

November/December 2009, Volume 6, Issue 6

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### **Editor's Note**

Church discipline is one place where everything in a church's life collides. Theory and practice collide. The doctrines of God, sin, judgment, redemption, and eschatology collide. Sometimes personalities collide. And, hopefully, sin and grace collide.



This means that practicing discipline well requires good pastoral and theological sensibilities. So we're devoting a second eJournal in a row to the topic, both to exercise our own sensibilities and yours. Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert provide counsel on what to do before you practice discipline. Matt Schmucker, both in his new article and in the one from the archives, offers advice on dealing with the non-attenders. Stephen Matteucci considers the importance of the one or two witnesses in Matthew 18. And I tackle the question of whether a member can resign his or her membership in order to avoid discipline altogether.

Finally, several pastors recall lessons they've learned the hard way in the forum, where Bob Johnson states the conclusion of the matter well: discipline in a church should be as normal and regular as preaching, teaching, and evangelism. That's a tough idea to accept, and one more reason we think it's worth coming back to this issue yet again. May Christ's bride be made ready.

— Jonathan Leeman

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## **PRACTICING CHURCH DISCIPLINE**



### **"Don't do it!!" Why You Shouldn't Practice Church Discipline**

Not the advice you were expecting from *this* pastor, but it's important to shepherd your church toward discipline the right way, not the wrong way.

*By Mark Dever*

**Page 6**



**[Before You Discipline, Teach This First](#)**

Convinced it's time for your church to begin practicing discipline? Make sure you teach these things first.

*By Greg Gilbert*

**Page 9**



**[Those Toxic Non-Attenders](#)**

Believe it or not, some of the most dangerous people in your church are the ones who are absent.

*By Matt Schmucker*

**Page 12**



**[The Preemptive Resignation—A Get Out of Jail Free Card?](#)**

Can church members resign their membership to avoid discipline?

*By Jonathan Leeman*

**Page 15**



**[Grabbing a Dog by its Ears: The Role of Witnesses](#)**

While it's generally wise (and biblical!) to stay out of other people's quarrels, sometimes Jesus commands it.

*By Stephen Matteucci*

**Page 18**

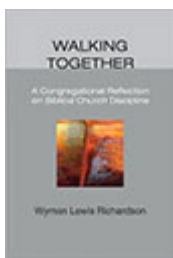


**[Pastors' and Theologians' Forum](#)**

What lessons on church discipline have you learned the hard way?

*Answers from Tom Ascol, Bob Johnson, Dennis Newkirk, Walter Price, and Philip Ryken*

**Page 20**



**[Book Review: \*Walking Together: A Congregational Reflection on Biblical Church Discipline\*, by Wyman Richardson](#)**

*Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman*

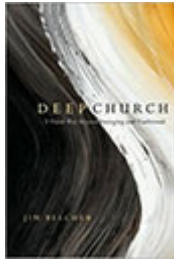
**Page 24**

**One From the Archives: [Matt Schmucker's classic article Cleaning Up the Rolls](#)**

**Page 26**

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## MISCELLANEOUS BOOK REVIEWS



[Book Review: \*Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional\*, by Jim Belcher](#)

*Reviewed by Greg Gilbert*

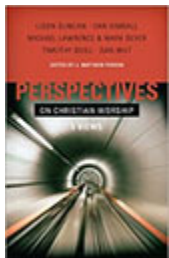
**Page 28**



[Book Review: \*Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them\*, by Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayes](#)

*Reviewed by Bobby Jamieson*

**Page 31**



[Book Review: \*Perspectives on Christian Worship: Five Views\*, edited by Matthew Pinson](#)

*Reviewed by Bob Kauflin*

**Page 34**



[Book Review: \*The God-Centered Life: Insights from Jonathan Edwards for Today\*, by Josh Moody](#)

*Reviewed by Andrew Davis*

**Page 37**



[Book Review: \*The Great Exchange: My Sin for His Righteousness\*, by Jerry Bridges and Bob Bevington](#)

*Reviewed by Shane Walker*

**Page 40**

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## AUDIO—LEADERSHIP INTERVIEWS



### [Inspiring Lives with Iain Murray](#)

*Posted on November 1, 2009*

Iain Murray, one of evangelicalism's premier biographers, points to several luminaries from church history you might have missed.



### [Christian Rap with Shai Linne and Voice](#)

*Posted on October 1, 2009*

Are "Christian" and "rap" mutually exclusive? Hardly. Shai Linne and Voice explain hip hop culture, rap music's potential for the gospel, and why rap can't replace preaching.



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## UPCOMING 9MARKS EVENTS



### [9Marks Workshop](#)

Riverside, CA

Nov. 6 – 7, 2009

*Mark Dever, Greg Gilbert, and Rick Holland*



### [Contemporary Issues Chapel Series - Biola University](#)

La Mirada, CA

Nov. 9 – 11, 2009

*Mark Dever*



### [Truth & Life Conference - The Master's College](#)

Santa Clarita, CA

Jan. 13 – 16, 2010

*Mark Dever*



### [9Marks Weekender](#)

Washington, DC

Mar. 18 – 22, 2010

*Mark Dever and Matt Schmucker*



### Together for the Gospel 2010

Louisville, KY

Apr. 13 – 15, 2010

*Mark Dever, Ligon Duncan, C.J. Mahaney, Al Mohler, Thabiti Anyabwile, John MacArthur, John Piper, and R.C. Sproul*

Registration is now open!

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## NEW TRANSLATIONS

The Chinese translation of *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever can be purchased [here](#).

The German translation of *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever can be purchased [here](#).

The French translation of *What is a Healthy Church?* by Mark Dever can be purchased [here](#).

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## **"Don't do it!!" Why You *Shouldn't* Practice Church Discipline**

*By Mark Dever*

"Don't do it." That's the first thing I tell pastors when they discover church discipline is in the Bible. I say, "Don't do it, at least not yet." Why this advice?

Let's think about what happens in the process of discovery. When pastors first hear of church discipline, they often think the idea is ridiculous. It sounds unloving, counter-evangelistic, weird, controlling, legalistic, and judgmental. It certainly seems unworkable. They even wonder if it's illegal.

### **THEY OPEN THEIR BIBLES**

Then, when no one is looking, they look back at their Bible. They come across passages like 2 Thessalonians 3:6, or Galatians 6:1, or the classic text on discipline—1 Corinthians 5. They consider the Old Testament background of excommunication, and they recall that God has always purposed for his people to be a picture of his own holiness (Deut. 17:7; Lev. 19:2; Isa. 52:11; 1 Peter 1:16).

Then, somehow, they turn to Jesus' own teaching, and discover that, in the same chapter in which Jesus condemns judgmentalism (see Matt. 7:1), he also warns the disciples to be on their guard against false prophets and against those who claim to follow him but do not obey his Word (Matt. 7:15-20; 21-23). Finally, Matthew 18 comes up, where Jesus instructs his followers to exclude the unrepentant sinner in certain situations (Matt. 18:17). *Maybe churches should practice discipline?*

What finally sends these otherwise nice, normal, well-adjusted, previously popular pastors over the edge is their discovery that some churches do, in fact, practice church discipline. Not strange, maladjusted churches, but happy, growing, large, grace-oriented churches like Grace Community in Sun Valley, California, or Tenth Presbyterian in Philadelphia, or First Baptist in Durham, North Carolina, or the Village Church near Dallas.

Now these pastors are in trouble. They realize they need to be obedient. They feel compelled by the biblical picture of a holy, loving, united church, a church that reflects the one, holy, loving God. They understand their failure to practice discipline hurts their church and its witness to the world.

It's at this point that a sullen resolve often seems to set in. "I will lead this congregation to be biblical at this point if it's the last thing I do!" And, too often, it is.

### **LIKE A BOLT OUT OF A CLEAR BLUE SKY**

Into the peaceful, well-meaning life of an innocent, Bible-believing congregation, the lightning bolt of church discipline strikes! It may be in a sermon. It may be in a conversation between the pastor and a deacon. It may be in a hastily arranged motion at a members meeting. But somewhere it hits, usually accompanied by great earnestness and a torrent of Scriptural citations.

Then, the sincere action is taken.

Then, the response comes: misunderstanding and hurt feelings result. Counter charges are made. Sin is attacked and defended. Names are called. Acrimony abounds! The symphony of the local congregation transposes into a cacophony of arguments and accusations. People cry out, "Where will this stop?!" and "So do you think *you're* perfect?"

### **CHURCH DISCIPLINE: DON'T DO IT! AT LEAST NOT YET**

What's the pastor to do? My advice would be, "Don't get yourself into this situation in the first place. Once you've discovered that corrective church discipline is biblical, hold off on practicing it for a while." (Church discipline is both corrective and formative, the latter referring to the church's work of teaching or forming Christians.)

Now at this point maybe you're thinking, "Mark, are you telling us to disobey the Bible?!"

In fact, I'm not. I'm trying to help you do what Jesus instructed his disciples to do (see Luke 14:25-33): count the cost before you begin. Make sure your congregation sufficiently understands and accepts this biblical teaching. Your goal is not immediate compliance followed by an explosion, but rather a congregation being reformed by the Word of God. You want them going in the right direction. And that requires patient shepherding.

## **HOW TO SHEPHERD YOUR CHURCH TOWARD DISCIPLINE**

First, *encourage humility*. Help people to see that they may be mistaken about their own spiritual state. Consider the example of the man in 1 Corinthians 5 as well as Paul's exhortation to the Corinthian Christians more broadly in 2 Corinthians 13:5. Paul charges us to examine ourselves to see if we're in the faith. Do your church members recognize that they are to help one another do that?

Second, *make sure that your congregation has a biblical understanding of church membership*. People don't understand discipline because they don't understand membership. Membership is a congregational relationship. It is not created, sustained, or ended merely by the act of an individual; an individual cannot join a church unilaterally without the congregation's consent. Likewise, an individual cannot continue in membership, or leave the membership of a particular congregation without the congregation's explicit or implicit approval (except by death). That's a mouthful, but what I'm basically saying is that it is a church's business to decide who its members are. And members cannot simply leave when they're in unrepentant sin. (See Jonathan Leeman's article, "[The Preemptive Resignation—A Get Out of Jail Free Card?](#)" for a fuller discussion of this matter.)

Such a vision of membership, however, must first be positively presented. Understand what the Bible teaches about church membership. Make sure that you've familiarized yourself with several crucial points and passages that you can remind members of when they ask. Look for opportunities in your sermons to teach on the distinction between the church and the world, and how that distinction is important for the nature and mission of the church. Help your congregation to assemble such a picture of God's plan for his church that the outlines of discipline begin to become conspicuous by their absence from your church's practice. Remember that the members must understand membership and discipline because they're the ones who must carry it out.

Third, *pray that God would help you to model ministry* to other Christians in your church by your public teaching and your private work with families and individuals. Work toward creating a "culture of discipleship" and accountability in your church, where Christians understand that a basic part of their following Jesus is helping others to follow Jesus (both through evangelism and discipling other Christians). Help them to understand the special responsibilities they have toward other members of their particular congregation. Teach them that the Christian life is personal, but not private.

Fourth, *prepare your congregation's written constitution and covenant*. Consult [Ken Sande's article](#) on the 9Marks website, for some general legal advice. Begin teaching pre-membership classes in which matters touching membership and discipline are explicitly taught.

Fifth, and finally, in your pulpit ministry, *never tire of teaching what a Christian is*. Regularly define the gospel and conversion. Explicitly teach that a church is intended to be composed of repenting sinners who are trusting in Christ alone, and who give credible professions of that trust. Pray that you would be centered on the gospel. Resolve that, with God's help, you will slowly but steadily lead your congregation to change. Pray that, rather than being a church where it's strange to ask people how they're doing

spiritually, you would become a church where it would begin to seem strange if someone *didn't* ask about your life.

### **YOU KNOW YOU'RE READY WHEN...**

You know your congregation is ready to practice church discipline when:

- Your leaders understand it, agree with it, and perceive its importance (mature leadership shared among several elders is the most consistent with Scripture and very helpful for leading a church through potentially volatile discussions);
- Your congregation is united in understanding that such discipline is biblical;
- Your membership consists largely of people who regularly hear your sermons;
- A particularly clear case comes along in which your members would fairly unitedly perceive that excommunication is the correct action (for example, excommunication for adultery is more likely to yield agreement among your members than excommunication for non-attendance.)

So, my pastor friend, though you may have once thought that the idea of church discipline is ridiculous, I pray that God will help you to lead your congregation to see that it is a loving, provocative, attractive, distinct, respectful, gracious act of obedience and mercy, and that it helps to build a church that brings glory to God.

But remember, when you first become convinced of the biblical case for church discipline, your first step in an established congregation is probably to begin by *not* practicing discipline, so that someday you can.

*Mark Dever is the senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, and the author of Nine Marks of a Healthy Church (Crossway, 2000).*

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## Before You Discipline, Teach This First

By Greg Gilbert

*Pastor:* "So, because of all that, it's with great sadness that I move that we as a church remove Joe from membership as an act of discipline. Is there any discussion?"

*Sister Sue:* "Pastor, I have some discussion. I don't see how we can do this. What right do we have to say whether Joe's a Christian? Only God can say that!"

*Pastor:* "Yes, of course that's true. But First Corin- ..."

*Brother Bill:* "Oh come on! I agree with Sue. I believe in the Bible and everything, Pastor, but a lot of that just isn't going to work now."

*Deacon Doug:* "And we're all sinners. Why should we single Joe out?"

*Pastor:* "[Sigh.] Alright. All those in favor, say 'aye'."

[the sound of crickets chirping]

*Pastor:* "Those opposed?"

*Everyone:* "**NAY!!!**"

[After the meeting] *Chairman Charlie:* "Pastor, the deacons want to meet with you tomorrow night. We have some concerns...."

That scenario or something like it has played itself out in far too many churches. Pastors with an admirable love of Scripture and their congregations, but with a lamentable lack of foresight and wisdom, find themselves in trouble because their people just aren't ready to take the step of practicing church discipline—even after they've been taught about it.

Most every pastor knows that he'll have to do a good deal of teaching about church discipline before his congregation is ready for it. What might not be so obvious, though, is that he will have to teach the church about more than just church discipline before they're ready for discipline. In fact, a biblical understanding of church discipline—what it is, what it aims for, and how it functions—has to be built on a solid understanding of other Christian doctrines.

To put it another way, there are certain things you have to teach in your church long before you even broach the subject of church discipline. It's really that simple. You have to teach a child to walk before you teach him to climb a mountain.

Let me list just a few things that a church needs to understand and embrace before it will be in a position to carry out church discipline.

### 1. THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

This, of course, is where it all begins. If your church is not convinced of Scripture's authority over them—over their own lives and over the life and practice of the church—you will not be able to bring them to a biblical understanding of church discipline. Our authority, right, and responsibility to practice discipline are given solely by the Word of God.

If you don't teach your congregation to look to and submit to Scripture in everything, the "We've never done this, pastor" argument will devastate any attempt to practice discipline. So will the "We don't have the right to do this" argument. And the "This is mean" argument. And on and on and on.

## **2. WHAT A CHRISTIAN IS**

If the idea of church discipline is to make any sense at all, your congregation must understand what it means to be a Christian in the first place. They're going to have to understand the gospel. They'll have to grasp the fact that being a Christian is not just about making a decision, but rather about ongoing faith in Jesus and repentance from sin.

They need to know that the church is for *Christians*, not just nice people, and they need you, pastor, to teach them the difference.

## **3. THE REALITY AND MEANING OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP**

Your church won't be willing to put someone *out* of the church unless they understand that there is an *in* and an *out*. The Bible is very clear about that fact. There are those who are "members" of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27) and those who are "outsiders" (1 Cor. 5:12). Your church needs to understand that, too, or the idea of putting someone "out" of something which has no "in" will quite understandably sound ridiculous.

Not only so, but your church needs to understand that church membership involves more than being a well-liked member of the community, or being a member of a certain family in town. Church membership means publicly affirming both someone's profession of faith in Jesus as well as their decision to submit to the oversight of the church. When your church begins to understand that, the idea of church discipline will start to make a lot more sense.

## **4. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD**

God intends his people to look different from the world. He intends them to live holy lives and to war against sin. That's what it means to repent. Repentance does not mean that a person has stopped sinning, but it does mean that he has declared war against sin. Your church must understand this before you can expect them to understand discipline.

Of course, there is a world of nuance to be talked about here—the difference between unrepentant and repentant sin, or the difference between scandalous sin and private sin, just to name a couple. Those are important conversations to have, but they'll only make sense within an understanding of the basic fact that God intends his church to be different from the world.

## **5. THE CHURCH'S RESPONSIBILITY TO JUDGE**

Many pastors run into opposition to church discipline in the form of a church member quoting Matthew 7:1, "Judge not, lest ye be judged." It's an uncomfortable topic in our hyper-tolerant age, but pastors need to teach their congregations that, while Jesus *does not give* his church the right to determine who is to be in or out of heaven, he *does give* them the right to determine who is to be in or out of the church. That's what Jesus meant by giving to the church "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16:19; 18:17). It's also what Paul meant when he asked, "Are you not to judge those inside [the church]?" (1 Cor. 5:12). Your church must understand and accept its responsibility to discipline before it will be able to exercise it.

Those are just a few examples of truths a pastor will need to teach his congregation before he gets to the particular subject of church discipline. I'm sure you could think of many others. I hope, however, that just meditating a bit on this topic will remind you that the job of the pastor is one of patient longsuffering. You don't want to drive the sheep to the field of church discipline. You want to lead them there, step by step,

correcting, rebuking, and encouraging with great patience and careful instruction (2 Tim. 4:2).

*Greg Gilbert is an assistant pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church and is the author of What is the Gospel? (Crossway, 2010).*

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## Those Toxic Non-Attendees

By Matt Schmucker

Growing up I always heard that it was better to be accused of committing a sin of omission than a sin of commission. That way, you could always chalk your sin up to forgetfulness, ignorance or thoughtlessness. The sin of commission was the bigger no-no since it appeared deliberate and calculated.

### NON-ATTENDANCE: JUST A SIN OF OMISSION?

I fear too many Christians think that not attending church on a regular basis is a sin of omission; if it's a sin at all, it would be a little one. No big deal. "Don't bring that legalism over here!" Apparently, this is what many pastors, elders, deacons and whole congregations think, since they have done little to address the staggering numbers of non-attendees.

For example, in my own denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, just one-third of the formal membership of over forty thousand churches in the U.S. actually attend on any given Sunday. That means that about ten million so-called Christians are actually no-shows.

### NOT ALL NON-ATTENDERS ARE ALIKE

Since not all non-attendees are the same, churches should treat different kinds of non-attendees differently. Here are four different kinds:

- Those who live in the area and are unable to attend: age or health prevent them. Such elderly or physically suffering members should be treated with special care. This article isn't about them.
- Those who live (temporarily) outside the area and are unable to attend: military or business assignments prevent them. Such (temporary) non-attendees should also be treated with special care since their travel for work places unique burdens on them and their family. This article isn't about them.
- Those who live outside the area and choose to keep their membership with *your* local church: distance prevents them. Such non-attendees should be encouraged to join a local church they can attend. This article *is* about them.
- Those who live in the area and sporadically, infrequently attend: nothing really prevents them except their own choice. This article is *especially* about them.

### WHY NON-ATTENDERS ARE TOXIC

These last two types of non-attendees have a toxic effect on the local church because they render membership in the body of Christ meaningless.

In 1 Corinthians 12 the apostle Paul speaks of the body and its parts as a metaphor for the church:

"The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body." (1 Cor 12:12)

"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Cor 12:27)

Between these two verses, Paul exhorts the members of the church in Corinth to see themselves as a part of the whole, in need of what every other member contributes. The parts have different functions (some are apostles, some are prophets, and so on), but they all come together to strengthen the whole. This is God's design for the body of Christ: when each member contributes something unique to the

whole, God's own multifaceted glory will be put on display.

Thus, when so-called members (parts) of Christ's body decide to detach themselves from the rest of the body, they threaten the body's integrity. If Christians are detached from a church body, what you have is no longer a body, but scattered limbs.

When I take the pendulum out of my grandfather's clock, it can still do certain things, such as open sealed paint can lids. But that's a mis-use of the pendulum. The pendulum (a part) was designed to fit inside the clock, join the other parts, and provide the weight to put in motion the cogs which turn the hands which allow us to tell time. That's how Christians are meant to function within the body of Christ. A Christian who cuts himself off from a local body of Christians is like a pendulum opening a paint can, not a pendulum that makes a clock run.

But non-attenders don't merely harm themselves; in fact they have a toxic effect on the local church to which they nominally belong. I would argue non-attenders have a toxic effect in four ways.

## **THE TOXIC EFFECTS OF NON-ATTENDERS**

### ***1. They Make Evangelism Harder***

First, non-attenders make evangelism harder. Your church is called to be an outpost of God's kingdom in your community, a small but meaningful display of God's glory as you love one another and mature in Christ. Therefore, everyone who bears the name of Christ, as affirmed by your church, yet who willingly chooses to live their lives apart from the covenanted community of believers is practicing *identity theft*. They've taken Christ's name, but they don't honestly identify with his body, the local church.

To borrow Jonathan Leeman's metaphor, they wear your team's jersey, but they don't practice with or compete for your team. That confuses your witness to the unbelieving community around you. Non-Christians see *your* jersey on a guy who looks like he's playing for the *other* team. It's like a man who wears a Redskins jersey but who only cheers for the Cowboys, goes to Cowboys games, talks about the blue and silver and dreams of living in Dallas someday. It's inconsistent, confusing, and misleading. To go back to more biblical language, Christians have been *adopted* into the body of Christ. Non-attenders act as if they are orphans. This makes it all the more difficult for your church's corporate life to bear witness to the gospel.

### ***2. They Confuse New Believers***

Second, non-attenders confuse new believers. New believers are often a mess. Everything they thought was up is down, and everything they thought was down is up. There is great confusion in the first weeks and months and even years of a new believer's life. They need to be taught well.

But not only that, they need good models. When the doctrine they're taught doesn't sync with the models they see, they become confused. Non-attenders are not only reverse-witnesses, they're reverse models. They disregard and disobey countless passages of Scripture and fail to image God's character in even the most basic ways, even though they claim to be his adopted children.

In their arrogance, non-attenders are effectively saying to new believers, "All that stuff you're reading in the Bible isn't really necessary. You can live without encouragement from other Christians. You can live without sacrificing yourself to serve and love other Christians. You can live without teaching and preaching. You can live without shepherds."

### ***3. They Discourage Regular Attenders***

Third, non-attenders discourage regular attenders. Regular attenders sacrifice to keep their covenant with their local church. They give their money and their time to meet the needs of other members of the body, which is not easy to say the least. Non-attenders don't do these things, at least not with any regularity. So

when a church allows non-attenders to remain members, they effectively gut the meaning of membership, which hurts and discourages the faithful.

Further, non-attenders rob the church of their needed service, which also tends to discourage more faithful attenders. Surely a church of 100 members, all of whom are laboring for God's glory with the gifts God has given them, is exponentially stronger than a church of 35 attenders and 65 non-attenders. Non-attenders unwittingly shift the entire burden to a few, a burden those few are not meant to carry alone.

#### ***4. They Worry Their Leaders***

Fourth, non-attenders worry their leaders. Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account." In light of this verse, a faithful pastor or elder should feel responsible for the spiritual state of every member of his flock. Like a father worried about his son who hasn't yet come home late at night, a good shepherd doesn't rest until all his sheep are accounted for. Non-attenders makes this task nearly impossible.

While time and courage are needed to address the problem of non-attenders, every pastor or elder should feel a burden to remove these no-shows and cure the toxic effect they have on evangelism, on new believers, on the faithful attenders, and on the church's shepherds. The payoff? As the church's membership increasingly consists only in those who faithfully attend and contribute to the life of the body, the church will begin to resemble the body God intended: a display of his wisdom that brings glory to the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ.

*Matt Schmucker is executive director of 9Marks.*

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## The Preemptive Resignation—A Get Out of Jail Free Card?

By Jonathan Leeman

Church leaders often ask how they should respond when a person who is being disciplined by the church resigns before the process of discipline is complete. Should they accept the resignation or continue moving toward excommunication?

Suppose a man decides to leave his wife for another woman. Other members of the church ask the man to repent and return to his wife. He doesn't. They ask again, but this time they also warn him about the possibility of excommunication. So he resigns his membership. Case closed. He's now immune. Or at least that's what the adulterous man is saying. Is that correct?

### THE CASE FOR ALLOWING PREEMPTIVE RESIGNATIONS

A civic case for allowing preemptive resignations would argue that local churches, in the context of a democratic civic society, are "voluntary organizations," just like the Boy Scouts, a women's soccer league, or a gardening club. You can choose to join; you can choose to leave. And no one gives a church the right to say otherwise. In a liberal civic context, the individual reigns supreme.

Now add a theological layer to the argument for preemptive resignation. Human beings do not ultimately depend on their families, their churches, their nations, or their parish priests for a relationship with God. They must depend on Christ. He alone is the mediator between God and man. This means that churches must not deny individuals the ability to act according to their consciences, which includes letting them leave church membership whenever they want to leave. Otherwise, the church effectively denies soul competency and wrongly places itself in between the individual and the individual's Savior. Right?

### THE CASE AGAINST ALLOWING PREEMPTIVE RESIGNATIONS

In fact, both the civic and the theological objections depend on a reductionistic idea about what the church on earth is. The church on earth does not exist *just* because a number of individuals have freely decided to associate together in an area of common interest to them, as with the Boy Scouts. It does not exist *just* as an aid to our sanctification as believers, as an over-inflated concept of soul competency would have us believe.

Rather, the church exists because Christ came to establish his kingdom, and he means for a marked off group of people to represent his heavenly rule on earth (see Matt. 3:2; 4:7; 5:3,5; 6:10,19-20; 13:11). The church exists not simply for its own sanctification's sake or even finally for the world's sake. It exists to accomplish the task originally given to Adam and Israel but fulfilled finally in Christ, the task of imaging or representing the glorious rule of God on earth.

The problem is, many hypocrites will claim to belong to the kingdom based on family ties or righteous deeds (e.g. Matt. 3:9; 6:1, 2-3, 5-6, 16-17; 8:11-12; 13:47-50), and many will come claiming the name of Christ and saying "Lord, Lord" (Matt. 7:21-23; cf. 24:5). But the kingdom does not belong to any and all professors; it belongs only to those who produce the fruit of the kingdom in keeping with repentance (Matt. 3:8; 5:3-12; 7:15-20, 7:24-27; 18:3-4). "Watch out that no one deceives you," said Jesus, anticipating such false professors (Matt. 24:4).

As such, Jesus gave local churches, who are outposts of this kingdom, the authority to bind and loose, which includes the ability to excommunicate (Matt. 16:19; 18:17-19). Excommunication, then, is one aspect of the authority that Christ gives to the local church for the sake of guarding Christ's name and

reputation on earth (Matt. 18:15-20). It's a way of saying that someone no longer belongs to the kingdom of Christ, but to the kingdom of Satan (1 Cor. 5:5). Just as baptism functions as a church's way of publicly affirming an individual's profession of faith (see Matt. 28:19), so excommunication functions as the church's way of publicly removing its corporate affirmation from an individual's profession because that profession appears fraudulent.

With all this in mind, consider again the example of the man who leaves his wife for another woman. The man continues to profess faith in Christ, but his profession now appears fraudulent, because his life does not produce fruit in keeping with repentance (Matt. 3:8). He has been asked to repent, but he will not. Given a choice between his sin and the commands of his so-called Lord, he chooses his sin. Precisely for such occasions, Jesus has given the local church the authority to excommunicate, the authority to remove its public affirmation of the man's profession. Once upon a time, the church had publicly affirmed the man's profession by accepting him into membership and by sharing baptism and the Lord's Supper with him; it had said to the on-looking world, "Yes, we affirm that this man is a Christ-follower." But now the church does not want the world to be deceived by the man's apparently false profession. Therefore, it acts through church discipline to clarify this man's state for its own members and for the watching world.

In so doing, it effectively says, "No, this is not what a Christ-follower looks like. We cannot affirm his profession, and we cannot identify him with us any longer, because to identify him with us is to identify him with our Lord. And our Lord would never abandon his wife."

Yes, individuals are ultimately accountable to God and not to their churches. Yes, individuals should choose God's side rather than the church's side whenever a church requires its members to go against the Word of God. Yes, the church is a "voluntary organization" insofar as the church cannot conscript members as with an army draft, or keep them from leaving, as with a slave. We're justified by faith alone. Still, Christ has given the corporate gathering of believers an authority he has not given to the lone individual: the authority, we might call it, of guarding the borders of the kingdom by making public statements on behalf of Christ. It's the authority of the White House press secretary to speak officially for the president, or of an embassy to speak officially for its government. The individual who attempts to preempt this process by resigning before the church enacts formal discipline is guilty of usurping the church's apostolic authority to speak in this manner. In so doing, he compounds his guilt, like the criminal charged with "resisting arrest."

## **PRACTICAL STEPS**

Does a church put itself at legal risk by denying a preemptive resignation and proceeding with discipline? It can, but that risk is ameliorated, if not altogether relieved, by taking two practical steps:

1. Include a statement concerning church discipline in the official church documents, whether a constitution or by-laws.
2. Clearly teach about the possibility of church discipline to all incoming members, and include this teaching in the standard curriculum for prospective members.

Should churches discipline members who explicitly renounce the faith? I don't believe so. Rather, the church should do what it does when someone dies—acknowledge the fact and delete the name from the church's membership directory. That's all it can do. Christ has not given the church authority over the dead or over those who do not name his name. In each case, the church covenant is simply rendered moot. It's worth observing that two of the most important passages on church discipline (Matt. 18:15-17 and 1 Cor. 5) both instruct the church in how to respond to someone who claims to be a brother.

## **CONCLUSION**

To state the argument here in a single paragraph, we can say that ending one's membership in a church requires the consent of both parties. We join a church by the consent of the church, and we leave a church by the consent of the church, because it's the local church that has the authority to publicly represent Christ on earth, as an embassy does its home government. Christ gave the church the authority to bind and loose, not the individual Christian. The man who continues to call himself a Christian and yet attempts to avoid the church's act of discipline is guilty of usurping the power of the keys. Christ has made the church his proxy on earth exactly for such occasions, lest heretics and hypocrites presume to continue speaking for Christ.

*Jonathan Leeman, an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, is the director of communications for 9Marks and is the author of [The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline](#) (Crossway, Jan. 2010).*

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## Grabbing a Dog by its Ears: The Role of Witnesses

By Stephen Matteucci

It's not easy to get involved in someone else's dispute. Indeed, it's not even safe. Proverbs says, "Like one who seizes a dog by the ears is a passer-by who meddles in a quarrel not his own" (Prov. 26:17).

Still, Jesus knows that sometimes that dog has to be grabbed by the ears because any quarrel between two members of one's church is, in a sense, *one's own* quarrel (see 1 Cor. 12:26). Thus when an offended brother confronts his offender, and the offender refuses to repent, Jesus commands, "take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses'" (Matt. 18:16).

So who are these one or two others? And why are they so important to the church?

### WHO ARE THEY?

John Nolland suggests that they have to be witnesses of the sin committed and must be "independently aware of the problem."<sup>[1]</sup> The text, however, gives two reasons for rejecting this view. First, Jesus does not call them witnesses. He requires that the offended brother take "one or two others along" (Matt 18:16), not that he take one or two witnesses along. Jesus expects them to become witnesses later, but they do not have to be witnesses of the offense.<sup>[2]</sup>

Second, this meeting must follow the initial, private meaning whenever the sinning brother refuses to repent. Yet, if the "one or two others" must be witnesses of the offense, then the second meeting would be conditional: it could only take place if one or two others saw the sin happen. Since many offenses have no witnesses, and since Jesus did not make the second meeting conditional, the "one or two others" do not have to be witnesses to the offense; although if the sinning brother doesn't repent, they will become witnesses of the sin to the church, so that, as Jesus says, "every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses" (Matt. 18:16).

In a sense, these one or two others are not like witnesses to a crime, but witnesses to the signing of a Last Will and Testament. They're not coming to testify about something that happened in the past, but to participate in the meeting between the two brothers; then they will be able testify about it before the church.

### WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Since the goal is restoration, these one or two others should act more like counselors and mediators, not as hired guns for the offended brother. Although they have come to the meeting at the request of the offended brother, they must remember that they have a ministry to both sides: to help the sinning brother repent and to help the offended brother forgive. They are not advocates for the offended brother; they are advocates of the spiritual growth and true repentance of both brothers, and the restoration of the broken relationship.

The role of the "others" is not an easy one, but it is an important one.

### *They're Important for the Offender and the Offended*

They will deal with one person who is being confronted with his sin, and another person who has been

offended by that sin. They must help the sinning brother, who might be struggling to repent. After all, most people do not respond with joy when their sins are exposed. And they must also help the offended brother, who may be too deeply hurt or too bitter to forgive right away. In his pain and bitterness, he may not have noticed that the sinning brother was ready to repent or even trying to repent at the first meeting between them. When that happens, the "one or two others" will have to help the offended brother forgive rather than help the sinning brother repent.

### ***They're Important for the Church***

The "others" also bear a heavy responsibility to the church. If the offender refuses to repent, they must act as witnesses before the church to what they saw and heard in the second meeting. They may have to stand before the church and be an advocate of the unrepentant person's excommunication.

Thus, those chosen must be wise counselors who can minister the gospel and help people restore a broken relationship. They must also be reliable people of good standing who have integrity in the congregation's eyes. As wise counselors, they can help those involved to repent or to forgive and work with them toward reconciliation with God and with each other. As people of integrity, their testimony before the congregation will ensure that "every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses" (Matt 18:16). The reputation of the witnesses will allow the congregation to act without engaging in an independent, public investigation of the sin. Such an investigation is likely to harm the church's mission of reaching out with the gospel to the excommunicated person.

*Stephen Matteucci is the pastor of Clifton Heights Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.*

[1] John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 746-47. If they know nothing about the offense until asked to participate in the second meeting, then Nolland asserts that "the appeal to multiple witnesses would not make any sense."

[2] This is the position that Jay E. Adams takes: "The 'witnesses' are not *merely* witnesses...They are pictured as actively participating in the reconciliation process. It is when the refusal takes place, and only then, that they turn into witnesses. . . . [T]hey will become witnesses if and when the matter is formally brought before the church." Jay E. Adams, *A Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 60 (emphasis in original).

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## 9Marks Pastors' and Theologians' Forum:

### ***What are some lessons on church discipline you've learned the hard way?***

Answers from

- [Tom Ascol](#)
- [Bob Johnson](#)
- [Dennis Newkirk](#)
- [Walter Price](#)
- [Philip Ryken](#)

#### **Tom Ascol**

The real difficulty in corrective church discipline is not so much in knowing what to do or even how to do it, though those questions can be problematic. The hardest part is in actually administering it. It is painful. There is no easy way to confront a brother in his sin. If he persists, there is no easy way to take one or two others with you to confront him again. If he still refuses to repent, there is no easy way to tell it to the church. And if he refuses to hear “even” the church, it is absolutely excruciating to remove him from membership: to “deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5).



Coming to terms with this fact—that there is no easy way to carry out these steps—has been one of the most sobering yet helpful lessons that I have learned as a pastor. When leading a church to take the final step of discipline, certain questions always lurk in the shadows: “Isn't there another way? Is there anything more that we can do to avoid this?” These questions arise, I think, out of a proper desire to avoid taking the most serious step a church can take in dealing with a person's soul. Yet by reconciling myself as a pastor to the fact that doing what Christ commands in such a case is unavoidably painful, and by teaching the church to view it that way, we are encouraged not to shrink back from our duty but to take up this cross with a view to God's glory and the welfare of the wayward member.

In God's kindness, I have had the privilege of seeing the fruit of church discipline borne out not only in the restoration of brothers and sisters who have submitted to it but also in the strengthening of the church in the fear of the Lord and in the conversion of unbelievers. I fully identify with the following words of Robert Murray M'Cheyne as he describes his own pastoral grappling with church discipline.

When I first entered upon the work of the ministry among you, I was exceedingly ignorant of the vast importance of church discipline. I thought that my great and almost only work was to pray and preach. I saw your souls to be so precious, and the time so short, that I devoted all my time, and care, and strength, to labour in word and doctrine. When cases of discipline were brought before me and the elders, I regarded them with something like abhorrence. It was a duty I shrank from; and I may truly say it nearly drove me from the work of the ministry among you altogether. But it pleased God, who teaches his servants in another way than man teaches, to bless some of the cases of discipline to the manifest and undeniable conversion of the souls of those under our care; and from that hour a new light broke in upon my mind, and I saw that if preaching be an ordinance of Christ, so is church discipline. I now feel very deeply persuaded that both are of God—that two keys are committed to us by Christ, the one the key of doctrine, by means of which we unlock the treasures of the Bible, the other the key of discipline, by which we open or shut the way to the sealing ordinances of the faith. Both are Christ's gift, and neither is to be resigned without sin (*Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, Andrew Bonar;

Baker, reprint, 1978, pp. 104-5).

*Tom Ascol is the senior pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida.*

### **Robert “Bob” Johnson**

Here are four lessons I’ve learned about church discipline that have exploded myths I used to believe.



**Myth #1:** After you master church discipline, you can move on to something else.

Church discipline is *not* like learning to ride a bike, in that once you have mastered it, you don’t need to work anymore to maintain it. Whenever I have neglected to emphasize church discipline in private and public ministry, the health of my flock has suffered.

**Lesson learned:** The discipleship and discipline aspect of church life is as normal and regular as preaching, teaching, and evangelism. Church leaders must regularly teach on discipline and regularly involve themselves in formative discipline, and, when necessary, corrective discipline.

**Myth #2:** If I ignore the situation, it will resolve itself.

When there’s a situation to be addressed, I can find all sorts of reasons why I don’t have to do anything about it today. However, whenever I have failed to stay on top of a problem, personal attachments and emotional reactions have tended to define the situation, instead of clear biblical principles.

**Lesson learned:** It is never too late to do the right thing, but doing it earlier helps to clarify the real issue before the congregation takes sides.

**Myth #3:** Of course people will understand church discipline; it’s right here in the Bible.

I have been met with many looks of amazement when people are told that we actually practice this. We shouldn’t be all that surprised when people choose family allegiances over the Bible, but what’s particularly grievous is when people who have been disciplined go to another local church that fails to recognize the discipline that we have carried out.

**Lesson learned:** Never assume that people or other churches understand and support church discipline. Therefore, a pastor should continually look for ways to help the flock grow in this.

**Myth #4:** No one would be part of a church that does this.

While some choose to run away, I have found that many members of the flock are relieved to know that they are part of a family that believes and practices everything God’s Word says. Church discipline is a gift from Christ to the church to keep the doctrine pure, the wolves at bay, and the bride pure.

**Lesson learned:** God’s Word cannot be improved on.

*Robert Johnson is the senior pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Roseville, Michigan.*

## **Dennis Newkirk**

I believe in church discipline. It is, however, easy to make mistakes, so proceed with caution and prayer.

I've learned not to go into discipline with preconceived notions or prejudice. I've learned to investigate thoroughly, to interview the individuals involved with exhausting completeness. I've learned to do these things because I have drawn wrong conclusions and taken inappropriate actions due to a lack of facts. The results were painful, to say the least.

A pastor must not only have the details but also understand that once he has started down the road of discipline, it will be difficult to stop the forward movement. In other words, consider the end before you start the journey. We must practice discipline, but we should have our eyes wide open.

I've also learned that some church members will not agree that a person's sinful actions were severe enough to warrant discipline. They will appeal to grace, forgiveness, patience, and call for mercy. We know that discipline may be one of the most grace-filled actions that we can take toward a sinning believer, but not everyone is going to recognize that. Therefore, elders should be prepared for pushback.

The most significant lesson that I've learned the hard way has come during those times when I failed to pursue it. We do more harm than good when we avoid discipline.

Some time ago, we had a man on our leadership team who worked behind the scenes creating disharmony. We delayed substantive action, hoping that the situation would fix itself. It didn't, needless damage was done, and it took months to get past our negligence. When he failed to repent and was removed from membership, it was as if the clouds suddenly parted and a new day dawned.

Lessons learned? Practice discipline, but do it carefully, deliberately, and prayerfully.

*Dennis Newkirk is the pastor of Henderson Hills Baptist Church in Edmond, Oklahoma*

## **Walter Price**

One lesson I've learned is that church discipline can be an opportunity for great joy. Each time we have taken the ultimate step of excommunication the church and its leaders have experienced deep agony. But in several situations the heartache has ultimately been replaced by joy.



Just recently a man who had been removed from membership ten years ago for blatantly unrepentant adultery came to my office in tears to tell of God's deep conviction in his life. He was deeply repentant and grateful to me for accepting his apology and confession and will be meeting with our elders to express it to them. My tendency would have been to consider him gone for good. But I'm reminded again that God's timing is seldom mine.

How grateful I am to the Lord that he allows us to experience the joy of granting forgiveness and being a part of the restoration process. Though there was a painful joy in knowing we had been obedient to the Scripture, the resulting joy in the presence of restoration is even more exhilarating. If we had been unfaithful in not practicing biblical discipline we would have been the poorer for it.

*Walter Price is the pastor of Fellowship in the Pass Church in Beaumont, California.*

## Philip Ryken

Virtually everything I know about church discipline has been learned the hard way: by sad experience.

The most painful difficulties I have had in pastoral ministry, by far, have involved the formal discipline of church members who have turned away from the Lord. In every case, the elders of Tenth Presbyterian Church have shed many tears.



What have I learned?

I have learned not to delay formal disciplinary process when circumstances demand it. Spiritual problems do not simply get better on their own; dithering only makes things worse.

I have learned to be sure that everyone involved in a disciplinary case is careful about confidentiality, including taking special precautions with electronic communication and exercising wisdom in conversations with spouses.

I have learned that the deceitfulness of sin can lead to a hardening of the heart that can only be addressed through fasting and prayer.

I have learned that most people will walk away from their church rather than honor their membership vows by dealing honestly and straightforwardly with their pastors and elders.

I have learned that when repentance is genuine, people confronted with sin will cooperate with their elders and treat them respectfully, without getting angry, or trying to seize control of the disciplinary process, or fighting against the consequences of their sin.

I have learned that few things cause more difficulty in the church than men (especially) who are too arrogant, or self-centered, or angry to see the damage they are causing to other people, especially their own families.

I have learned the wisdom of the following Proverbs 28:13, 14 and 29:1, 9, 19, 22.

I have learned that nothing brings greater joy to a pastor's heart than a sinner who truly repents.

*Philip Ryken is the Senior Minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*

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## Book Review: Walking Together

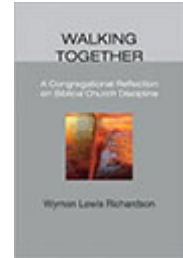
By Wyman Richardson

Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman

### ***Walking Together: A Congregational Reflection on Biblical Church Discipline*, by Wyman Richardson**

[Wipf & Stock, 2007, 119 pages, \\$14.00](#)

Wyman Lewis Richardson's *Walking Together* provides a concise and careful introduction to the topic of church discipline. Richardson seems to have read almost everything written on discipline in the last thirty years, which, based on his footnotes and bibliography, is more than I realized.



#### **A SOLID INTRODUCTORY WORK**

Like most introductory books, Richardson does not say anything strikingly new that readers of other books on church discipline have not already encountered. But he does a good job of summarizing the basic points, and mining the literature for the wise counsel that others have given.

Richardson is a pastor, and presumably has some firsthand experience with church discipline, but interestingly he removes himself entirely from the text. All his illustrations come from others. This is not a critique, per se. I assume it's deliberate. But it does give the book a different feel than, say, Mark Lutherbach's treatment of the subject, which seems to have as many personal illustrations as it has pages.

That's not to say that Richardson doesn't bring pastoral wisdom to bear. For instance, he offers ten items for what should characterize the "one or two others" that we bring to confront someone who is in sin (76). Also, he recognizes how crucial it is for a church to address its practices of membership before it marches forward into the realm of discipline. Someone who hadn't "been there, done that" may miss this essential point.

Typical for a book on discipline, Richardson spends a decent amount of time providing an apologetic for the subject, which makes sense in light of our culture's love affair with tolerance and horror of anything remotely exclusivistic. Especially helpful is his attempt to help the reader understand the idea of godly love, which does call for acts of warning and judgment.

#### **WEAKNESSES? NOT MANY**

Weaknesses? If I wanted to be picayune, I could say that that the book sometimes feels a bit workman-like and impersonal because the author is *so* removed from the text. But maybe such a comment reveals more about me as a Gen-X American than it does about the book. I trust some readers will appreciate this aspect of the book.

More substantively, Richardson contends that "a church should never (a) hear about a matter of church discipline, (b) discuss the matter, and (c) vote to remove a person from the fellowship all in one meeting" (p. 91). If he changed the word "never" to "seldom," I believe he would be more in line with the gist of Paul's command in 1 Corinthians 5.

Aside from this one sentence, I couldn't find anything I disagreed with in the book, nor anything that I

would want to improve upon. Richardson is sensitive, pastoral, and careful throughout. This is important because church discipline is one place where everything in a church's life collides: theory and practice collide here, and our doctrines of God, sin, judgment, redemption, and eschatology all collide here, as he observes (17-18). Explaining discipline well requires keen pastoral and theological sensitivities. Richardson has both.

The final test I always ask for books on discipline is, can a pastor use it for training his fellow church leaders, assuming that not all church leaders are not pastorally and theologically sensible? Richardson's *Walking Together* gets an easy "yes." In fact, I'd say it's one of the better ones.

*Jonathan Leeman, an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, is the director of communications for 9Marks and is the author of [The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline](#) (Crossway, Jan. 2010).*

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## Cleaning Up the Rolls

By Matt Schmucker

Though I hear stories from church leaders around the country almost every day, I was still stunned by the following email from a faithful deacon in a Baptist church:

"I would appreciate the opportunity to talk with you regarding cleaning up the church roll. I began compiling a list of widows from our membership database yesterday and found that of the 141 total widows in our database, 38 were deceased and 4 had transferred membership to other churches (not counting the ones who are classified as "Inactive" or "Non-Resident Members."

You can just imagine how the late-night talk show hosts would poke fun at this: "Did you hear about the thirty-eight dead members of Faith Alive Baptist Church? Talk about the need to change the church's name!" This might be funny if it did not characterize churches around our nation and others.

Bad records and outdated rolls trouble any faithful pastor's existence. Yet before you sweep things clean, consider both *why* and *how* this should be done.

Why should churches clean up their membership roles?

- 1) Christ's name and honor is at stake in the world. Think about the Apostle Paul's passionate concern for who was associated with the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 5).
- 2) Membership in a church should reflect, as best as possible, membership in Christ's Kingdom. We should neither receive nor dismiss members lightly. "Dropping someone from the rolls" should be treated with utmost care, even if the member himself has been careless.
- 3) Pastors, elders, and leaders will "give an account" to God someday for their shepherding (Heb. 13:17). God took Israel's shepherds to task for repeated unfaithfulness (e.g. Ezek. 34).
- 4) Congregations will also give an account to God for how they receive members. Consider who Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians 5!
- 5) Less mature Christians are at risk of being confused about the importance of the church in the growing Christian's life and could be led toward complacency themselves.
- 6) The member who has moved out of the area should be encouraged to link arms with a church in his new hometown and make himself known to believers there. If he does not, his former church should encourage him to do so by letter or phone. If he remains unresponsive, the church should inform him that they will remove his name in the next members' meeting, thereby sending the message that they can no longer account for his life.

How should churches clean up their membership roles?

If you tackle all the problematic membership cases at once, you will run into fire. But it's difficult to predict where. Will your members be happy to remove local non-attenders? Out-of-the-area members? The dead? Pastor, be wise and only do what your people can tolerate. Be patient and teach until they are ready to move.

So where do you start? Picture multiple concentric circles (like a dartboard) with the center (the bull's-

eye) representing *meaningful membership*. The outer rings represent *meaningless membership*, and hopefully they are easiest to clean up. As you move from the outer rings to the bull's-eye, your membership rolls should increasingly consist of confessing believers who are actively involved in your church. Let's start from the outside and work in:

**1) Members who are dead.** (At my church we found 10!) This outer-most ring should be the easiest to clean up. At your church's next meeting for conducting business, put these names before the congregation with a motion to remove them from membership in the following meeting. Don't ask the congregation to immediately remove these names, but give them time to think about the motion.

**2) Members whom you cannot find.** Probably the next easiest group to remove. Two women in our church hunted for seventy members for six months in vain! These names were then put before the congregation asking for help. When all efforts were exhausted, a motion was put to the congregation to remove them.

**3) Absent and disinterested members.** Our church had dozens of members who we found but who wanted nothing to do with us. We found one woman in Germany who had become a Unitarian and was upset that we contacted her.

**4) Members out of the area.** These are people who are unable to attend on a regular basis due to distance, and any meaningful accountability is near-impossible. You will no doubt encounter people who have a wrong understanding of membership in this group: "I've held my membership in that church since I sang in the Junior Choir in 1959" or "I walked the aisle in that church in 1970, and I promised my mother I would remain a faithful member." Despite their emotional attachment to your church, this group needs to be taught a right understanding of church membership. Remember pastor, you will give an account for these individuals. Don't be caught with names on your rolls of people whom you have never met. Make a motion to remove these individuals "for non-attendance" at your next business meeting.

**5) Non-attending members in the area.** Certainly we've reached one of the toughest circles. These people want to maintain their membership and they *can* attend; but they want little to do with the church. This circle is often difficult because of the relationships these individuals maintain with attending members. Maybe it's a grown child or an old friend from the choir. Again, teaching is required and movement must be slow.

These first five categories are the biggest and most obvious targets. There are other categories like "attends, but won't sign the statement of faith" or "in the area, but cannot attend." Old age or an infirmity might prevent a member from attending; they should not be dismissed, but specially cared for! Also, we encourage special charity toward elderly members who have moved out of the area and into retirement homes. Why? They often grew up with a different understanding of church membership and are unlikely to change. Out of love, consider allowing them to remain on the rolls.

Once again, out of love for your people, do not clean the roles more quickly than your congregation can handle. For some, this may take years to work through the different rings. Churches are too often divided over careless pastoral exercises when the goal should be unity. Remember, each listing on your roll is more than a name; it's a soul.

*Matt Schmucker, an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, is executive director of 9Marks.*

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## Book Review: Deep Church

By Jim Belcher

Reviewed by Greg Gilbert

***Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional*, by Jim Belcher**  
[IVP, 2009. 233 pages. \\$17.00](#)

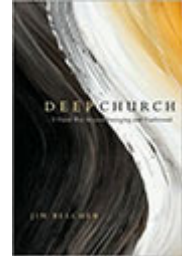
When you can get both Tim Keller and Rob Bell to endorse your book, you've really done something extraordinary. Especially for a "third way" book that claims to cut a middle path between two warring camps, getting a couple of generals from either side to meet on your cover and shake hands for the cameras is a real diplomatic coup—a symbol that maybe, finally, you've managed to broker a settlement that will issue in a lasting peace.

I just don't think it's going to work, though.

I hate to be so short about it, but that's really my considered judgment after reading and thinking about Jim Belcher's call in *Deep Church* for traditional evangelicals and the emergent church to "work together to build evangelicalism." Frankly, I'm surprised that Belcher, after seeing what his research brought to light, decided to press on with the idea that emergents and traditionals could reunite somehow. If there's anything the book made clear to me, it's that the most important thing that divides the emergent church from evangelicalism is not a misunderstanding at all. On the contrary, it is a real and substantive division about the gospel itself, one that's not going to be resolved by simply (and simplistically) claiming to "learn from both sides" as we "follow a different route." More on that later.

First, let me give you just a quick idea of what Belcher is up to in *Deep Church*. Others have offered a more thorough analysis of the book's contents and even interacted with some of the details of its arguments, so I'm not going to take the time to do that here. Suffice it to say that the main thrust of Belcher's book is to carve out a third way between what he sees as two titanic—and more or less equally weighted—forces within the broader camp of evangelicalism. On one side are what he calls "traditionals," represented by Don Carson, Kevin DeYoung, and others. On the other side are "emergents" including Doug Pagitt, Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, and others. Belcher approaches the impasse between these two camps by examining seven issues that he considers to be central to the disagreement: epistemology, evangelism, gospel, worship, preaching, ecclesiology, and culture. For each of those topics, Belcher traces the emergent church's critique of traditional evangelicalism and then the traditionals' response to the critique. Then he offers his own critique of both cases and describes a third way, which he calls "deep church," that is meant to take what is best and discard what is worst from both sides.

It's worth saying right from the beginning that an author should think very hard before trying this "third way" approach to analysis. There's an enormous danger of coming off as arrogant, as if no one has managed to get it right until *you* came along. Maybe even worse, you can come off as patronizing, as if you're calling the children together to explain to them how they've been misbehaving. In my opinion, Belcher doesn't avoid those dangers. More than once, for example, he lets us know that *he* has learned (unlike whom, exactly?) that "even when I disagree with others I can still learn from them" (36). And when Belcher says he's writing for "the majority" who "want to learn from both sides," where exactly does that leave those of us in both the emergent and traditional camps who think there are really some serious issues at stake?



Anyway, back to the main point. The real irony of *Deep Church* is that Belcher actually does a pretty good job of laying out the real, substantive, and ultimately fellowship-breaking issues that stand between emergents and traditional evangelicals, but his whole stated project of finding common ground on which those two camps can reunite falls completely apart, I think, in the first few pages of his book. Let me show you why I say that.

In the book's introduction, Belcher recounts a meeting between Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, and John Piper. The meeting ended badly, with Piper telling Pagitt, "You should never preach," because Pagitt rejected what Belcher strangely calls "Piper's view of atonement," which I have to assume is penal substitutionary atonement. As Piper summed it up, because they rejected penal substitutionary atonement, Pagitt and Jones were "rejecting the gospel *in toto*."

Now, this is not the place to rehearse the biblical case for penal substitutionary atonement. I and others have done that elsewhere. So let me just skip to the conclusion of that case and say that Piper is right: To reject the idea of Jesus dying in the place of sinners, taking their punishment on himself for their sins, is to reject the gospel *in toto*. And therefore it is to make any sort of union between yourself and traditional evangelicalism impossible. To reject penal substitution is to reject the gospel, and to reject the gospel is to put oneself outside traditional evangelicalism.

Knowing what Belcher was trying to do with this book, I entirely expected him to try to show later in the book how emergent leaders *don't* in fact reject penal substitutionary atonement. I expected him to quote a passage here or there in one of their writings which leaves open the possibility of penal substitution. That never happens. Quite to the contrary, Belcher concludes in his sixth chapter, titled "Deep Gospel," that the emergent church (represented here by Brian McLaren) is indeed guilty of "gospel reductionism" (118). "Nowhere," Belcher says, "does [McLaren] mention...the doctrines of atonement, justification, union with Christ, or our need to be forgiven" (118). True, Belcher makes that statement about a certain article in which McLaren is claiming to articulate the gospel, but his point is that he doesn't find those doctrines *anywhere* in McLaren's writings.

But then, if that's the case, what's up with all this hope for a reunion? How exactly do you find a "third way" between *affirming the gospel* and *not affirming the gospel*? Yes, of course, Belcher softens his hit on the emergents by saying that traditional evangelicals are guilty of "gospel reductionism," too. They "make the opposite mistake" of "car[ing] only about their own selves" and ignoring the kingdom of God, he says. But even setting that infuriating straw man aside for a moment, wouldn't you think that when Belcher finally realized—after a *third* reading!—that Brian McLaren in fact does not affirm the gospel of forgiveness of sins through the penal substitutionary death of Jesus, he would maybe temper some of the "reunion" talk? I mean, regardless of anything else he writes in the other chapters of his book, surely the most hopeful conclusion Belcher could possibly hold after writing chapter six is that the emergent church could reunite with evangelicals if they'd just make one little tweak to their thinking—affirm the gospel! But then...well, yea. That's kind of the point, isn't it?

Look, I think it's actually pretty helpful for a self-described insider/outsider like Belcher to show so clearly that the deepest division between the emergent church and evangelicalism is about the gospel itself. That's clarifying. But the fact that he doesn't seem to understand in the slightest how that disagreement over the gospel would utterly preclude the unity his whole book is calling for is puzzling and disappointing.

On a similar note, it's also worth pointing out that Belcher's idea of a "new ecumenism" on the basis of the ancient creeds is not going to work, either. The creeds are not Scripture, and they are not heaven-sent, inspired, once-for-all standards of what it means to be a Christian. All of the ancient creeds were written in response to specific heresies. That's why they spend so much time talking about the nature and person of Jesus Christ; those were the issues facing the church at the time. The fact is, the

atonement and its meaning didn't come under creed-worthy assault until much later in the church's history. But that doesn't mean that the atonement and its meaning are any *less* important to understanding the gospel as it's taught in Scripture. Honestly, again, I'm amazed that Belcher—a PCA minister who is presumably well-versed in what was at stake in the Reformation—would think that affirming the ancient creeds would be a sufficient ground for ecclesiastical unity. I'm sure the pope will be delighted to hear that!

Belcher's book has gotten a great deal of good press since its publication, and many evangelicals seem to have fallen head-over-heels for it as a way forward in the debate between the emergent church and traditional evangelicalism. But to those of you who consider yourselves traditional evangelicals, let me ask you just to pause the reunion celebration for a moment and consider a question: Just how important to you is this gospel that Jim Belcher himself says the emergent church *does not affirm*? If we can all come to agreement that foundationalism is dead, that we should love the culture and have transcendent worship and love non-Christians, are we really willing to decide that agreement on the meaning of the cross of Jesus Christ is not worth the division? Are we really willing to “work together to build evangelicalism” with people who even Jim Belcher says do not affirm the *evangel*? I would hope not—and therefore I would hope that the fanfare which has greeted this book would fade a bit when people realize what it actually says.

The emergent church does not affirm the gospel. They don't hold to penal substitutionary atonement.

Whatever else he says, Jim Belcher could not be clearer (or more accurate) about those two points. And so I say again, like I said at the beginning of this review, that the reunion Belcher is hoping for here is just not going to happen.

Well, actually, I suppose it could...if the emergent church decides to clearly affirm the gospel. Or, on the other hand, if evangelicals just decide they don't really care that much about the *evangel* after all. Which of those, honestly, do you think seems the more likely these days?

*Greg Gilbert is an assistant pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church and is the author of What is the Gospel? (Crossway, 2010).*

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## Book Review: Lost and Found

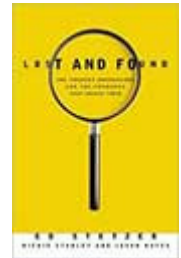
By Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayes

Reviewed by Bobby Jamieson

### ***Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them*, by Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayes**

[B&H, 2009. 240 pages. \\$17.99](#)

The current generation of American young adults is famed for being spiritual tinkers, not consistent churchgoers. This observation, argued by Robert Wuthnow in his book *After the Baby Boomers*, forms the background for Ed Stetzer's recent book *Lost and Found*.



The General Society Survey reports that general church attendance among eighteen to twenty-nine-year-old Americans declined from just under twenty-five percent to just over fifteen percent (4-6). This means that an increasing number of young adults are "unchurched"; that is, they do not regularly attend any religious service. An increasing number of them, moreover, have *never* regularly attended any religious service. This means that an increasing number of young adults are unfamiliar with Christian churches, have little or no personal ties to Christian churches, and may feel distant or alienated from Christian churches.

With these cultural changes in mind, Ed Stetzer and his team from LifeWay Research and the Center for Missional Research set out to get to know this current "unchurched" generation, find out what makes them tick, and take a good look at churches they think are examples of reaching unchurched young adults with the gospel.

#### **SUMMARY**

Stetzer's team took polls, conducted surveys, and did face to face interviews, hearing from nearly nine hundred unchurched young adults from ages twenty to twenty nine, along with over five hundred unchurched Americans over thirty for comparison. They asked questions about their attitude toward Christians and the church, as well as their beliefs about God, Christianity, the Bible, and heaven and hell. The results of this research comprise Part One of the book.

Part Two of the book features Stetzer's summary of and commentary on the values of the young unchurched that emerged in the course of their surveys. This section is intended to help the reader put flesh on the picture of the young unchurched that emerged in Part One, so that we can come to know the young unchurched before we seek to reach them (67). In Part Two Stetzer also reflects on how pastors and churches should respond to this knowledge of the younger unchurched. This section contains the bulk of Stetzer's practical recommendations.

As a "young adult" with plenty of unchurched friends, I cannot say that I found any of the statistics all that surprising or revelatory. Perhaps this merely confirms that Stetzer and his team have presented an accurate and informative picture of the general spiritual milieu of unchurched American young adults. If you're feeling out of touch with the current generation of young adults, Stetzer's research and commentary could serve as a useful primer that can help orient you toward the personal engagement with the younger unchurched that Stetzer, for one, would exhort you to take up (19).

In Part Three, Stetzer highlights churches that he argues are particularly effective at reaching the younger unchurched because they excel in nine areas, such as creating deeper community (ch. 8), making a difference through service (ch. 9), delivering content (ch. 11), and being authentic (ch. 14).

The book is woven together by a fictional narrative constructed out of different profiles that emerged from the research, which helps put faces on some of the numbers presented in Part One.

### **MUCH THAT IS BIBLICAL, SPOT-ON, AND FAR TOO UNCOMMON**

The greatest strength of this book is that many of its practical recommendations are biblical, spot-on, and frankly far too uncommon in church literature. Here's a sampling:

- After arguing that churches should present deeper content, Stetzer exhorts pastors to "Teach the entire Bible, even the difficult sections...Address tough topics and answer difficult questions...Provide exegetical Bible teaching," and "Sing theologically sound music" (103).
- Stetzer encourages churches *not* to divide the church up into age graded segments (124), but rather to foster and encourage many kinds of cross-generational discipleship (131-136).
- He encourages all Christians to both seek out discipleship and to seek to disciple others (130).
- He encourages churches to think of discipleship not primarily as a special event, sealed off from the rest of the Christian life, but as living life together with the goal of doing each other spiritual good (134).

To all this, I and everyone at 9Marks would offer a hearty "Amen!"

Another commendable feature of Stetzer's book is the humility he displays in seeking to understand those whom he wants to reach with the gospel. This missiological humility speaks well to Stetzer's evangelistic zeal and love for the lost. It also serves as a model for how churches should patiently listen to rather than hastily criticize those who culturally differ from us. Perhaps more young adults would feel comfortable in our churches if more of us listened as well as Stetzer does.

### **A COUPLE MISSED MARKS**

Yet it seems to me that there are several ways in which Stetzer's overall approach doesn't quite hit the mark.

First, Stetzer sometimes moves directly from his research to a ministry imperative. For instance, he writes, "Among unchurched young adults, service...was cited as a major reason why they would consider (or not consider) being part of a church. Knowing this, we must focus our efforts toward establishing social action as a major element in the strategies and programs of our churches" (117). Now, I'm fairly confident that Stetzer believes that local churches have a biblical mandate to pursue social ministries. But in this passage he simply notes that the unchurched want more social action, and then declares that churches must therefore pursue it.

For my part, I think it's probably not ever wise for pastors to simply ask people what kinds of things they'd like the church to do and then decide that the church should therefore do them. And while Stetzer boldly pledges allegiance to Scripture as our "plumb line for interaction with this world" elsewhere in the book (99), his research sometimes wields a kind of functional authority that I don't think harmonizes well with the sufficiency of Scripture.

Second, some of the book's practical recommendations are driven by the belief that in order for the church to reach a certain group, it should attempt to look and feel as much like them as possible. For instance, Stetzer commends First Presbyterian Church of Salinas, CA for their amazing numerical turnaround. He writes, "In a nutshell the most significant change at First Presbyterian was the church's willingness to adopt a new vision for impacting their community" (162). So what was First Presbyterian's new vision for impacting their community? A third weekend service with "U2 type music... (that is) very edgy... the kind of music that twenty-five and thirty-year-olds listen to on the radio," along with concert-style lighting (162). Or again, another pastor whom Stetzer commends writes of his strategy to reach young adults, "They have a kind of MTV mentality of lots of camera angles and movement and things like that. So that's the style that they are kind of used to. And like I said, we just utilize or leverage technology to bring the gospel message in a clear and relevant way" (183).

Now, I don't doubt that the right music or an exciting, fast-paced atmosphere can draw people to a public event they otherwise wouldn't attend, but I'm not sure that the church's witness depends on aligning our corporate gatherings with non-Christians' personal preferences. In fact, I'm concerned that this runs deeply counter to the New Testament teaching on the nature of the church. Can we really divide the church into different worship services, each catering to the cultural preferences of a narrow and rather exclusive subgroup of people? Is the body of Christ really at liberty to create one "service" for the hands, another for the feet, and another for the eyes? Doesn't that send the wrong message to those hands, feet, and eyes, who already seem to have a deeply rooted impulse to say to the others, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor. 12:21)?

I understand that these brothers Stetzer commends are structuring their church services like this for evangelistic purposes, but if we tailor the corporate life of the church to fit all of the divisive cultural preferences of the non-Christians we're trying to reach, aren't we wrongly importing those divisions into the very life of the church?

## CONCLUSION

So in the end, at least for this reader, this book is a mixed bag. The information Stetzer has harvested could be a useful way for someone to get oriented toward the way the current younger generation thinks about the church and Christianity. Moreover, many of Stetzer's practical exhortations are exactly on target and are excellent prescriptions for biblically faithful ministry. Yet I think that a less-than-biblical philosophy of ministry shines through at certain points, so read with discernment.

*Bobby Jamieson is assistant editor for 9Marks.*

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## Book Review: Perspectives on Christian Worship

By Matthew Pinson

Reviewed by Bob Kauflin

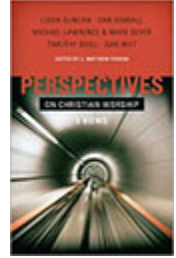
### ***Perspectives on Christian Worship: Five Views*, edited by Matthew Pinson**

[B&H Academic, 2009. 368 pages. \\$24.99](#)

How do we remain biblically rooted in our corporate worship of God without becoming culturally irrelevant?

That's the question *Perspectives on Christian Worship: 5 Views* seeks to answer.

Editor Matthew Pinson introduces the book with a brief and insightful historical overview of Christian worship. Then we're offered five different views (and responses) of public worship today: *liturgical* (Timothy Quill), *traditional evangelical* (Ligon Duncan), *contemporary* (Dan Wilt), *blended* (Michael Lawrence and Mark Dever), and *emerging* (Dan Kimball).



### **POINTS ON THE SPECTRUM**

The book admittedly fails to cover the full spectrum of worship practices and traditions today, and Duncan, Dever, and Lawrence seemed to agree with each other *a lot*, as did Kimball and Wilt (maybe it should have been three views?). Still, there's enough variation here to provide food for substantive conversations about how the corporate worship in your church could be more biblical and culturally impacting.

#### ***Liturgical***

Timothy Quill, a former Lutheran pastor, tries to persuade us that the Liturgy of Word and Sacrament has "sustained the church and reached the lost for the past two thousand years" (21). While that may be overstated, I agree with Ligon Duncan who, in his response, says that Quill is "thoroughly Trinitarian, Christocentric, theological, and biblical in his understanding of worship" (82). Quill highlights worship as God's gift of grace to us, rather than our gift to God, a point he reiterates in most of his responses.

Quill admits early on that the Liturgy belongs to the *adiaphora*, matters neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture (19), but you get the impression he feels more strongly than that. Thus, his justification for liturgical worship is ultimately more pragmatic and historical than biblical. In response, Duncan points out that, "Liturgy can...create complacency and simply going through the motions in worship" (83). As edifying and educational as his chapter is, I don't think Quill sufficiently addresses this point.

#### ***Traditional Evangelical***

Duncan's chapter on traditional evangelical worship focuses less on forms and more on the meaning, elements, goals, and qualities of biblical corporate worship. His values are similar to Quill, with forms being more negotiable, but not irrelevant. He alerts us to the "law of unintended consequences" (112) with respect to the mediums we use. "The minute a service is called 'contemporary,' we have just conveyed, whether we like it or not, that the most important thing about it is the featured musical style" (111). He also warns that using music to attract people encourages participants "to view themselves as consumers rather than as worshipers" (113). Like all the contributors, Duncan says "worship is all about God" (149)

and that conviction comes through in his chapter. He roots his views of worship in scriptural principles and commands, and says the Bible is to be read, preached, prayed, sung, and seen in public worship (105).

Wilt and Kimball affirm Duncan's chapter, but wonder if his practices are at times more influenced by his own tradition and experiences than he realizes. I think they make a good point. Wilt stresses that cultural *accommodation* is very different from cultural *connection* (133).

### **Contemporary**

Dan Wilt's chapter on "contemporary worship" focuses more on contemporary worship *music*, which raises obvious conflicts with Duncan's chapter (although he graciously avoids them in his response). Wilt takes engaging with the culture seriously and emphasizes the importance of the heart and authenticity in worship. While he is an appreciative student of historic traditions, Wilt says the contemporary worship movement "is a significant force that is shaping the discipleship life of average believers around the globe" (197). Wilt's case seems stronger for the values of biblical worship than contemporary music itself, but his passion to see people truly encounter God when they sing is admirable.

Lawrence and Dever express concerns about Wilt's over-emphasis on cultural relevance and personal authenticity. They write, "Certainly we must worship our Savior from within our culture. Yet just as certainly worship must take its cues not from its context, but from its subject, not from our changing culture, but from the unchanging character of God" (215).

### **Blended**

Regulative Principle adherents might be surprised to find out that Lawrence and Dever wrote the chapter on "blended worship." But after making clear what blended worship is *not*, they define it simply as "using various forms for invariable elements." They offer some helpful guidelines and some great quotes. They say our worship is to be intelligible, orderly, edifying, unifying, and reverent. "To the saved heart, the richness of the gospel will always exceed even the most impoverished music that celebrates it" (252). "No one church, much less one public service, can incorporate and blend every biblically informed tradition" (256). They astutely observe that, in contrast with our own, the worship wars of previous generations were always an attempt to answer the question, "What is most faithful to the Bible?"

In his response, Kimball takes issue with Lawrence and Dever's understanding of the Word in worship. "As much as there is a desire to protect the church using only 'Word-focused' worship, we must remember that the subtle stylistic things we do in addition to words also communicate" (284). Wilt questions viewing the "Word" simply as preaching, and says "the thought that to preach is to transform is magical and lacks substance" (278). In seeking to heighten our awareness of how words are received, both Dans run the risk of minimizing the preached word, despite their claims to the contrary.

### **Emerging**

In the final chapter, Dan Kimball makes a case for "emerging worship," which he defines as "expressions of worship that are relating to how people in today's culture communicate, learn, and express their love to God" (297). It's evident that Kimball loves the church, the lost, and the Lord. And he's concerned about the criticism emerging churches have received for not taking the Bible seriously. His eight guidelines for "emerging worship" on pages 297-298 would be helpful for any church.

That said, his references to a Chinese proverb, nine spiritual temperaments, and worship as a "multisensory experience" muddy the waters. Dan Wilt humbly comments, "The random and sometimes cavalier use of Scripture must continue to be eradicated from both contemporary and emerging worship patterns" (346). Lawrence and Dever sound a similar alarm: "We are on safer ground biblically if we

assume that culture's default effect will be to misshape our worship, and that what is needed is to allow the Scriptures to constantly reform and reshape our worship according to the pattern of the Spirit rather than the pattern of the world" (351).

### **HELPFUL, EVEN WITHOUT A CHARISMATIC VIEW**

I would have appreciated a chapter that reflected a more charismatic or continuationist perspective, but I still found the interaction between the authors to be helpful and stimulating for my own thinking about worship. The authors agree in more areas than they disagree, and if you focus on those areas, you'll be well on your way to worship that is more in line with what God desires and has made possible through the gospel.

*Bob Kauflin serves as Director of Worship Development for Sovereign Grace Ministries, and is one of the worship leaders at Covenant Life Church.*

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## Book Review: The God-Centered Life

By Josh Moody

Reviewed by Andrew Davis

***The God-Centered Life: Insights from Jonathan Edwards for Today*, by Josh Moody**  
[Regent Publishing, 2007. 196 pages. \\$16.95](#)

There was a time when studying Jonathan Edwards was regarded as an anachronism, a cause of embarrassment from a bygone era. In 1787, Ezra Stiles, president of Yale University, predicted that within one generation the works of Jonathan Edwards would be relegated to "oblivion... [in the] rubbish of libraries." But the second half of the twentieth century saw an ever-increasing interest in the thought and life of the great pastor from New England, including John Piper's epoch-making classic, *Desiring God*, which breathes in modern language the spirit of Edwards' "God-entranced worldview."



Coming on the heels of this half-century surge of interest in Edwards, Josh Moody's succinct and clear work *The God-Centered Life* seeks to rigorously apply some of the best aspects of the life and doctrine of Edwards to our present world. Moody's analysis is sharp, practical, convicting, and very helpful, especially for busy, harassed pastors who may be losing their way under the pressures of twenty-first century ministry.

### CONTENTS

Moody begins his work with a poignant chapter on how Edwards might have viewed present-day evangelical churches with their short and shallow sermons, their commercialism, and their pastors who act like business managers and salesmen rather than proclaimers of God's inspired Word.

In the next eight chapters, Moody applies Edwards' insights to eight vital areas of church life and ministry today, which he helpfully summarizes in the final chapter of the book, "The Edwards Message." I will borrow Moody's summaries of these eight lessons and add my own comments on each.

1. *Edwards taught us how "revival is biblical"* (ch. 2).

Edwards saw revival as the act of the sovereign God in awakening souls to his reality and truth, saving them through the gospel, and he believed that God uses *means* to accomplish that end. Thus a pastor can and ought to seek revival through prayer and labor; when it comes, he ought to give full glory to God for giving it.

2. *Edwards taught us how "true experience of God is heart experience"* (ch. 3).

Edwards established that the true nature of religion is in the affections of the heart. Then he fought a two-front war against the "Old Lights" who opposed all such affections, and the "New Lights-extremists" who felt that the more dramatic a display of bodily excitation, the better.

3. *Edwards showed us how to analyze new Christian movements by their fruit* (ch. 4).

In our present context, more and more new movements are springing up, whether so-called "evangelical" or even cultish. The need for careful discernment is as great as any time in church history, and Edwards is a trustworthy guide. Moody points out that Edwards' amazingly perceptive analyses of the awakenings of his age teach us how to differentiate the baby from the

bathwater so that we don't throw out both.

4. *Edwards identified the central problem of our humanistic age: it is insufficiently "God-centered" (ch. 5).*

According to Moody, God-centeredness is the centerpiece of what Edwards has to offer the twenty-first century church. Here Moody is at his most helpful and most frustrating. It is helpful for Moody to bring up this issue as the key to everything. But, frustratingly, he then points to complex issues like the G8 Economic Conference, genetic cloning, stem-cell research, just wars, euthanasia, and more, and simply waves his hand: "Edwards' God-centeredness gives not so much an answer to these questions as hints and suggestions of a different way of approaching them" (104). Given Edwards' own labored application of doctrine to the practical areas of life, Moody's light touch here shows how hard it is to be as rationally solid as Edwards was! So Moody's biggest deficiency, I think, merely points out the value of his study.

5. *Edwards modeled consistency in teaching God's Word even in so-called "secondary matters," and explained how "secondary matters" can sometimes have "primary importance" (ch. 6).*

In this chapter, Moody traces out the "Communion Controversy," and shows just how vital it is to restrict the Lord's Supper to the regenerate in the life of the church.

6. *Edwards exemplified that "effective leadership must be biblically intelligent leadership" (ch. 7).*

Here Moody demonstrates with remarkable skill how diligently and thoughtfully Edwards united faith and reason in his ministry. Moody also argues that it was by his ability to press right doctrine as far as reason could go that Edwards left his greatest mark on the theological development of the Christian church.

7. *Edwards' failings teach us that we must ultimately learn from God, not man, for "human leaders fail" (ch. 8).*

Moody lists in detail some of the greatest faults he perceives in Edwards. These include Edwards' defense of slavery, his poor management of a sensitive pastoral issue in Northampton, and his support of infant baptism. This chapter helps balance both Moody's glowing confidence in Edwards as a trustworthy guide and our view of heroes from church history in general.

8. *He showed us that "family life and effective ministry are reconcilable" (ch. 9).*

Moody provides some very sweet quotes reflecting the special relationship between Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, as well as the tender care with which he trained his children in godliness. Moody's practical discussion of the intense pressures of pastoral life show how vital Edwards' "severe balance" between pastoral and family responsibilities is.

In sum, Moody asserts that an "Edwards-influenced individual" would seek to be theologically careful and precise, getting past platitudes like "Jesus is the main thing." Such a person would boldly preach heaven and hell and would be sold-out for the world missions movement. Similarly, an "Edwards-influenced church" would have a high regard for biblical teaching and a high view of church membership. It would be energetic in prayer, bold in evangelism, and discerning regarding which parts of evangelistic ministry must change, can change, or must never change. Moody concludes powerfully, "To be influenced by Edwards means, above all, to live a life of worship in which, instead of worshiping our work, working at our play, and playing at our worship, we radically and truly understand that the greatest experience and joy of life is found in God and him alone."

## **ASSESSMENT**

Josh Moody has done the church a great service in giving us this book. It is a cogent and succinct summary of the central themes of the life of Jonathan Edwards, and Moody does his best work applying those themes to our present context better than any other author I have read. This book will handsomely repay the effort in reading it, and will help train a new generation of "Edwards-influenced individuals" who seek to live radically God-centered lives in our bewildering twenty-first century context.

*Andrew Davis is the senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of Durham, North Carolina.*

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## Book Review: The Great Exchange By Jerry Bridges and Bob Bevington

Reviewed by Shane Walker

***The Great Exchange: My Sin for His Righteousness*, by Jerry Bridges and Bob Bevington**  
[Crossway, 2007. 304 pages. \\$15.99.](#)

We all believe something, and what we believe radically impacts how we live and who we worship.

That all important link between faith and life is what energizes *The Great Exchange* by Jerry Bridges and Bob Bevington, a book on the atonement that is accessible to all thoughtful Christians.



This book was written to clarify the current confusion surrounding Christ's work on the cross within the western church, and in one sense is a refreshingly unoriginal work: the structure is openly borrowed from George Smeaton's (1814-1889) more exhaustive efforts (*The Apostles' Doctrine of the Atonement* and *Christ's Doctrine of the Atonement*) while the passionate theological reflection is dependent on John Piper. Besides their gracious and even eloquent use of words, Bridges and Bevington add nothing new to the debate on the atonement, yet they do provide much-needed clarity. In fact, the book is so lucid and edifying that I placed it on our church book table and recommended it to my congregation prior to completing this review.

*The Great Exchange* is divided up into chapters developed around the books of the New Testament. An overview at the book's beginning lays out the biblical framework of the atonement, while each succeeding chapter enriches readers' understanding of Christ's work from within the doctrinal framework of the various biblical authors.

A mild tone prevails throughout: avowed liberals are mentioned as those who wish to "abide exclusively by the 'red letter' words of Jesus" (33), and John Owen's *The Death of Death* is briefly praised for demonstrating that "all for whom Christ died also died in him" (145). Yet most of the buzzwords which confuse the discussion of the atonement in the local church are avoided. Instead, biblical terms such as apostles, fulfillment, atonement, and propitiation are carefully defined and often highlighted through italics, and the distinction between Jesus' active and passive obedience is defined, defended, and applied throughout the book.

In sum, the authors argue for a great exchange which "results from the death of the perfect sacrifice" of Jesus Christ (41), leading to a "twofold substitution: the charging of the believer's sin to Christ results in God's forgiveness, and the crediting of Christ's righteousness to the believer results in his justification. More than being declared not guilty, in Christ believers are actually declared righteous. Redeemed sinners and their Christ have traded places" (41). In other words, Bridges and Bevington believe in works-based salvation, but not fallen humans' works: it is Christ's work on behalf of Christians that saves.

Bridges and Bevington urge that the church fervently maintain the orthodox understanding of the atonement for both theological and practical reasons. They write, "No attempt to reform the church can succeed if it departs in any way from the centrality of the message that our sinless Christ actually died on a real cross as the sin bearer for those who are united to Christ by faith in his substitutionary sacrifice and righteousness" (15). Before the church can be reformed, would-be reformers must understand the foundation of the church. Thus the conversation about the church does not begin with the correct response to post-Enlightenment thought or marketing polls, but with the fundamental issue of Christ and

the cross.

The crux of Bridges and Bevington's argument is that all understandings of the atonement and even ways of life that do not have penal substitution at the center are biblically unsound and ultimately unsatisfying to the redeemed heart. They define the "futile ways" of the world (1 Peter 1:18a, ESV) as "the pursuit of our own righteousness in an attempt to satisfy God's justice by our performance, manmade doctrine designed to make us feel self-sufficient or self-justified, the pursuit of personal agenda designed to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, the overly busy lifestyle lost in the purposeless passing of time" (255). Only a heart of flesh or one desperately confused can find ephemeral rest and joy in beliefs outside of Christ's alien righteousness and propitiation.

Jerry Bridges and Bob Bevington have invited the church to the lifelong effort of bringing our beliefs into line with the Bible's teaching on the atonement in all its eternal glory. They are calling on the church to eliminate unbiblical thought and practice by growing in our understanding of Christ and his work. It is admittedly a disciplined effort, but it is both ultimately satisfying and evidence of our salvation. I pray that the church would heed Bridges and Bevington's call.

*Shane Walker is the pastor of Andover Baptist Church in Linthicum, Maryland.*

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