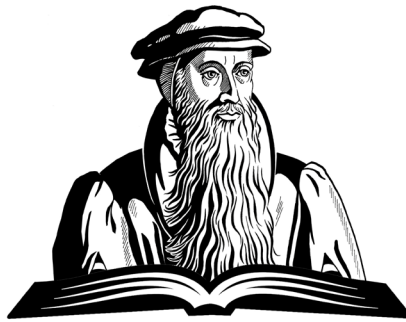


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

Biblical Eldership

by Rev. Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture #6
Shepherding



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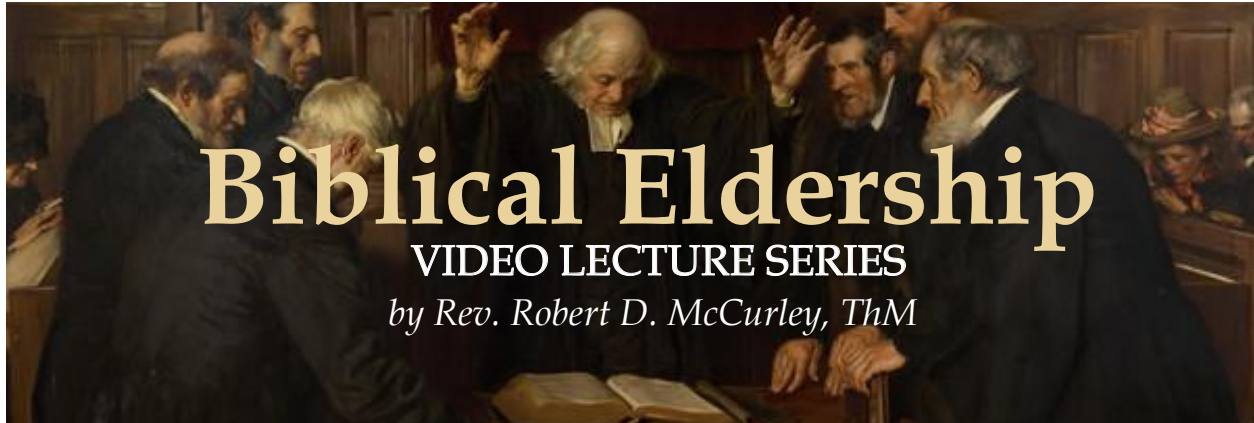
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Cover image: "The Ordination of Elders in a Scottish Kirk," 1891, John Henry Lorimer

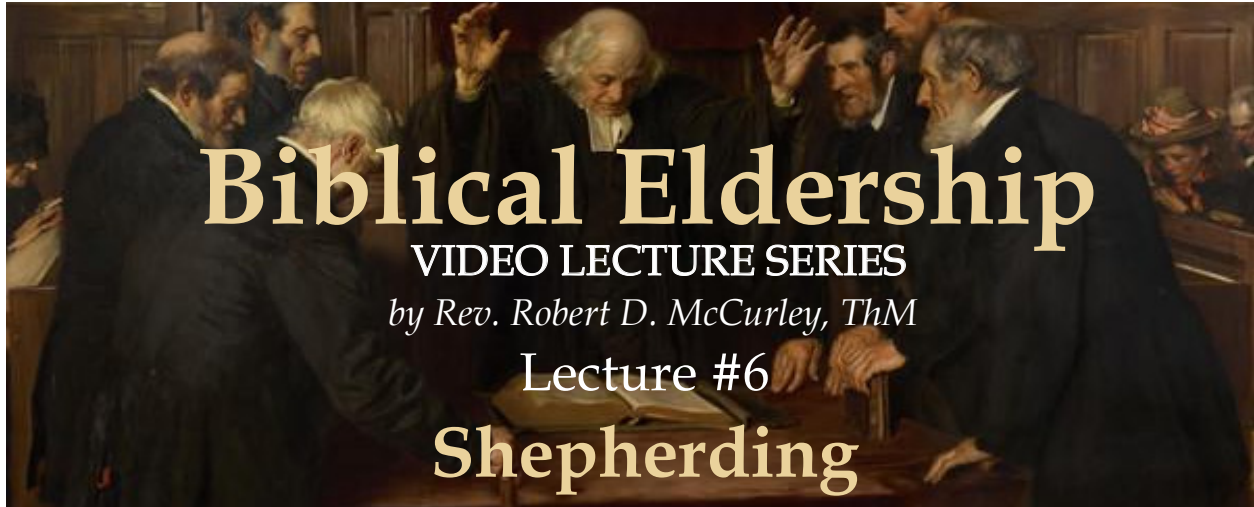


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Perhaps you've been out in the countryside and seen on a distant hillside a man tending a flock of sheep. If not, you may have seen a picture of such a scene. A shepherd, or shepherder, is a person who tends, herds, feeds, or guards flocks of sheep. In times past, he could have been seen with a shepherd's crook in his hand—a strong, multi-purpose stick or staff often fashioned with a hooked end. He would use this tool to guide and protect his sheep. Shepherding is among the oldest occupations in the world. The duty of shepherds is to keep their flock intact, protected from predators, and guided. His responsibility is the safety and welfare of the flock. In our own day, some flocks may include as many as a thousand sheep. A shepherd will graze the animals, herding them to areas of good forage, and keeping a watchful eye out for poisonous plants. Shepherds sometimes work in groups, either looking after one large flock, or each bringing their own and merging their responsibilities. Well, this is a striking picture, and as you know I'm sure, it's a familiar image in the Bible, which often speaks of sheep and shepherds, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

As we will see in this lecture, it is an important concept for understanding what the Bible teaches about Ruling Elders. So, in this module or course, we're considering what the Bible teaches about the New Testament office of Ruling Elder. In the previous lecture, we considered the importance of the Elder's doctrine. In this lecture, we'll turn our consideration to the Elder's role and responsibility in shepherding the Lord's people, the flock of Christ.

We begin, first of all, with the Chief Shepherd. One of the most popular Psalms throughout history has been Psalm 23. It begins, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want"—I shall not lack or be in need. The imagery of a shepherd conveys many precious ideas. Shepherds lead, and feed, and defend, carry, nurture, heal, and provide for their sheep. This demonstrates tenderness and care. Christ himself is the Shepherd of his people. He is called "the Good Shepherd." Elsewhere he's called "the Great Shepherd," or, "the Chief Shepherd." And his people are called "his sheep," "his flock," "his fold." We sing in Psalm 95, verse 7, "For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand." David, who wrote Psalm 23, was chosen to be king out of the sheepfold—he had been a shepherd. Psalm 78, verses 70 and 71 say, "He chose David also his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds: from following the ewes great with young he brought him to feed Jacob his people, and Israel his inheritance." David took what he learned among his flock and carried that with him in shepherding Israel. In doing so, he prefigured Christ, who was a shepherd King. This demonstrates, doesn't it, that rule is for the benefit of those we are serving,

which we'll explore further in a moment. But we see, first of all, Christ sets the pattern. He is the Chief Shepherd. Christ is described, for example, in Psalm 80, verse 1, "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth." Or, in Isaiah 40, in verse 11, "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young."

The Old Testament tells us how God brings his people up out of Egypt, guides them through the wilderness for forty years, and leads them safely into their own land. Listen to how Psalm 77, verse 20 describes it: "Thou leddest thy people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron." Like a shepherd, God was personally present with his people. He protected his people, and provided for his people. He fed them. He healed them. God guided his people to fertile pastures. Think of the language of Exodus 15, verse 13, right after they cross over on dry ground: "Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which thou hast redeemed: thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation." The Lord was tender, nurturing, gentle with his people—Hosea 11, verse 4: "I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love: and I was to them as they that take off the yoke on their jaws, and I laid meat unto them."

In all of this, you may have noticed, when we were mentioning Psalm 77, verse 20, that God shepherded his people through Moses, the human leader he appointed to shepherd. And Moses sought the Lord for a successor when he came to the end of his life. He spoke of the one "which may go out before them, and which may go in before them, and which may lead them out, and which may bring them in; that the congregation of the LORD be not as sheep which have no shepherd"—Numbers 27, verse 17. So, the Lord, the Chief Shepherd, shepherded his people through human servants that he appointed. Well, this brings us to our next point.

Secondly, we have undershepherds. So, in the New Testament, one of the ways that the Lord shepherds his people is through the care of Elders, who are undershepherds, that is, shepherds under Christ himself, who is the Chief Shepherd. God promised that all the way back in Jeremiah 23, verses 3 and 4: "And I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith the LORD." Or as he said earlier in Jeremiah 3, verse 15: "And I will give you pastors"—the word can be translated "shepherds"—"according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding."

So then, turning to the New Testament, we're led to anticipate that the Lord is going to do this, that he's going to provide shepherds. And lo, and behold, that's in fact what he does. Peter writes to the Elders, in 1 Peter 5, verse 2, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly." Or think of Paul, who's speaking to the Ephesian Elders, in Acts 20, verses 28 and 29. He says, "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. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock." Both of these passages are addressed to Elders of local congregations. They're called to shepherd the flock of God. Remember Jesus' words to Peter, which further reinforced this responsibility. Remember, three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved him? Three times, Peter replied, "Yes, Lord, thou knowest I love thee." And three times, Jesus charged Peter to care for his sheep, feed his lambs—John 21, verses 15 to 17. This refers to the care shepherds show sheep—feeding them, tending them, guiding them, protecting them. And that is exactly the kind of care Elders are to give or provide for the people. Elders are to feed their people with

the Word, exhorting them in sound doctrine, as we heard in the last lecture, proclaiming to them the whole counsel of God. But Elders are also supposed to guard their people—guard them against false doctrine, and against those who would lead them astray. Elders are to lead their people by providing a godly example themselves that the people can follow. They’re to be equipping the people for service in the church of Jesus Christ, as Ephesians 4, verse 12 tells us. And Elders would be wisely directing the affairs of the church. So Elders are to care for the people by tenderly providing whatever counsel, help, or encouragement they might need.

And this is important, because this, actually, is the primary task of Elders. Their primary responsibility is to shepherd their people. And as you can see, that means Elders must care. They must care deeply. They don’t just care about their people, they care for them. In order to do so, they must know them. They must know, not just their name, but their circumstances, and their needs, and their struggles, and all of the other things that may be of aid or help to them. Elders are to seek them out, to show initiative, to be following up and be inquiring about the state and souls of their people. They’re to give their people what their souls need. Even when the people themselves don’t know what they need, maybe even don’t want what they need most. Elders are to serve their people with biblical love. In all this, Elders reflect Christ, the Chief Shepherd. So Paul exhorts church leaders, “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men”—1 Thessalonians 5, verse 14. That kind of person-by-person care is exactly what Christ promises to do for his people, when he pledges to seek the lost, to bring back the stray, to bind up the injured, and to feed them all with his Word—Ezekiel 34, verse 16.

And so Elders, like Christ the Chief Shepherd, must engage in this sort of self-sacrifice for the sheep. And that concept of self-sacrifice is important, because there’s a big difference between a shepherd and a hireling. A “hireling” is a person who’s hired to care for the sheep. They don’t actually care for the sheep. The hireling doesn’t have a sense of ownership. He works for his own benefits, for pay or whatever, not for the benefits of the sheep. Consequently, what happens? When difficulties arise, the hireling will abandon the sheep rather than to place himself in harm. Jesus actually spells all this out, doesn’t he, regarding himself, in John 10, verses 11 to 15: “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.” Elders engage in self-sacrificial care for the Lord’s people. They invest their whole being into the well-being of these precious souls, and they will pay whatever cost is required in order to care for, feed, tend, and protect the flock of God. And so, secondly, we see something about the undershepherds. But then, thirdly, we’ll speak about shepherding visits, or home visitation. When Paul was addressing the Ephesians Elders, in Acts 20, in verse 20, he speaks about “how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house.” He goes on, in verse 31, and charges them, “Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.” Well, following Paul’s pattern, the Elders in Christ’s church historically have engaged in visiting the families of the flock. So this involves in person, face-to-face, specific care for individual souls. This is beyond the public and pulpit ministry of the pastor. In the sixteenth century, there’s a document called the [Scottish] Second Book of Discipline. It was a document describing how the church would be run during that period. And in chapter 6, paragraph 5, it says this, in reference to Elders, “As the

pastors and doctors should be diligent in teaching and sowing the seed of the word, so the elders should be careful in seeking the fruit of the same in the people.” It’s actually a beautiful picture. In the pulpit, the seed sown into the soil of men’s hearts; the Word is being sown into their souls. And the Elders are to be found among the flock, coming in and out among them, and seeking the fruit of that good seed, to be able to nurture it, and to water it, and to prune it, as it were, and to care for it. One of ways in which this is carried out is by being with the people, being with them in their own space. So shepherding visits, or visiting people’s homes as Elders, has one aim—the aim is to serve them. The aim is to care for them. So the Elders don’t come for a visit in order to engage in interrogation or to do other such things. The aim is actually to serve them. It’s also not just a social visit either. There are lots of other opportunities within the life of the church to engage in social visitation. But with a shepherding visit, it’s actually a stated time for Elders to come and to, as it were, serve the people, to provide help to their souls, to show individual interest in their particular needs, their specific needs. And so, that’s done by addressing their specific questions. What questions do the people have? What is it that they are struggling with? What areas do they need helpful counseling regarding their circumstances? What questions do they have about the sermons they’ve heard, or about things that are happening in the church? What help do they need with regards to their marriage, or their children, or their witness at work, and many other things? The people will come with their questions, and you’re able to actually give them tangible, productive help that will be very meaningful to them.

Now, the frequency of how often Elders visit can vary, depending on the needs of the congregation, the size of the congregation, the number of Elders, and so on. But maybe even in some congregations, there’s one stated visit a year. In our own congregation, it ordinarily happens twice a year. And this, of course, is in addition to other visits. When emergencies arise, and there’s a crisis, a family may call one of their Elders and say, “This difficulty has come up, and I need help. I need some counsel.” And that’s important. We need to be prepared to help people when they need it most. What I’m describing is in addition to that. So, this is a stated visit. Think in terms of doctors. If you get really sick, you might have to go to the doctor in order to get help with your sickness. But then there are what we sometimes call “well visit” appointments, when you’re going to the doctor just as a routine, and they’re checking your vital signs, and your temperature, and they’re asking questions about how you’re doing. That sort of check up. They need those as well, as Elders. And so, as I said, the pattern is not a social visit, that there’s an intention, a purpose in the visit. And that should be explained to the people ahead of time, that the Elder’s coming, and he’s there to serve you and to care for you, and to explain what the visit will look like, and to really ask them to prepare. Because the more prepared the people are, the more productive the visit will be. So an Elder may come, and he may open the Bible and read a passage of Scripture, and ask them things that they specifically need prayer for. That’s a good way to begin the visit. But then we can go on, and ask how things are going. Are they regular in family worship? Do they need help in understanding how to implement that better? Are the children learning their Catechism, or Scripture memory? And it’s not so much to quiz them as to encourage them. So you find out what the children have been working on, in order to give them an opportunity to express themselves. This encourages, and strengthens, and fuels the fire in the things that they’re doing well. And so it provides these sort of opportunities. So the components of a visit can vary, but usually it would include reading the Bible, maybe a brief word of exhortation, praying for specific things, asking them what kinds of concerns they might have—concerns about the church, questions about sermons that they’ve heard, things about their job, their family, their future; helping take the Word of God and apply it to

the specifics, the particulars that they are facing. And so, this is a way of shepherding, in fact, the only way in which shepherding takes place, but it does provide one concrete, practical mechanism for implementing shepherding of the flock within the eldership.

And it may that be in some congregations, you would divide the congregation, the number of families, into different groups, into districts, Elder districts. So that one particular Ruling Elder is given a special responsibility for one group, and another for another group, and so on and so forth. All of the Elders collectively, including the pastor, have responsibility for the whole, but this division of labor can be a good way of making sure that no one is overlooked.

Well, the benefits for this, for a well-organized pattern of faithful Elder visitation, are numerous. For one, it strengthens the role of the eldership. People become much more aware of the fact that the church is actually governed by a plurality of men, not just one man, not just the minister who's standing in the pulpit. They realize that all of these men are given responsibility to care for their souls, and that they all stand together behind the teaching of God's Word in the church. You'll also note that where there is a well-organized system of house visitation, the Elders can often become aware of potential problems before they become serious. So rather than waiting until everything blows up, they're actually able to help people—to come alongside, lovingly, and tenderly, to address problems before they become worse. And, when there is regular visitation, there's at least one opportunity—once a year, twice a year, however often it's being done—for the members to express any concerns that they may have about what's going on in the church. So, rather than keeping that to themselves, or just talking to others, they're able to express that to those who are given oversight. And this helps the Elders to be able to see and address potential problems. It also ensures that those who might otherwise tend to be neglected—so those on the periphery of the congregation. Those who tend to be neglected are shown by the Elder visits that they are valued as members of the church. Often we see how people come away so significantly encouraged and comforted, when they wouldn't have been otherwise, because they realize how important their place is in the church, how much they are needed, and how much their life, and testimony, and fellowship, and words of encouragement mean to others.

Now, this is true for every congregation, not just established congregations, and larger congregations. Wherever there are sheep, wherever there's a flock, there needs to be person-to-person shepherding. And that means, even at the beginning of a church planting situation. It's important that it be implemented there. And early on, there may not be many Elders, or any Elders at all, perhaps. But as soon as possible, when Elders are placed in the congregation, it's necessary for sharing the shepherding work with the pastor who's laboring among them.

But in addition to all of this, one of the other benefits is found in what it does for the Elders themselves. There are many joys in seeing the fruit and growth of the members, things you wouldn't have heard about that the Lord's doing in their life, and ways in which they're making progress, victories that the Lord's given them. And the fact is that in many ways the Elders themselves grow. In the exercise of their gifts, in the shepherding of God's people, the Elder grows in maturity, and grows in spiritual depth, and even grows in doctrinal knowledge, and in pastoral skill, as they faithfully care for the duties of the flock. Those gifts have to be exercised, and the more it's done, the more equipped the Elder is to skillfully care for souls. That increase of experience aids them. And of course, it has many other influences upon the congregation, including, for example, attendance at public worship services. And here you are, visiting them in their home, on their own turf, in their own circumstances, but that sort of investment often has an influence on their own attendance at the public services under the preaching of God's Word, and so on. This patient Elder

visitation is an important part that encourages people not to neglect “the assembling of themselves together, as is the manner of some,” as Hebrews 10:25 says.

So visitation forms one practical component, to ensure that shepherding and care of souls remains a priority in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We will go on to speak in future lectures about other ways in which this is pursued.

Well, in this lecture, we’ve considered the biblical basis for the whole idea of shepherding. And we’ve seen that the Lord Jesus Christ himself is the Chief Shepherd, that we’ll never understand shepherding until we see what Christ himself does on behalf of his flock. And then we’ve seen that the Lord has provided human instruments through which he carries out that shepherding, in the office of Ruling Elder, that the best Ruling Elder is the one who best mimics and reflects the example of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, in order to tend to the flock of God with tenderness, and with care. So shepherding is a primary responsibility of the eldership. We’re going to go on in the lectures that follow, to look in detail at other specific areas of role and responsibility that fall to the office of Elder.