

The Church (9) Church Leadership--The Leadership of the Elders

Introduction:

The Lord willing, today we will complete our study of the Biblical teaching respecting the church of Jesus Christ. For the past several weeks we have addressed the nature of leadership within the local church. The church of Jesus Christ is quite unique in this respect: although the polity of the New Testament local church is congregational in nature, nevertheless, the Lord has established the office and role of elder to shepherd His church. The congregation elects men who will in turn lead the congregation, men to whom the members of the congregation submit. But in a sense, it is not the congregation that chooses these men, but rather the Lord calls and confirms His men through the congregation to shepherd His people. The people seek to discern the Lord's will so as to choose men whom He would have lead His people.

Today I would like us to consider more fully and clearly the nature of the leadership that the elder is to exercise in the church. In addition I would like us to consider the manner in which members of the congregation are to regard and respond to the church's elders. We will trace in the Scriptures what the Lord has revealed about these matters. We will do so first by showing the Old Testament background in which we read of the shepherds of Israel that had failed to shepherd properly the Lord's people. We will then consider the promise of God to His people that He would provide good and faithful shepherds for them. This promise of the Lord is fulfilled in His calling and equipping pastor-teachers to lead His people.

I. The unfaithful shepherds in Old Testament Israel

The shepherds that the Lord has placed in His churches may be contrasted with the "shepherds" that served Israel during the times if the Old Testament. Let us turn to the prophecy of Jeremiah to read of the failure of Israel's shepherds and the promise of God that He would give faithful shepherds to His people. Let us read **Jeremiah 23:1-24**.

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!" says the LORD.
²Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel against the shepherds who feed My people: "You have scattered My flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings," says the LORD. ³"But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. ⁴I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking," says the LORD.

⁵"Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD,
"That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness;
A King shall reign and prosper,
And execute judgment and righteousness in the earth.
⁶In His days Judah will be saved,
And Israel will dwell safely;
Now this is His name by which He will be called:

THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

⁷“Therefore, behold, the days are coming,” says the LORD, “that they shall no longer say, ‘As the LORD lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt,’ ⁸but, ‘As the LORD lives who brought up and led the descendants of the house of Israel from the north country and from all the countries where I had driven them.’ And they shall dwell in their own land.”

⁹My heart within me is broken
Because of the prophets;
All my bones shake.
I am like a drunken man,
And like a man whom wine has overcome,
Because of the LORD,
And because of His holy words.

¹⁰For the land is full of adulterers;
For because of a curse the land mourns.
The pleasant places of the wilderness are dried up.
Their course of life is evil,
And their might is not right.

¹¹“For both prophet and priest are profane;
Yes, in My house I have found their wickedness,” says the LORD.

¹²“Therefore their way shall be to them
Like slippery ways;
In the darkness they shall be driven on
And fall in them;
For I will bring disaster on them,
The year of their punishment,” says the LORD.

¹³“And I have seen folly in the prophets of Samaria:
They prophesied by Baal
And caused My people Israel to err.

¹⁴Also I have seen a horrible thing in the prophets of Jerusalem:
They commit adultery and walk in lies;
They also strengthen the hands of evildoers,
So that no one turns back from his wickedness.
All of them are like Sodom to Me,
And her inhabitants like Gomorrah.

¹⁵“Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets:

‘Behold, I will feed them with wormwood,
And make them drink the water of gall;
For from the prophets of Jerusalem
Profaneness has gone out into all the land.’”

¹⁶Thus says the LORD of hosts:

“Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you.
They make you worthless;
They speak a vision of their own heart,
Not from the mouth of the LORD.

¹⁷They continually say to those who despise Me,
‘The LORD has said, “You shall have peace”’;

And to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say,
‘No evil shall come upon you.’”

¹⁸For who has stood in the counsel of the LORD,
And has perceived and heard His word?
Who has marked His word and heard it?

¹⁹Behold, a whirlwind of the LORD has gone forth in fury—
A violent whirlwind!
It will fall violently on the head of the wicked.

²⁰The anger of the LORD will not turn back
Until He has executed and performed the thoughts of His heart.
In the latter days you will understand it perfectly.

²¹“I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran.
I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied.

²²But if they had stood in My counsel,
And had caused My people to hear My words,
Then they would have turned them from their evil way
And from the evil of their doings.

²³“Am I a God near at hand,” says the LORD,
“And not a God afar off?

²⁴Can anyone hide himself in secret places,
So I shall not see him?” says the LORD;
“Do I not fill heaven and earth?” says the LORD.

Jeremiah served as God’s prophet to Judah in the last decades of its national existence in the 6th century BC. He witnessed the judgment of God upon Judah in the overthrow and destruction of Jerusalem perpetrated by the armies of Babylon. Jeremiah saw several deportations of his people as they were taken in chains out of the land at the onset of their 70 year exile in Babylon. God’s judgment had fallen upon His people after centuries of Him patiently enduring their defections and rebellions. The Lord had sent His prophets, ones like Jeremiah, who repeatedly and continually confronted the people with their sin and their need for repentance and return to the Lord. But as we read in our passage, one of the great causes for the downgrade of the people was false the shepherds who had lead the people wrongly. The Lord promised that He would cause a remnant of His people to return from the nations into which the Lord had driven them. He would cause the return and restoration of His people in a second exodus, and reestablish them as His people. He would secure their steadfastness towards Him, using one of the means that He would appoint, even faithful shepherds who would lead them and teach them rightly. Let us work through this passage.

II. The Pastors of New Testament Churches were foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures.

A. The Lord’s denouncement of the shepherds of His people (Jer. 23:1-4)

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!” says the LORD.
²Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel against the shepherds who feed My people: “You have scattered My flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings,” says the LORD. ³“But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. ⁴I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking,” says the LORD.

The Lord denounced the shepherds of Israel who had not only failed to gather and feed the sheep of the Lord's pasture, but they had destroyed and scattered His people. Yes, it was the Lord Himself who was judging His people by bringing the force of Babylon upon them, but the cause of the failure and defection of the people was due to the unfaithful shepherds leading them.

Now we should not equate exactly these Old Testament "shepherds" with New Testament "shepherds", for they are not identical. For these Old Testament shepherds were chiefly the kings of Israel. The Lord had called these men to serve His people in a political sense within the theocracy of Israel, which was the manifestation of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament. We could enlarge this group with the priests and prophets were also regarded as shepherds. This is reflected in the passage we read (Cf. Jer. 23:9, 11, 13, 16). They, too, largely failed in their responsibility. In contrast New Testament shepherds are pastors of local churches, who perform spiritual ministry among the Lord's people. And of course they are not civil rulers, but rather they are spiritual shepherds of the Lord's churches, through which is the manifestation of the kingdom of God in this New Testament age. But though there are significant differences in the identity and nature of shepherds in Old Testament Israel and of shepherds in New Testament Israel, there are some similarities. The kings, priests, and prophets had failed to teach God's people rightly. He promised, however, that He would raise up faithful shepherds to lead His people in the future.

Actually the association of kings with the work of shepherding was not unique to Israel. Through much of ancient history the nations of the world were largely pastoral in livelihood and lifestyle. "Pastoralism was a widely visible and significant sector of all Near Eastern societies from the very beginning of human civilization."¹ Many different peoples associated their kings with being shepherds of their people. This was true not just in Israel, but was also the case in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and among the Greeks.² And not only did these people regard their kings as shepherds of their people, but they also regarded their deities similarly. It was written in one ancient source of a "god" of the Mesopotamians who purportedly said, "The god is a shepherd of men, seeking (good) pastures for mankind."³ One ancient Greek writer wrote of both a god and king, "He must be a lover of men, for it would be strange for a shepherd to be a hater of sheep and ill disposed toward his own flock."⁴

Now we are most familiar with our Lord Jesus who asserted that he was the Good Shepherd. He declared in two places, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11, 14). But in the Old Testament there are statements and numerous allusions to the Lord God being the Shepherd of Israel. We read in the opening words of Psalm 80 of David's prayer to God:

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
You who lead Joseph like a flock;
You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth! (Psa. 80:1)

But perhaps in the prophets, in which the Lord is denouncing the unfaithful shepherds of Israel, we see the Lord Himself set forth as the True and Good Shepherd of Israel. Consider Ezekiel 34:1ff, which reads:

And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ²"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? ³You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. ⁴The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them.

¹ Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart; Pastoral traditions and Leadership in the Bible* (InterVarsity Press, 2006, p. 42.

² See chapter 3 in Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*.

³ Ibid, p. 58.

⁴ Ibid, p. 72.

⁵So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. ⁶My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them.”

⁷Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸“As I live,” says the Lord GOD, “surely because My flock became a prey, and My flock became food for every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search for My flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock”— ⁹therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD! ¹⁰Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand; I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep, and the shepherds shall feed themselves no more; for I will deliver My flock from their mouths, that they may no longer be food for them.”

¹¹For thus says the Lord GOD: “Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. ¹²As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. ¹³And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. There they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down,” says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶“I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment.” (Ezek. 34:1-16)

But the Lord, the true Shepherd of Israel, called men to shepherd His flock. And again, these shepherds were chiefly the kings that He raised up to rule in Israel. They were to serve Israel as a shepherd serves His sheep. The kings were to protect the Lord’s flock. They were to “feed” their people as well. But again, the priests and also the prophets were also regarded as shepherds in their responsibility to teach the people to live rightly before God. They were to call the people back to the Lord and His ways when they strayed. They were to care for and tend to the Lord’s people on His behalf. This was their duty as shepherds of Israel. But the shepherds of Israel had failed in their duty. Rather than gather, they scattered the flock of God. So God declared that He would judge and cast out those unfaithful shepherds. He Himself would come and shepherd His people. We read of this in our passage of **Jeremiah 23:1-3**:

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!” says the LORD. ²Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel against the shepherds who feed My people: “You have scattered My flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings,” says the LORD. ³“But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase.

We also read of this theme in the promise of salvation in **Isaiah 40:9-11** in which the Lord reveals Himself as Shepherd who would save His sheep:

⁹O Zion,
You who bring good tidings,
Get up into the high mountain;
O Jerusalem,
You who bring good tidings,
Lift up your voice with strength,
Lift it up, be not afraid;
Say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

¹⁰Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand,

And His arm shall rule for Him;
Behold, His reward is with Him,
And His work before Him.
¹¹*He will feed His flock like a shepherd;
He will gather the lambs with His arm,
And carry them in His bosom,
And gently lead those who are with young.* (Isa. 40:9-11)

B. The Lord's pronouncement that He would raise up the Son of David to Shepherd His people. (Jer. 23:5-6)

Here we see clearly that God's promise of setting up shepherds who would feed His flock would be realized through His raising up the Promised Son of David to rule His people. We read in Jeremiah 23:5ff.

⁵"Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD,
"That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness;
A King shall reign and prosper,
And execute judgment and righteousness in the earth.
⁶In His days Judah will be saved,
And Israel will dwell safely;
Now this is His name by which He will be called:

THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

This has been and is being realized through the coming of the Lord Jesus. Whereas the shepherds of Israel had failed miserably to fulfil their responsibilities, God raised up the promised Son of David, Jesus Christ, to save His people. He is King over His people, who saves them from their sin. He is their righteousness. This speaks to the gift of righteousness that God imparts to His people through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Whereas they were guilty and under the wrath of God for their sins, having no righteousness of their own to enable them to stand before God, God provides the righteousness which they need through the promised Davidic King.

The salvation that the Lord brings to His people is a likened to a second exodus. Just as the Lord saved Israel out of Egypt and He led His people through the wilderness to the Promised Land, so the coming Messiah would bring back a remnant of His people from their exile, even the nations into which the Lord had scattered them. He would secure them unto Himself and enable them to dwell in peace and safety.

⁷"Therefore, behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "that they shall no longer say, 'As the LORD lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt,' ⁸but, 'As the LORD lives who brought up and led the descendants of the house of Israel from the north country and from all the countries where I had driven them.' And they shall dwell in their own land."

This is what God has done in history. He caused the return of exiles from throughout the nations, even as He is escorting them unto "their own land." And although the language is couched in terms that the Old Testament Israelites would understand and value, as New Testament Christians we understand that this "Promised Land" to which the Lord is bringing His people is ultimately a new heavens and new earth in which the Lord will place New Jerusalem, the dwelling place of His people.

C. The Lord promised in the Old Testament Scriptures that He would raise up faithful shepherds to lead His people.

The Lord promised to provide faithful shepherds to lead His people. It was declared in our passage of Jeremiah. The Lord declared,

“I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking,” says the LORD. (Jer. 23:4)

The Lord promised to give good, godly men to lead them upon their repentance from sin when they turn back to Him. **Jeremiah 3:14f** reads,

“Return, O backsliding children,” says the LORD; “for I am married to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. ¹⁵And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.”

III. The Lord gives authority and responsibility to the elders, or pastors, of New Testament churches

A. The Lord commissions elders *to teach the Word of God to the local church of Jesus Christ.*

Teaching the Word of God to the people of God was a major emphasis of our Lord Jesus’ ministry. Although He healed many people of their infirmities, delivered many people from oppression, His chief calling during His earthly ministry was to proclaim the Word of God to His people. We read His words in Mark 1:38, “But He said to them, ‘Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth.’”

We read that the Lord Jesus gave instruction to Peter that He was feed the people of God with the Words of God. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His apostles. We read in John 21:15ff of His interaction with Peter.

¹⁵So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?”

He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

He said to him, “Feed My lambs.”

¹⁶He said to him again a second time, “Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me?”

He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

He said to him, “Tend My sheep.”

¹⁷He said to him the third time, “Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me?”

Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?”

And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.”

Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep.” (John 21:15-17)

We also read of the Apostle Paul’s instruction to Timothy as a minister of Jesus Christ.

I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: ²Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. (2 Tim. 4:1-2)

B. The Lord commissions elders to rule over, that is, *to govern and lead the local church of Jesus Christ.*

Just as the shepherds of Israel ruled the people, so their New Testament counterparts are to be the leaders of their people. But whereas the shepherds of Israel failed their charge, the lord calls redeemed men and commissions them to shepherd His people. He gives them a heart to know Him and a heart to care for the well-being of His people. As the Lord had promised His people: “I will set up shepherds over them

who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking,' says the LORD."

Paul gave instruction to the elders of the church at Ephesus regarding their responsibility before the Lord:

"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*, to *shepherd* the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." (Act 20:28)

And then it was Peter, who was an elder himself, who gave the definitive instruction on the nature and manner of the work of the pastor.

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: ²Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; ³nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; ⁴and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. ⁵Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (1 Pet. 5:1ff)

Peter set forth the nature of pastoral leadership in this exhortation to elders. Elders are to lead primarily through example, even as they teach the people the Word of God. They are to oversee the flock, watching over and watching out for the well-being of the people of God on behalf of the Lord, the Chief Shepherd. They are commissioned by Him to serve His people on his behalf. They are accountable to Him and one day they must give an account to Him of their service to His people.

The manner of service of New Testament shepherds of the Lord's people is to be decidedly different than the unfaithful shepherds of the Old Testament. The Lord Jesus told His disciples very forthrightly,

"The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.' ²⁶But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves. (Luke 22:25-30)

Here we see that the Christian view of authority is decidedly different than how the fallen world views human authority. Jesus said, "he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves" (22:26). All authority which we have should be employed in *serv*ing others. Authority is never to be used to gain dominance or control over others--that is self-serving, self-exalting. We are to be servants, using the authority with which we have been entrusted to serve others, ministering to their practical needs as well as their spiritual: providing instruction, exhortation, encouragement, rebuke and correction, if needed.

We also see our Lord's example of exercising authority. "For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves" (Luke 22:27). In contrast to the accepted notion that one with greater authority is regarded as expecting to be served by others, our Lord was serving others with the authority that had been given to Him. He never used His authority to manipulate or bring personal benefit to Himself. He was devoted to serving His Father, serving the poor and needy, serving His disciples, by healing and instructing in the Word of God.

C. The Lord commissions elders to *protect* the local church of Jesus Christ.

Paul gathered the elders of the church at Ephesus and gave them instruction as to their calling and work. He charged them with the responsibility to protect the church from devious men and from false doctrine. As shepherds protect their flock of sheep from those who would bring harm to them, so elders are responsible shepherds of the church to protect the Lord's sheep from those who would harm His people. Here are Paul's words from **Acts 20:17-31**:

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church...

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. ¹⁸And when they had come to him, he said to them: "You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, ¹⁹servicing the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; ²⁰how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, ²¹testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. ²²And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, ²³except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. ²⁴But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

²⁵And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. ²⁶Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹***For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.*** ³⁰***Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.*** ³¹***Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.***

It is the elders' responsibility to protect the church. They are to be on constant watch, as a shepherd constantly watches out over his flock, guarding his charge from any and all that would harm them. The elders are to guard the people of God from forces outside the church and from dangerous men who may arise within the church. The Lord has charged them with this responsibility to protect His people.

What does protecting the church entail? Here is a good summary:

Protecting the flock includes seeking the lost, straying sheep—a critical aspect of shepherding that many church shepherds totally neglect. Moreover, protecting the flock involves disciplining sin, admonishing improper behavior and attitudes (1 Thess. 5:12), and stopping bitter infighting. Although the New Testament emphasizes the elders' role in protecting against doctrinal error, the elders cannot neglect seeking the lost and correcting sinful behavior.⁵

The Lord calls and equips these men in His churches to protect His people in a manner in which they are, for the most part, unable to protect themselves. Sheep are vulnerable creatures, and by nature, rather weak in their ability to defend themselves. The Lord has entrusted elders to do for His people that which they cannot do (very well) for themselves.

Here is a good depiction of the weakness and vulnerability of the Lord's people:

Protecting the flock is vitally important because sheep are defenseless animals. They are utterly helpless in the face of wolves, bears, lions, jackals, or robbers. Phillip Keller, writing from his wealth of experience as a shepherd and agricultural worker in East Africa and Canada, explains how unaware and vulnerable sheep are to danger, even inevitable death:

⁵ Alexander Straugh, *Biblical Eldership; An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Eldership* (revised and expanded) (Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), p. 18.

It reminds me of the behavior of a band of sheep under attack from dogs, cougars, bears, or even wolves. Often blind in fear or stupid unawareness they stand rooted to the spot watching their companions being cut to shreds. The predator will pounce upon one then another of the flock raking and tearing them with tooth and claw. Meanwhile, the other sheep may act as if they did not even hear or recognize the carnage going on around them. It is as though they were totally oblivious to the peril of their own precarious position.⁶

The Lord has called and commissioned elders to be guardians of His people in any and all matters that would threaten their spiritual well-being.

IV. The people of God are to submit to the leadership of their shepherds.

We may read of this in several places. In Hebrews 13:7 we read that believers are to follow the example of those who have led the people of God, who taught them the Word of God.

“Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct” (13:7).

These leaders appear to have been those who had at first introduced the readers to Christ but have since died in faith. These Christians had witnessed first-hand that these leaders were deserving of emulation and imitation. We read in **Philippians 3:17** in which Paul encourages his readers to “follow” those who are living rightly. “Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern.”

When the writer speaks of these rulers and of “the outcome of their conduct”, he may be speaking of the good witness they had manifested in the way they had died (martyrdom?). But perhaps it is more likely it refers to the fact that they died in faith, just like those described in Hebrews 11.

Then we read in verse 8, “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*” We should understand this statement in the light of the context. Whereas those leaders are now gone and can but be recalled with fondness of memory and their lives recollected for an example to follow, Jesus Christ, in contrast, is yet the same and can be depended on now and forever. He is the eternal Son (1:12) who “yesterday” Himself endured a life of suffering having offered Himself up as a sacrifice for His people. “Today” He lives as the High Priest of His people who intercedes on their behalf and gives needful grace in times of need. And “forever” He may be depended upon to stand before and on behalf of His brethren.

We read in **Hebrews 13:17** the direct command for the people of God to obey their spiritual rulers:

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

In Hebrews 13:7 the writer referred to past leaders who had died in faith; this is a reference to present leaders. Submission is not simply obeying an authority when you agree with him, submission many times involves deferring to a leader’s judgment even though you may disagree with him. And although this idea may (and has) result in the abuse of power and irresponsible submission to arrogant and self-serving leaders, nevertheless, the principle stands. This should be one’s attitude and response to one’s spiritual leader:

“If indeed this leader is truly concerned for my soul, then I will tend to defer to his judgment.” Why? For I am equally aware of my ability to deceive myself even as I am able to have another deceive me.

⁶ Ibid, p. 18.

He has concern for my soul. He has experience in these matters. The Lord has called him and given him to me as my servant to help me and guide me, and so I will obey him.”

Spiritual leaders will one day render an account to the Lord. They will have to give an account of their own life and service. But perhaps the idea here is that they will also “report” or give their assessment of the ones who the Lord had placed under their leadership. It would be good to ask, “How would my pastor assess my Life and character if he had to give an honest forthright assessment?”

We read that “*watch out over your souls.*” This is the description of spiritual shepherds who are awake, losing sleep, guarding you while you are sleeping or watching lest you stray from the fold. The Lord has promised to call and equip men to lead His people. He has called upon His people to submit to them.

Submission to authority is a great duty of Christians. It is also a great difficulty for many, requiring great humility, grace, and faith in the Lord. As one wrote:

Submission is always difficult. Our hearts are stubborn, prideful, and rebellious. Yet we are called to submit, even in trying and disagreeable situations. Children must submit to imperfect parents, wives to difficult husbands, and employees to demanding employers. Likewise, the congregation is required to submit to and obey its elders, even if the elders have weaknesses and faults. Indeed, most elders are quite imperfect, so those who are disobedient can always find reason to revolt. Of course the things we consider to be the elders’ misjudgements or errors may well be our own errors, do we should not be too hasty or disregard the judgment of those God has chosen to provide for our spiritual care.⁷

May our Lord be merciful and gracious to our church in these matters. May He impart grace to the elders to serve rightly in their leadership. May He impart grace to the congregation to submit to the elders as the Lord leads them in His will. May our Lord guide and enable our church to function biblically and properly in its government as we seek to live before Him closely and serve Him faithfully.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,
And to present you faultless
Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,
To God our Savior,
Who alone is wise?
Be glory and majesty,
Dominion and power,
Both now and forever.
Amen. (Jude 24f)

⁷ Ibid, p. 292.