

# Undershepherds

Jeremiah 23:1–6, 1 Peter 5:1–5

Have you ever heard the word *undersheriff*? What is an undersheriff? A sheriff's *deputy*, who reports to the sheriff and helps him enforce the law. Michigan law stipulates that in counties with larger populations, "the sheriff shall appoint an *undersheriff*, who shall also be the chief deputy sheriff." Clinton County, where we are gathered this morning, has an undersheriff—something useful to know if you're a lawbreaker! As Christians we are thankful for the rule of law. The *devil* is the "lawless one," seeking to undermine good order, and we see devilish impulses in society today. These are to be resisted!

The church is the *kingdom* of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus himself is King, with supreme and universal authority. At the Last Day he will be universally recognized as "King of kings and Lord of lords."

The church is not only Christ's *kingdom* but also his *flock*. "We are his people, and the *sheep* of his pasture."<sup>1</sup> Our New Testament text today calls Christ the "Chief Shepherd." But "*Chief Shepherd*" implies that there are other shepherds. The apostle Peter clarifies that he is addressing "the elders who are among you." He instructs them to "*shepherd* the flock of God which is among you." It is significant that he makes a verb out of the noun "shepherd," which is a title of Christ. He is telling church elders: "You are shepherds along with Christ—but remember: *he* is the 'Chief Shepherd.'" At the final day, all undershepherds will give account to the Chief Shepherd. Those who faithfully perform the duties of their office will receive his "well done." They will be *blessed* by the Father. On the other hand, those who undermine Christ's authority or compete with Christ will be exposed as evildoers and come under his *curse*. The blessings and curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 find their ultimate fulfillment at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

So the title of today's sermon is "Undershepherds," a term implied by the apostle Peter. Here is the principle: *undershepherds have no independent authority, but report to the Chief Shepherd*, just as undersheriffs report to the sheriff.

Since Christ is indeed King and Head of his church, it follows that anyone, such as a pope, who wears a crown and sits on a throne and claims universal authority, is a usurper and enemy of Christ.<sup>2</sup> *Christ*, not the pope, is the King and Head of his church.

*Christ* is the Chief Shepherd, but he has appointed, as it were, *undershepherds*, under himself, to shepherd his people. Now this idea might not play well in a self-

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<sup>1</sup> Ps. 100:3

<sup>2</sup> According to *Catholic Encyclopedia*, "vicar of Christ" is "a title of the pope implying his *supreme and universal primacy*, both of honor and of jurisdiction, over the Church of Christ" (<https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/vicarof-christ> accessed 10-18-25, emphasis added)—something the Reformed churches categorically reject.

centered culture, but it is actually a great comfort to the Christian. Since the time of David the church has gladly acknowledged that “the LORD is my shepherd . . . . He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. . . . Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”<sup>3</sup> Here is a Psalm that does not apply to the world generally, but only to the church. Only the Christian can say, “The LORD is my shepherd.” Only the Christian has a special, saving relationship with the Shepherd. Only God, through his sovereign Spirit, can make a saint out of a sinner.

Now in the natural world sheep that follow a shepherd are happy. Their shepherd loves them and cares for them, day after day. He knows the location of the green pastures where they feed. He leads them beside the still waters, where they drink. His rod and staff protect them from wolves and extricate them when they get caught in briars and thorns. He anoints their heads with oil, soothing their bleeding wounds.

Christ, enthroned in heaven, is the loving Shepherd of his church and puts us in local flocks with flesh-and-blood ministers and elders who exercise spiritual care on Christ’s behalf—following *his* agenda, not their own. Ministers feed us with the truth of his Word, explaining and applying it to our hearts and consciences, serving up spiritual food for the soul. Ruling elders exercise oversight over the ministry of the Word, taking care that the sheep are being faithfully shepherded through the public preaching. Elders listen intently to every sermon, making sure that Christ’s sheep are fed a balanced spiritual diet through the public ministry of the Word, with emphasis on the Gospel. With the pastor, elders visit the flock to check on the spiritual condition of the sheep. The elders’ care of the sheep is an evidence of Christ’s care for his flock, and is welcomed by Christ’s true sheep.

Our New Testament text begins with the words, “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder.” There is no explanation of “elder,” for the church from earliest times had been overseen by elders. The first occurrence of the term “elders” in the Bible is actually a reference to the governance of Egypt. In Genesis 50:7 we read that “Joseph went up to bury his father: and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the *elders* of his house, and all the *elders* of the land of Egypt.” It was understood that a healthy society should look to its elders—men of experience and understanding—for leadership. The fifth commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother,” is rooted in the very character of God and was intuitively understood by man the creature from the very beginning. Our common law recognizes that parents are responsible for their children. It was God’s judgment on Israel when he said, “I will give *children* to be their princes, and

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<sup>3</sup> Ps. 23

*babes* shall rule over them. . . . As for my people, *children* are their oppressors, and women rule over them” (Isa. 3:4, 12). The phrases “the elders of Israel” or “the elders of the people” occur some 37 times in the Old Testament and had a recognized meaning. The first occurrence is in Exodus 3:16, where God tells Moses, “Go, and gather *the elders of Israel* together, and say unto them, The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared unto me, saying, I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt” (Ex. 3:16). Israel at that time was an enslaved people living in poverty, but there was recognition that the elders understood what it meant to be Israelites. Moses was instructed to take the elders of Israel with him when he went before Pharaoh to press Jehovah’s demand to let his people go into the wilderness to worship him. After God had delivered his people from Egypt and promulgated his law to them at Sinai he tells Moses, “Come up unto the LORD, thou, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and *seventy of the elders of Israel*; and worship ye afar off” (Ex. 24:1).

The word *elders* occurs some sixty times in the New Testament. In Matthew 15 Jesus is asked, “Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders?” showing that elders were still the recognized leaders among the Jews.

On Paul’s first missionary journey he and his missionary team “ordained *elders* in every church” (Acts 14:23). The word for “ordained” (NKJV: “appointed”) is actually χειροτονέω, which literally means *elect by raising hands*. The prefix χειρο-, from χεῖρ, *hand*, is related to our English word *chiropractor*, a practitioner who manipulates human joints by hand. To elect by raising hands indicated the congregations’ approval of the elders who would have spiritual oversight over them. In other words, Paul and his traveling companions did not impose spiritual leadership on the congregations against their will but sought the congregations’ assessment of their elders’ character and spiritual judgment. Significantly, in Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council—a large meeting of the apostles, pastors and elders from churches all over the then-known world, called to consider a matter that was disturbing the churches—was called, not by the apostles alone; rather, “the apostles *and elders* came together to consider this matter” (Acts 15:6). After the Council debated, using arguments from scripture, and came to a consensus, Paul and Barnabas went through the cities and delivered to the churches “the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles *and elders* at Jerusalem” (Acts 16:4). God was establishing a precedent for the church to call synods and councils for the orderly consideration of doctrinal controversies. The early councils of the Christian church gave us the Nicene Creed, which reaffirmed the doctrine of the Trinity, believed among all churches.

So when the apostle Peter in our text says, “The *elders* who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder,” it is evident that the term *elder* has a *recognized*

meaning. It is understood that a biblical church is governed by a *plurality* of elders, and not by any single elder acting alone. Additionally, Peter's use of the phrase, "I who am a fellow elder," reveals humility. In the lists of the apostles in the Gospels it is Peter who is always mentioned first. He could have said, "I, Peter, who am the first among the apostles." But he does not say that. Rather, he says, "I who am a *fellow elder*," giving the church an enduring example of humility. I am personally troubled by the term "lead pastor" that is in use even in Orthodox Presbyterian churches. Those who use that term ought to carefully consider what it conveys—that some pastors are more equal than others.

So Peter under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit instructs: "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers." Note here the confluence of three important terms that essentially refer to the same man: "elders" are to "shepherd the flock." That means that elders are *shepherds*. But that is not all; they also serve as *overseers*. The word here is ἐπισκοπέω, *serve as overseers*, the verb form of ἐπίσκοπος, translated *overseer* or *bishop*. As I mentioned in an earlier sermon, the biblical sense of "bishop" never entailed a single man having sole oversight and rule over many churches. The use of the term *bishop* seems to foster an unhealthy clergy-laity distinction. But Peter's point is that the terms *elder*, *pastor* (from the Latin for *shepherd*) and *overseer* (*bishop*) refer to the same man. Even ruling elders are to "shepherd" the flock. When they see a sheep going astray, they ought, like a good shepherd, to go after it. As Peter wrote earlier in his epistle, "ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls"—that is, Christ.<sup>4</sup> Godly pastors and elders lead their flock *to* Christ, never away from Christ!

Godly elders serve, "not by compulsion but *willingly*, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." Elders should serve "*willingly*." As Paul teaches in 1 Timothy 3, those who serve must "desire" the office of an overseer. Being a ruling elder is a calling. It is Christ himself who calls men to be elders. "When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men."<sup>5</sup> The men Christ calls are men whom he gifts for ministry; certainly they are gifts to the church. How many times do we as a congregation receive prayer requests from other churches, saying, "Pray with us that God might raise up elders within our midst"? I know of at least one fairly good-sized church in our presbytery that has only one ruling elder. He has been serving faithfully for many years and is now having to step back somewhat from active ministry to attend to his wife's deteriorating health. Now a pastor and one elder are, technically, a plurality, not a singularity, but a congregation's having just one ruling elder is certainly not an ideal situation. How the church needs to

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Pet. 2:25

<sup>5</sup> Eph. 4:8

continually “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”<sup>6</sup>

Being an elder is hard—sometimes thankless—work. We need to pray for strength for our elders, that God might sustain them for spiritual warfare over the long haul—that he would grant them, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man (Eph. 3:16). Here are men who sorely need God’s strengthening to “fight the good fight of faith,” balancing their personal devotional life, the needs of their wife and children, their responsibilities to their employer, and the needs of the congregation, the presbytery, and the general assembly. It is a big job.

The apostle Paul spoke of what it was like to serve Christ: “I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked . . .”—and on and on he goes (2 Cor. 11).

But Peter promises a great reward: “and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the *crown of glory* that does not fade away.” In the words of a gospel song, “It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus.” Yes, it will! To hear his “Well done” will eclipse the long hours and the toil and sweat that elders put into ministry.

In the last verse of our New Testament text the apostle summarizes the people’s responsibility to their spiritual leaders: “Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders.” In submitting, God’s people give to themselves a great gift. Clearly, we are to submit ourselves to God’s will, and obviously, his will for us is that we voluntarily submit ourselves to the church. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the apostle Paul writes, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” The godly wife does not submit to her husband because he is stronger, or more forceful, or smarter, or more clever; rather, she submits herself to her own husband “as to the Lord.” In other words, she submits out of a sense of duty to God. At bottom, that is the only kind of obedience that pleases him. Have you ever seen a child have a meltdown in a public place? It is not a pretty sight. Some children are defiant. How many parents have felt like saying, “Child, if you would only obey, you would learn that it is in your own best interest.” The Bible speaks of this: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right . . . that it may be *well* with you and you may live *long* on the earth.”<sup>7</sup> If wives submit to their husbands and children to their parents, as to the Lord, the home is a happier and more peaceful place. Similarly, if the bride of Christ, the church, submits to godly elders, pleading with their congregations to obey their Lord, the church is a

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<sup>6</sup> Matt. 9:38 ESV

<sup>7</sup> Eph. 6:1–3

happier, more peaceful, better-functioning place. God will be glorified, and sinners will be brought to Christ. The church will have a more powerful witness to the world, which will stand up and take notice that here is a group of believers who are living out their faith with sincerity and integrity.

Ultimately, Christ's exhortation "shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers" means *shepherd the flock of God, leading them to Christ*. Paul says this explicitly in 1 Corinthians 11: "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ." He was setting himself up as a role model, inviting the people, "Pay attention to me. See that I am a faithfully living out Christ." Paul was holding himself to *model* godly behavior before the congregation. A pastor can preach with all the skill and passion he can muster, but inevitably some of his words are forgotten or fall on deaf ears. But if a congregation sees a godly life modeled before them, the object lesson will be all the more powerful. This is what Jesus did when he came into this world. He came to reveal God to his people. "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son."<sup>8</sup> God had revealed himself to Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Job. He had spoken audibly from heaven. His people had a verbalized knowledge of his truth. But then Jesus came and *modeled* that truth! What was before just facts and propositions and arguments was now modeled before peoples' very eyes. Oh, how the church needs men who can *model* the Christian faith—model *Christ*!—faithful shepherds who lead God's people to Christ.

On the other hand, consider our Old Testament text. God himself speaks, and he gives a powerful warning: "'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!' says the LORD. Therefore 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. '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. *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. 'Behold, the days are coming,' says the LORD, 'that I will raise to David a [righteous Branch]; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In 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.'"

Faithful shepherds are a blessing to a church, but unfaithful shepherds who destroy and scatter Christ's sheep are a curse. At the final day they will hear the

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<sup>8</sup> Heb. 1:1-2

Lord who warned, “Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings.”  
Judgment Day is coming!

The only way we can escape God’s righteousness judgment is to be clothed with “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” Here is the doctrine of imputed righteousness. If we, like faithful Abraham, believe in the LORD, the perfect righteousness of Christ will be credited to us. That is our only hope of salvation.

Dear saints of God, follow the Shepherd by following his appointed undershepherds. Confess Christ with his church. Amen.