecture, we said that one of the reasons that the church goes by the wayside is because men did not keep their promises. If godly Elders would keep their promises to maintain biblical doctrine we would continue to see the church flourish.

Well, in this lecture, we’ve considered the importance of an Elder’s doctrine. The church needs faithful men, dependable men, who will keep their promises, and persevere in maintaining biblical truth in the church. In the next lecture, we will turn our attention to the responsibility of shepherding, in the office of Ruling Elder. This constitutes one of the chief duties of every Elder—shepherding the flock of God.