

# church membership

ordained servant

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# *Ordained Servant Online*

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### **CURRENT ISSUE: CHURCH MEMBERSHIP**

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### *From the Editor*

The modern world privileges informality with the mistaken idea that the informal is more authentic. So the written rolls of church membership and the vows to affirm the commitment of membership are seen as being unspiritual. This is a nineteenth-century Romantic ideal, not a biblical one, but cultural pressures persist, and the less people pay attention to their Bibles the easier world-conformity becomes. Ryan McGraw and Ryan Speck address the question, “Is Church Membership Biblical?” Their answer is persuasive.

Glen Clary reviews Scott Manetsch’s new book *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*. A study of the ministerial discipline and practice in Calvin’s Geneva yields a rich picture of early Reformation ministry. It is another reminder of how biblical forms and spiritual life are not mutually exclusive but essentially complementary.

Mike Horton always has his finger on the cultural pulse. Dale Van Dyke’s review of Horton’s latest offering, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World*, reminds us of another dimension of the form-substance discussion. In a world that elevates the sensational, it is the ordinary means of grace and Christian living, worship, and service that are most important in the eyes of our Lord. This book should be of great encouragement to us ordinary Christians who seek God’s glory in a world that does not recognize how extraordinary our God’s grace is.

But in the spiritual battle those who minister the Word can often become very disheartened. Stephen Magee reviews Clay Werner’s book, *On the Brink: Grace for the Burned-Out Pastor*, which points to the cross of Christ as the only means to see weary pastors through the slough of despond.

In our last review David Booth looks at Gordon Wenham’s *The Psalter Reclaimed*, encouraging immersion in the canonical Psalms as a neglected means of worship and sanctification.

Finally, Christina Rossetti’s “The Common Offering” focuses us on the ordinary ways that our love is expressed in response to our Lord’s extraordinary love for us.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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- “Membership Rolls and the Book of Life.” (Gregory Edward Reynolds) 16 (2007): 36–39.
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*Ordained Servant* exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

# ServantLiving

## Is Church Membership Biblical?

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by Ryan M. McGraw and Ryan Speck

### INTRODUCTION

How many membership cards are you carrying currently? Do you have a library membership, a grocery store “preferred customer” card, a gym membership, and perhaps others? We have so many memberships that we can become weary of them, which leads some people to groan when the church, which is a spiritual institution, requires official membership. Thus, it is increasingly common for Christians to question whether church membership is a biblical practice.

As Bereans, Christians ask rightly, “Is church membership biblical?” No one can cite chapter and verse to prove a multi-step process for joining the church and being counted on her rolls. So, then, why do some churches insist on an official process to join their membership, while others do not? The biblical answer to this question is not direct, but indirect. Just as a canvas provides a necessary backdrop for a work of art, so the Bible assumes the necessity of formal church membership in order to fulfill the commands and to apply the promises of Scripture with regard to the church.

We define formal membership as a covenant bond made by a public vow by which a person commits him or herself to a local body of believers, under the authority of a well-defined group of church leaders. This results in an official record of members who belong to a local church. We will demonstrate the requirement for formal church membership by proving from Scripture that the church is a visible community, that every Christian must be a member of this community, and that such membership necessitates vows and rolls.

### I. THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY

#### 1. The Analogy of Citizenship

Throughout Scripture, God describes his people as a city or a nation: a gathered, defined group of people living together (e.g., Pss. 46; 48; 87; Matt. 21:43; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 12:22–24; Rev. 21). He depicts heaven itself as the City of God (Rev. 21:2) and Christians as “citizens” of a heavenly city (Phil. 3:20; Heb. 11:10). While foreigners may reside in a city or nation, citizens alone constitute its true membership. They have birth certificates, pay taxes, and obtain passports and other licenses. In other words, they have recognized privileges and responsibilities that non-citizens do not and should not have. The nature of any society includes official citizens belonging to it by open and clear declaration.

When someone is caught in a criminal act, one of the first points in processing his case is to determine whether or not he is a citizen of that society. In the United States of America, arrested citizens must be read their rights and treated with a measure of respect and dignity. The laws of other countries may affect the treatment of those who are not citizens.

Official status as a citizen and the rights and privileges that attend this status are not peculiar to any country or time. This principle was true in biblical times as well. The Apostle Paul, for example, appealed to his Roman citizenship for similar rights and privileges (e.g., Acts 22:29). When Paul referred to citizenship in the kingdom of God (e.g., Phil. 3:20), he understood citizenship much as we do today. Being a citizen entails having official, publicly recognized membership in a community. This status brings particular rights and privileges within that community. To be a citizen of a country is to be an official member of its society, a subject of its laws, and a beneficiary of its government. As citizens of the kingdom of God, Christians enjoy all the rights and privileges of living under Christ's rule and government.

Even Christ recorded the names of his citizens in his book (Rev. 13:8; 21:27). As it is in every other respect, the church militant (on earth) is a dim reflection of the church triumphant (in glory). Paul prized his citizenship in heaven at great personal cost. He declared it publicly through his open commitment to Christ (Acts 9:18–20; 13:1; 15:2; etc.). Did he not join with God's people in a public and official manner in the presence of many witnesses? Timothy, his friend and fellow minister, did the same (1 Tim. 6:12). We have the documents to prove it (his writings and what others wrote about him). Since he used this language of citizenship to describe our status in the courts of heaven, would an official public commitment to the church on earth be out of place?

The church is both visible and invisible. In its visible aspect, we identify the members of the church through their profession of faith in Christ and obedience to him. In its invisible character, God alone knows who his elect are and who are truly born of the Spirit. The visible church is made in the image of the invisible church and, as such, reflects its character. Those who belong to the invisible church are citizens of a heavenly kingdom. Is it not appropriate for the members of this invisible society to express their citizenship by belonging to its visible and earthly expression?

Some consider "citizenship" to be a cold and lifeless concept. Is belonging to the "Kingdom of God" merely a matter of having the "right papers"? This was not the apostle's inspired opinion. He held citizenship in this kingdom as his highest privilege in life and in death. He understood that this citizenship entails being members of the household of God (Eph. 2:19), part of Christ's body (Col. 1:18), and belonging to the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). The citizens of this kingdom are the saving objects of the work of the triune God, into whose name they are baptized (Matt. 28:19).

Even in regard to earthly citizenship, the Roman centurion in Acts 22:28 told Paul that he had purchased his citizenship "with a great sum." If he set such great value on his Roman citizenship, how much more should we value our membership in the church, which is the kingdom of Christ? Our heavenly citizenship is analogous to the citizenship and memberships we sustain on this earth. In placing church membership in opposition to the nature of a warm loving society, Christians can unintentionally neglect the full teaching of God's Word. In Scripture, official, public, formal vows are not at variance with living, warm, organic fellowship with other believers and with true, heartfelt, spontaneous devotion to God. Citizenship necessarily involves records of citizens.

What nation has citizens with no official documentation? As the members of the invisible church are recorded in heaven, so should the members of the visible church be recorded on earth.<sup>1</sup> Government is not possible without a record of citizenship. We must be members of the church even as we are members of other societies.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Reynolds, "Membership Rolls and the Book of Life," *Ordained Servant* 16 (2007): 39.

## 2. The Analogy of a Family

Membership in an earthly family is analogous to membership in the church. The Scriptures describe God's people (the church) as a family (e.g., Luke 8:21; Gal. 3:26; Eph. 5:25–28; Col. 3:20–21; Heb. 2:11; 1 John 3:1ff). Though families can be less loving and cohesive than they should be, they are definite units of people living together in close relations. These relations should, and often do, produce warm relationships. As such, they are the building blocks of society. Intimate love is God's intention within the family, which is his institution (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5; Eph. 5:31). Such love is also Christ's intention for his church. It is the love he has shown to the church (Eph. 5:23), and it is the love he intends for us to show to one another (1 John 4:11).

This description of the church as the family of God helps us understand (by analogy) what our personal conduct ought to be, both in the family and in the church. The husband should love his wife and give himself for her (Eph. 5:25), just as Christ did for the church. Wives must submit to their own husbands and respect them (Eph. 5:22, 33), just as the church loves and respects Christ. Children are obligated to obey their parents in the Lord (Eph. 6:1). Fathers must beware of provoking their children to wrath (Eph. 6:4). They do so by reflecting the just and wise government of the Lord as they (along with their wives) rear their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).

Being a member of a family is a legal matter. While it is popular to speak of “starting a family” when couples have children, according to Scripture, a family begins with and is constituted by a marriage covenant (Gen. 2:24; Mal. 2:14). The intimacy and unity that should exist between members of a family begins with a husband and wife joined together by covenant in the sight of God through vows. The marriage covenant is a legal contract, involving officially recorded and publicly taken vows (Ruth 4:10–11; Mal. 2:14; Matt. 21:1ff; Rev. 19:9).

This is true in civil society as well as in Scripture. Contractual agreements mean nothing legally unless they are established as a matter of public record with witnesses (Deut. 19:15; Matt. 18:16). For this reason, the Scriptures repeatedly affirm that a marriage can be dissolved only through a certificate of divorce (Deut. 24:1, 3; Isa. 50:1; Mark 10:4). The commitment a man and woman make to each other excludes all other people from the rights, privileges, and duties of that marriage. All others should know that these two people belong to one another; they are “off limits” to all outsiders. This is why we wear marriage rings—they commemorate publicly our marriage vows.

When we come to Christ, we become part of his church, which is his bride. Because we are born again by the Spirit's power, we are children of God and belong to his family. We are children of God through adoption by the Father, through marriage to Christ, and by being born of the Spirit. Moreover, much like our public commitments in marriage, he commands us to confess him before men (Matt. 10:32–33; Luke 12:8–9; Rom. 10:9–10).

Do public vows and official records make marriage a dry, cold, dusty relationship? On the contrary, publicly and officially declaring their love for and commitment to one another should deepen a couple's love. A couple with no public commitment to one another always has an uncertain and undefined relationship. They have no privileges and no binding responsibilities to one another. This is often why men who will not commit to a woman in

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marriage often speak of not wanting to be “tied down” and why the women who are with them are often insecure.

We could argue similarly in relation to having children (who then receive birth certificates) and adopting children (another prominent theme in the Scriptures to describe God’s people). Official commitments do not contradict the free, vibrant, organic nature of Christianity. They are part and parcel with it throughout the Bible. We are related to the triune God and to one another, and we must dwell together as a loving family.

### **A Practical Observation**

These biblical concepts apply to the “church-hopper” in our day: the person who jumps from church to church, never settling anywhere. When something happens that irritates him slightly, he jumps to another church. Does this reflect the importance that the triune God places upon the church? How can such a person be vitally connected to God’s people in any meaningful sense of the term? To borrow an analogy from James, as death is separation of the spirit from the body, so those who claim to have the spirit of Christianity without expressing spiritual vitality in the body of the church act dead instead of alive. The spirit expresses life through the physical body. The members of the invisible church express their life through commitment to the visible church.

Have you experienced a time when you were, practically speaking, cut off from weekly and intimate fellowship with other believers? Perhaps you travelled to a foreign country. Perhaps you moved somewhere without a church nearby. If so, then was this not a difficult, waning time for you spiritually? Did you miss the sweet fellowship and mutual love and concern that you experienced with your brethren previously as a society, family, and body?

Such times drive the value of committed fellowship and true community home to our hearts. God established the community of believers for our good. It is necessary for our spiritual growth in the grace and knowledge of Christ. The nature of the church as a divinely ordained community does not prove the case for formal church membership, but it is the necessary backdrop for it. Defective views of church membership often reflect defective views of the church itself.

## **II. THE DUTY OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: WE MUST JOIN THIS COMMUNITY**

The biblical description of the church as a community implies that we should join this community. This is true for at least two reasons, both of which highlight the fact that, ordinarily, it is neither desirable nor possible to live the Christian life alone.

### **1. The Interdependence of Believers**

The community of the church is vitally important because we need each other. The Apostle Paul drives this point home in 1 Corinthians 12:21. The eye cannot say to the hand that it does not need it. The head cannot say to the feet that it does not require them. It would be absurd to treat our physical bodies this way. Yet Paul indicates that this is precisely how Christians often treat the church. He wrote about the interdependence between Christians, not the independence of Christians. We are differing members of the same body.

We all have the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22ff) in greater or lesser measure. Yet the Spirit has gifted each of us in various ways in order to complement each other’s faith and service. Some of us are called to be teachers and preachers. Some of us are specially equipped to

administrate. Some are gifted for mercy ministries above others. Some have a remarkable ability to encourage others. Why has Christ distributed such gifts among his people? It is for the edifying of his body (Eph. 4:8ff). Our fellowship with one another is necessary in order to live the Christian life and to express the life of Christ's body.

The Simon and Garfunkel song, "I am a rock; I am an island," is not sound theology. No one can live well alone. People, made in the image of the triune God, need fellowship. God needs no one. The communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is a fellowship that accepts no supplement and requires no complement. Yet man is needy. He needs God. The God whom he needs and reflects is a being in communion. Part of man's renewal in God's image consists in his communion with God and with God's church. Man was created for fellowship with God and with others in submission to God. The two tables of the Ten Commandments reflect this order and relationship. The new man in Christ is part of the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). The Christian is created for Christian fellowship, with God and with those who are in fellowship with God.

## **2. The Mutual Responsibilities of Believers**

Believers not only need one another; they have duties to perform toward one another. The necessity of Christian fellowship and the responsibilities resulting from that fellowship are joined inseparably by God; let no man rend them asunder. If God created us to be a body of believers needing fellowship and equipped us to help one another in the faith, then we must exercise our gifts to bless fellow believers rather than for our private benefit. God commands us not to withhold from one another what the other needs. When you read Scripture, you find multiple "one-another" commands. Wayne Mack notes fifty-eight such commands.<sup>2</sup> He writes:

All these commands are written in the present tense. This means we're to be constantly doing these things. The lives of every believer should be characterized by the fulfillment of these commands toward other believers. We're to be constantly devoted to one another, praying for one another, honoring one another, greeting one another, and motivating one another to love and good works. If this is true, then it also follows that we must be physically present with other people in order to do these things. . . . We cannot possibly fulfill these kinds of commands to every person in the world. We do not have the time or the resources to do it, no matter how much we would like to. We have to be selective about the people with whom we're going to work in fulfilling these commands.<sup>3</sup>

We have the clear responsibility to love one another, but we have limited resources to do so as individuals. The gifts of the Spirit and the community of the church highlight the fact that we exercise Christian love concretely in relation to a specific group of people. God in his Word forbids us from living the Christian life without fellow Christians. He commands us to walk in fellowship with them.

Many believe that they can do all of these things without formal church membership. Some will say, "Can't we be a community without belonging officially to a church? Can't we fulfill these commands and needs outside of the church as an institution through para-church

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Mack, *To Be or Not to Be a Church Member? That Is the Question!* (Merrick, NY: Calvary, 2004), 26. Consider: Rom. 12:16; Gal. 6:1–2; 1 Cor. 12:25–26; Heb. 3:13; 10:24; Col. 3:16; James 5:16.

<sup>3</sup> Mack, *Church Member*, 29



organizations? Should we not be free to fellowship with whatever group we want, whenever we want, without officially belonging to a specific church?" Many professing believers have no official relation to any church, but they regularly attend or even minister in churches or in informal Christian groups. Some churches forbid membership and ordination. Do such people fail to fulfill Christ's commands to the church through his apostles?

The next section builds a case for formal membership in the local church from scriptural principles by drawing implications from the church as a community and the duties attached to communion with her.

### **III. THE FORM AND MEANS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: MEMBERSHIP ROLLS AND MEMBERSHIP VOWS**

In addition to what has already been said, at least three practical reasons solidify the need for membership rolls and formal membership vows: the relationship between church members and church officers, the process of church discipline, and the right of the congregation to elect her own officers. The preceding material highlighted the need for formal church membership in terms of the nature of the church and the duty to join her. Part two below shows the form membership should take.

#### **1. The Relationship between Church Members and Church Officers**

The relationship and responsibilities between church officers and church members necessitates formal church membership. From the beginning, God instituted various means of governance for his people. He made Adam Eve's head before the Fall (1 Tim. 2:11–13). Thus, God provided human leadership even in a perfect world with perfect people. A necessary implication of this fact is that human governance is not a necessary evil, but a necessary good. Even in a sin-cursed world, human governance continues to be a necessary good supplied by God to bless his people. Our Lord called Abraham to be the head of his household, who were the people of God at that time (Gen. 18:19). God provided priests, prophets, and kings to be over his people (Lev. 9; 1 Chron. 23:13; Amos 2:11; 1 Sam. 3:20; 16:13; etc.). He called apostles to lead the church under the New Testament (Matt. 10:1–8; Acts 1:24–25; Eph. 2:20; 3:5; 4:11). He set forth the eldership as a perpetual office in the church (1 Tim. 3:1–7; 5:17; Tit. 1:5–9; etc.). God has always made it clear that he intended men to be ruled by other men according to the authority structures of his choosing and his designation. In fact, Jesus gave church leaders as part of the gifts he purchased by his own blood for the good of his church (Eph. 4:8, 11–16). The church is the authority structure under which God has placed all Christians in order to bless them. God places Christians under church leaders for their benefit. Sometimes it is difficult to see how such men are a blessing to Christ's church. Most church leaders themselves are bewildered at times as to why God called them and how he could use them. Nonetheless, to the glory of his grace alone, he uses men with clay feet to help his people in various ways.

Regardless of how we understand the biblical form of church government, all should be able to affirm that the church is a body of believers under divinely sanctioned officers. For example, Acts 15 describes what is known as the Jerusalem Council. A troublesome teaching arose amongst God's people regarding circumcision and importing Jewish rites into the Gentile church. In response, the apostles and elders gathered together in Jerusalem to address the problem through the use of Scripture, debate, and prayer. The delegates sent to this

council reflected the authority structure that God had appointed in the church through his Word. They were not leaders of parachurch organizations. They were extraordinary (apostles) and ordinary (elders) church officers. The elders were the elected leaders of local churches who led the people and under whose authority the people submitted themselves.<sup>4</sup> The council arrived at its decision by appealing to Scripture rather than to apostolic authority, even though the apostles were present. The decision was nonetheless ascribed to the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). The apostles and elders sent this decision to local churches in many regions with the expectation that all follow their directions (Acts 16:4).

Hebrews 13:17 further highlights the mutual responsibilities God enjoins, both on church officers and on church members. The writer commands his audience to submit to those who rule over them on the grounds that such rulers must give an account to God for their souls. The Lord here assumes that there will be shepherds over his people. He holds those shepherds accountable for how they rule his people. How can they be responsible for a definite body of Christians if they cannot define the parameters of that body? Are they accountable for those souls who come and go as they please? Can such people obey the command of the text, when they have no commitment to the local body or to its officers? How can they fulfill these mutual responsibilities without formal commitments from both parties (vows) and membership rolls of some kind?

The Word of God does not denigrate authority. Men may abuse the power of church government through their sin, but this does not mean that the government that Christ instituted in his church is evil. This passage commands us to embrace this authority structure as part of our duty and love to God. When forced to choose between the two, we must obey God and not men (e.g., Acts 5:29). We must submit to our elders only insofar as they minister according to God's Word. Nonetheless, elders remain God's authority structure for his church today. The church ruled by elders is one means by which Christ exercises his authority, not merely through men in office, but through men in office ministering the Word of God.

If God has given an official authority structure to govern his church, then why do many Christians today believe that they can fulfill their responsibilities to the church with no tangible commitment to a local congregation and to her officers? Could it be, at least for some, that the objection is really against the divine mandate to submit to church authority? Could it be that the spirit of radical individualism that pervades our culture has jaded our view of church membership? How do you respond to the language of Hebrews 13:17, "obey" or "submit" to those who "rule over you"? How can you apply this without membership?

Our Lord Jesus Christ instituted local authorities to rule over his bride. These governing authorities exercise spiritual power only. Church power is ministerial and declarative, not magisterial and legislative. Church power is not carnal or coercive; it is not by the sword. However, this does not mean that church officers do not exercise genuine authority under Christ their head.

In 1 Timothy, the Apostle Paul encouraged Timothy to exercise his ministry faithfully (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:18). Among other things, Paul taught Timothy about the requirements of elders (1 Tim. 3). The language of overseer, ruler, and shepherd involves ruling over a particular body of believers. These elders govern local congregations. For example, in Acts 20:17 Paul assembled the elders of Ephesus. They were elders of this church and of no other.

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<sup>4</sup> In Acts 14:23, the Greek verb is *χειροτονέω* (*cheirotoneo*), which lexicons universally recognize to mean choose or elect, likely by raising the hand.

Throughout the Scriptures, elders govern local bodies of believers—just as it was in the synagogues (Matt. 5:22; Acts 13:15; Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; etc.).

What if a group of church leaders from a church down the street came to your building and declared that your church service will start an hour later than usual next week? Would you submit to their decision? Or, do you not recognize clearly that such a declaration cannot have authority in your church. Those leaders cannot make the decisions for your church; your leaders alone can. The same is true in every other realm of authority.

Without membership, you are no more committed to the church and to her officers than a man is to a woman to whom he is not married. How can a woman submit to a husband unless she has a husband? How can a man become a husband without a vow before God that constitutes a new family? Should every man, who happens to be a husband of a woman, be able to call every other wife to submit to him as a husband? Unless the woman vows to submit to the man, he has no such authority over her.

Likewise, in the local church, membership vows are necessary, in part, for you to promise to obey the command contained in Hebrews 13:17 (to submit to your specific, local “rulers”). Membership rolls are necessary to keep record of who has taken these vows and to know to whom the officers must keep their vows in service to God. Is it not possible that the strenuous objections to official church membership really stem from an unwillingness to submit to those God has called to be leaders of his people? Public vows and membership rolls are necessary in order to fulfill the responsibilities of church members to their officers (and vice versa).

## **2. Christ’s Discipline Process Outlined in Matthew 18:15–20 Reinforces the Need for Formal Church Membership**

Christ told his disciples that they must deal with unrepentant sin in their brethren specifically and concretely. If such people do not hear us after private admonition and after bringing one or two witnesses, then we must “tell it to the church.” Whether you regard this as an official church court or the membership at large, Christ assumes that the body of the church is both recognizable and definable.<sup>5</sup> Our Lord makes no provision in this process for dealing with church-less Christians.

The primary reason why churches do not follow through with excommunications (in our experience) is that the unrepentant person stops coming to church. Many are accustomed to refer to this as a person “excommunicating himself.” Yet putting the offender out of the church is an act of the church, not an act of the offender. It is a public declaration that this person no longer has any public official relation to the church because his or her life and profession of Christ are no longer credible. How could the church do this if the person was not a member but only a casual attendee?

This is a negative corollary to the vows taken upon joining the church. If a person can come and go from the local congregation as that person pleases with no official commitment to that congregation, then how is it possible to obey Christ’s command to excommunicate the unrepentant? This places many in the absurd position of exercising this sanction only when the offender consents to the process. Yet do we not know by experience that such a scenario is rare? Defective views of excommunication go hand in hand with defective views of church membership. Without membership vows and membership rolls, we will inevitably reduce

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<sup>5</sup> “The church” here likely follows Jewish use in the Old Testament and the synagogue. This referred to the eldership as the governing body that represented the church.

excommunication to an act of the individual rather than to an act of Christ through the church.

Putting someone out of the church for unrepentant sin is an exercise of the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:19). Membership rolls are necessary in order to exercise the power of the keys, which is through the ministry of God's Word. However, this implies the oft-overlooked corollary that entrance into the church is an exercise of the keys of the kingdom just as much as exclusion from the church is. The authority symbolized by the imagery of keys is that of both opening and closing doors. While the sword is the symbol of the state's authority (Rom. 13:4, a symbol of the death penalty), and the rod is the symbol of parental authority (Prov. 13:24; 22:15, a symbol of physical discipline), opening and closing is the symbol of the church's authority.

In Matthew 16:19, Jesus committed the keys to Peter (and spoke to Peter in the singular, "you"). However, in Matthew 18:18 (using the same language of "binding" and "loosing" as in Matthew 16:19), Jesus addressed the disciples in the plural ("y'all"). There is now a plurality of leaders who hold the authority to bind or loose, as symbolized in the keys. This group consists in the elders of the church. Admitting members to the church that have a credible and biblical profession of faith is a public declaration that their sins are remitted on account of their faith in Christ. This is a positive act of church discipline that should strengthen the faith of believers. It is also a commitment. Just as you enter the church through the ministerial application of the Word, so you must voluntarily place yourself under the exercise of the power of the keys. The only way to exercise discipline, both for edification and for correction, is for members to join the church through a public commitment and to be counted on her rolls.

### **3. Membership Rolls are Essential in the Election of Church Officers**

The election of church officers is both a right and a privilege of church members. In Acts the congregation participated in the election of an apostle (Acts 1:21–23), the first deacons (Acts 6:3–6), and elders (Acts 14:23). It is impossible to elect officers justly without a well-defined membership in the local congregation. Membership rolls necessarily determine who has the right to vote for new officers. These membership rolls should consist of those who have promised their commitment to the local church. Such public commitments are what we call vows.

Without membership rolls constituted by vows, it is impossible to preserve the biblical right of church members to elect their own officers. Several problems arise, for example, when a church without membership attempts to elect a new minister. The church has two options. In the first, it is left at the mercy of whoever shows up on the day of the election, whether they attend the church regularly or not. In such cases, it is not uncommon for attendance to double or triple on the day on which elections are held. Yet what right do those who have made no commitment to the officers and members of that congregation have to elect the future officers of the congregation? If the church has no membership, then how does anyone present have a sure right to participate in electing officers? In fact, what if the much larger church down the street decided to swarm into your building and vote for your officers? How could you prevent them from doing so, unless you recognized that only members of your particular church could vote on your officers?

The alternative to allowing anyone present to vote is that the current leadership bypasses the election process entirely and chooses their own successors. The former option deprives

church members of the right to elect a man who ministers regularly to them by making them subject to people who may not even attend the church regularly. The second option obliterates the New Testament example of the people electing their own officers and gives the current leadership tyrannical authority over the church. Membership rolls are necessary in order to protect the rights of God's people in the local church.

## CONCLUSION

Have you become a member of a local congregation? Have you resisted having your name added to the rolls? How can you keep Christ's commands in relation to the local church without doing so? To which elders do you actively submit? Which congregation are you committed to? You cannot adequately express your membership in the church invisible without doing so through the church visible and local.

Have you resisted taking membership vows? Recognize that good vows only require you to promise to do what Scripture requires of you already. Must you not be subject to the discipline and government of the church? Should you not support the local church in its worship and work to the best of your ability? No local church is perfect and no church needs to be in order for you to join it. Join that church that best reflects your understanding of Scripture, honors Christ, and will feed your soul. Take your vows freely and without coercion. Take them wisely. Take them prayerfully and seriously. But, by all means, take them.

Everything that the triune God commands you to do is for your good. Will his promises fail you as you seek to honor him in his church? We should always be thankful that Christ did not call us to live the Christian life alone. He went to the cross alone. He tread the winepress of God's wrath alone. Yet he redeemed a community of sinners. The church is his body. Belonging to her is belonging to the Father's household. She is the temple of the Holy Spirit. In spite of the faults of the church militant on earth, she is inhabited by many who shall be part of the church triumphant in heaven.

Are you citizens of this heavenly kingdom? Then reflect your membership in this heavenly society by becoming members of the earthly society that reflects it. As William Perkins wrote, the church is "the suburbs of the city of God, and the gate of heaven; and therefore entrance must be made into heaven in and by the church."<sup>6</sup> Let us dwell with her and in her so that we might be near to God through her.

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<sup>6</sup> William Perkins, *A Warning Against the Idolatrie of the Last Times and an Instruction Touching Religious, or Divine Worship* (Cambridge: Printed by John Legat, 1601), 145.

# ServantReading

## Calvin's Company of Pastors *by Scott M. Manetsch*

A review article

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by Glen J. Clary

*Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609*, by Scott M. Manetsch. Oxford Studies in Historical Theology. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 428 pages, \$74.00.

Scott Manetsch has done a tremendous service to the church by providing a detailed account of pastoral ministry in Geneva from 1536 (the year of Geneva's political and religious revolution) to the end of the first decade of the seventeenth century. *Calvin's Company of Pastors* is brimming with scholarly research that considerably advances our knowledge of religious life in Geneva during these crucial years of the formation and maturation of the Reformed church. Both the academy and the church will benefit from this work, which was clearly the author's aim.

Manetsch distills essential pastoral lessons from his research and suggests various applications to the modern church. Without any romantic notions of recovering and reliving the glory days of Calvin's "perfect school of Christ," Manetsch urges Protestant churches to renew their commitment to the theological vision of the Company of Pastors for the sake of the health and wellbeing of the church. I will have more to say about this at the end of the review.

The central purpose of the book, writes Manetsch, is "to examine the pastoral theology and practical ministry activities of [the] cadre of men who served as pastors in Geneva's churches during nearly three-quarters of a century from 1536 to 1609" (2). In so doing, Manetsch hopes to "to trace out in detail Calvin's pastoral legacy and the efforts of his successors on the Venerable Company who were committed to preserving it" (8). By using the Reformers' own writings; the registers of the city council, the Company of Pastors and the Consistory; and other archival material, Manetsch is able to create a rich mosaic of the color and texture of "religious life in early modern Geneva, offering intriguing insights into some of the particular difficulties, dilemmas, and demands that Geneva's pastors encountered as they proclaimed the Word of God and shepherded their Christian flock" (2).

The book is divided into two sections. Part One (chapters 1–5) "explores the history and nature of the pastoral office and details the personnel who belonged to the pastoral company from 1536 to 1609" (9). Here one finds intriguing information about the pastors' family relationships, their financial conditions, and the general rhythm of pastoral work in the three city churches and in the dozen countryside parishes surrounding the city.

Part Two (chapters 6–9) examines in more detail the specific duties of Geneva’s pastors including preaching, church discipline, writing books, and providing pastoral care to their members through the sacraments, catechesis, visitation, and spiritual consolation. The members of the Venerable Company conducted worship, preached the Word, baptized infants, catechized children, examined youth for admission to the Lord’s Table, conducted household visitations, comforted the sick, and consoled people preparing to die (306). In their weekly consistory meetings, they also endeavored to apply the “medicine” of “church discipline in the hopes of achieving repentance, healed relationships, Christian understanding, and spiritual growth” (306).

The Company of Pastors consisted of eight to ten ministers from the three city parishes, four professors from the Genevan Academy, and another ten to eleven ministers “who served the small parish churches in the surrounding villages under Geneva’s jurisdiction” (2). During the 1540s,

Calvin organized this group of ministers into a formal church institution known as the Company of Pastors [or the Venerable Company] which met every Friday morning to examine candidates for ministry and discuss the theological and practical business of the church, both locally and internationally. (2)

[B]y the final years of his life, Calvin had succeeded in creating a pastoral company in Geneva that was intensely committed both to the reformed faith and to his theological leadership. More than simply the architect and recognized leader of the church, Calvin had become both a theological guide and a spiritual father to many of Geneva’s ministers. (300)

From the beginning of Geneva’s reformation in 1536 to the end of the first decade of the seventeenth century, more than 130 men belonged to the Venerable Company. The overwhelming majority of them were French refugees, and most of them “have received little scholarly attention and are all but forgotten” (2). Next to Calvin, the most well-known member of the Company is Theodore Beza, who succeeded Calvin as the recognized leader of the group and perpetuated Calvin’s theological legacy. The ministers of Geneva (including Calvin and Beza) recognized and advocated parity of ministerial office, though Calvin and Beza were clearly the most influential members of the Company.

Though, in principle, all of Geneva’s ministers possessed equal authority within the church, in point of fact Calvin’s star was the brightest light in Geneva’s ecclesiastical firmament during his pastoral career, serving as moderator of the Company until shortly before his death in 1564 without election or serious discussion. (62)

At the same time, “Calvin’s authority within the Company was never absolute, and he routinely submitted to the collective will of his colleagues on daily matters of lesser importance” (62). Calvin’s Company of Pastors “was never Calvin’s per se” (63).

After Calvin's death, Beza persuaded the Company to choose its moderator by an annual election to "protect the church" from "ambitious men who might aspire to become perpetual bishops" (63). The Company elected Beza as moderator for a one-year term and reelected him each year for the next sixteen years (63). The civil magistrates would have had Beza continue as moderator permanently because they found him easy to work with, unlike some of the other ministers, including Calvin, who lacked Beza's irenic spirit and political wisdom. "Whereas Calvin by temperament had been brilliant, uncompromising, independent, and decisive, Beza was more cultured, sympathetic, collaborative, and politically astute" (63). Under Beza's leadership, the Company enjoyed "a more constructive, less combative, relationship with Geneva's magistrates" (64). This did not always sit well with certain pastors who had a more prophetic edge to their preaching and who often criticized the magistrates from the pulpit.

On April 28, 1564, as Calvin lay dying of tuberculosis, he summoned the Venerable Company to his residence to give them final instructions (1). He warned them "to be on guard against all religious innovation in the future" (1). Calvin begged them to "change nothing" and to "avoid innovation" not because he was "ambitious to preserve" his own work but because "all changes are dangerous, and sometimes even harmful," explained Calvin (1). The Company of Pastors was eager to defend and preserve Calvin's theological vision and over the next four decades successfully resisted "efforts to modify church doctrine and practice" (301). One of Manetsch's goals is to explore "the degree to which Geneva's ministers after Calvin obeyed his admonition to 'change nothing'" (3).

Manetsch demonstrates that "no change was permitted [by the Company] to Geneva's public theology as expressed in the *Confession of Faith* and Calvin's *Catechism*" and that "though revisions to Geneva's liturgy and practice of worship were sometimes proposed, they were rarely adopted" (301). The Company even resisted changes to homiletical forms that deviated from Calvin's unadorned style of preaching. Thus, Beza and his colleagues were defenders and preservers of Calvin's theological, liturgical, and homiletical legacy.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to see them as mindless imitators of Calvin. They did, in fact, introduce some changes in custom to religious life in Geneva, but those changes were in keeping with Calvin's theology. They were more than mere defenders and preservers of an established tradition, for they endeavored to work out the practical implications of Calvin's theology for ecclesial ministry. They were, as Manetsch put it, "more consistent than Calvin himself in working out the practical entailments of the reformer's pastoral theology" (301). Manetsch writes:

[R]eligious life in Geneva and the texture of pastoral ministry did change during the generation after Calvin due to a variety of political, religious, social, and polemical factors. In some cases, Geneva's magistrates forced religious change upon the Company of Pastors through negotiation, or even intimidation, in an effort to extend their jurisdiction over church policy in the city. On other occasions, reforms were initiated by the ministers themselves, as they attempted to work out the implications of Calvin's ecclesial program and theology in the face of new religious contexts and challenges. Even if Calvin's legacy loomed large over Geneva's church throughout



the period, the theory and practice of pastoral ministry changed in subtle ways during the half century after Calvin's death in 1564. (3)

The first wave of Reformed pastors in Geneva consisted mostly of foreigners who received their theological education in other parts of Europe, but after the founding of the Genevan Academy in 1559, the majority of Geneva's pastors "received at least part of their theological training in Geneva where, in addition to studying reformed doctrine at the feet of Calvin and Beza, they were shaped by a common religious culture that included daily preaching services, academic disputations, and rigorous moral discipline" (300). To maintain unity in theology, liturgy, and polity, all ministers were required to subscribe to Calvin's *Confession of Faith*, Calvin's *Catechism*, and the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* and to follow Calvin's liturgy. Even Calvin's *Institutes* was eventually given quasi-confessional status (75, 300).

Each Friday morning, the pastors met to study Scripture together in a meeting called the Congregation. One of the ministers would read a selected passage of Scripture in its original language, translate it into French, and give an exposition of the text. The other ministers would then evaluate his exegesis and discuss the theology related to the passage. Thus, the Congregation "served to regularize the ministers' interpretation of Scripture" and "forged a common theological outlook" among them (300, 305). Calvin and his colleagues believed that biblical interpretation and theological development should take place in community. Calvin even used the weekly Congregation to vet his interpretation of Scripture before publishing his commentaries on the books of the Bible. Thus, Calvin's commentaries do not represent his own private interpretation of Scripture, but the interpretation that was hammered out by the Venerable Company as they met in the weekly Congregation.

The Company also participated in a quarterly meeting known as the Ordinary Censure, which was tied to the quarterly celebration of Holy Communion.

Four times a year, on the Friday before the Lord's Supper, the ministers of the city and countryside, and professors from the Academy met behind closed doors to air their grievances and offer fraternal correction on matters of doctrine and personal moral character. As a visible sign of their unity, the ministers concluded the Ordinary Censure by sharing a meal of soup together. (128)

Just as the Congregation promoted collegiality and unity in theology and biblical interpretation, the Ordinary Censure promoted collegiality and unity in ministry by "providing a regular venue for Geneva's ministers to air doctrinal disagreements and address interpersonal conflicts" (305). Thus, each member of the Venerable Company was accountable to the Company as a whole, just as the members of the church were accountable to the Consistory, which met every Thursday at noon "for the purpose of overseeing public morality and doctrine, and admonishing and disciplining people guilty of flagrant sin" (29).

Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* established the office of lay elder. And the civil magistrates held an annual election to choose twelve men "from among the three levels of Geneva's civil government: two from the Small Council, four from the Council of 60, and six from the Council of 200" (29) to serve as elders on the Consistory for a one-year

term. Thus, the Consistory was made up of these twelve elders (who were civil magistrates) plus the city pastors. The Consistory had “no power to impose corporal punishment; it had authority to wield only ‘the spiritual sword of the Word of God’ ” (29). The ecclesiastical discipline carried out by the Consistory was “intended to serve as a form of pastoral care, administering spiritual ‘medicine to bring sinners back to our Lord’ ” (29).

The fact that more than half of the members of the Consistory were councilmen chosen by the magistrates is indicative of the close relationship between church and state in Geneva. One of the biggest battles Calvin faced in Geneva was over the balance of power between church and state. After Calvin’s death, Beza was able to relieve some of this tension, but it was not uncommon for conflicts between the Company and the magistrates to flare up during the remainder of the sixteenth century, usually due to the overreach of the magistrates in governing ecclesial affairs. Soon after Beza’s departure, the magistrates “commenced an aggressive campaign to expand their jurisdiction over religious life” (303). They insisted on having the right to appoint ministers to vacant pulpits rather than allowing the Company to choose new ministers. The magistrates even went so far as to reverse the Consistory’s excommunication of certain members “effectively breaking the Consistory’s monopoly over church discipline—a prerogative that Calvin had worked so hard to achieve fifty years earlier” (303).

Manetsch does a superb job of demonstrating that preaching was the primary task of Geneva’s pastors. On Sundays and Wednesdays, the sermon was part of the full service of worship outlined in the Genevan Psalter. On the other days of the week, the sermon was not accompanied by the Psalter or the long prayers of confession and intercession in Calvin’s liturgy. The average city pastor preached around 250 sermons per year. New Testament books and the Psalms were preached at the morning and evening services on the Lord’s Day (catechetical sermons at the noon service), and Old Testament books were preached on weekdays. Preaching was always *lectio continua* except during Christmas or Easter when ministers sometimes interrupted their series “to preach weekday sermons from gospel texts related to Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection” (151).

Manetsch also covers other aspects of pastoral ministry including baptism, prayer, catechesis, the Lord’s Supper, church discipline, and home visitation. I was particularly impressed by how much emphasis the Company placed on the necessity of pastoral visitation. For example, Beza said:

It is not only necessary that [a pastor] have a general knowledge of his flock, but he must also know and call each of his sheep by name, both in public and in their homes, both night and day. Pastors must run after lost sheep, bandaging up the one with a broken leg, strengthening the one that is sick. . . . In sum, the pastor must consider his sheep more dear to him than his own life, following the example of the Good Shepherd. (281)

Manetsch concludes the book by endeavoring to glean some insights from his study of the Company of Pastors for ecclesial ministry today. First, he observes that since pastoral ministry is often a difficult vocation that entails heavy workloads, financial constraints, incessant criticism, congregational apathy, and various other hardships, to be

an effective pastor requires “courage, a clear sense of vocation, thick skin, a generous dose of humility, and solid Christian faith” (304–5).

Second, Manetsch agrees with the Company of Pastors that no minister should hold preeminence in the church but that all ministers should be accountable to the collective judgment of their colleagues (305). Collegiality and mutual accountability in pastoral ministry is beneficial both for the ministers and for the church as a whole. The church would benefit from having a culture where ministers depended on one another, learned from one another, were subject to one another, and forgave one another (305). This is one of the great insights of the Venerable Company that we seek to embody in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. We agree with Manetsch that “Contemporary Protestantism, with its infatuation for robust individualism, celebrity preachers, and ministry empires, has much to learn from the example of Geneva’s church” (305).

Third, Manetsch urges the modern church to recover the primacy and centrality of the Holy Scriptures in worship and in Christian living. The “path to spiritual renewal for moribund churches and tired saints in the twentieth-first century involves, at least in part, recovering the central place of Scripture in the church’s ministry” (306). Since the role of preaching played such a prominent role in Manetsch’s treatment of the Company of Pastors, I think he could have developed this third application a bit more. It would have been especially encouraging to see him argue for a recovery of Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture as well as his theology of preaching, as the path to ecclesiastical renewal.

Finally, Manetsch urges the church to recover the practice of pastoral care, which the Venerable Company valued so highly. The wholehearted commitment of pastors to personally shepherd each member of the flock from cradle to grave is a glaring omission in current pastoral ministry. Manetsch writes, “in our modern world where men and women so often struggle with spiritual dislocation, fractured relationships, and deep-seated loneliness, Calvin’s vision for pastoral oversight that includes gospel proclamation *and* intense relational ministry appears especially relevant and important” (306).

In *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, Manetsch does a superb job of describing pastoral ministry and religious life in Geneva from 1536 to 1609. His scholarship is first-rate. One rarely finds such meticulous research in a book that’s so engaging and enjoyable to read. I was happy to discover that Manetsch encourages his readers to consider the vital lessons that one may learn from the Company of Pastors and apply them to pastoral ministry in our day. The application section of the book, however, is pretty weak and needs to be fleshed out considerably. It is left to the reader to struggle with how to apply the numerous insights into pastoral ministry to his own ministry context. I strongly encourage all ministers and elders in the OPC to study *Calvin’s Company of Pastors* and consider areas of ministry in their local churches and presbyteries that might be enhanced by recovering the Reformed customs and traditions of the Venerable Company.

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# Ordinary by Michael Horton

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by Dale Van Dyke

*Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World*, by Michael Horton. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014, 221 pages, \$11.76, paper.

*Ordinary*, by Michael Horton is well worth the read. In an age that lauds the new, the radical and revolutionary, Horton extols the virtue, grace, and sustaining power of “ordinary” believers, nurtured by the ordinary means of grace, for truly meaningful and fruitful lives. While the title and cover appear to be a direct rebuke of David Platt’s widely read *Radical*, Horton never mentions him by name and casts a positive vision and tone throughout the book—even as he skillfully exposes the false motives and assumptions behind “radical” Christianity.

In keeping with his “Pilgrim Theology,” Horton contends that a “radical” faith is not a sustainable faith over the long haul. The central theme of the book is that God intends to perfect his saints and accomplish his kingdom purposes through ordinary things: ordinary means of grace, ordinary ministers and ministries, and the ordinary, largely unnoticed acts of common saints.

This book is dedicated to all of the pastors, elders, and deacons whose service is as unheralded as it is vital to sustainable discipleship; to all of the spouses and parents who cherish ordinary moments to love and be loved, and to all of those believers who consider their ordinary vocations in the world as part of God’s normal way of loving and serving neighbors right under their nose each day. (27)

The book is comprised of two parts, roughly 100 pages each. Part One, “Radical and Restless,” analyzes the mistaken assumptions and societal influences behind the “radical” Christian movement. Horton highlights the contemporary infatuation with excellence; the expectation of quick, measurable results; and our society’s obsession with youth. Horton has a unique ability to read societal trends and connect sociological dots in order to provide helpful insights concerning the forces affecting the church today. For instance, the chapter on “The Young and the Restless” (chapter 3) should be required reading for any youth pastor or leader. Chapter 4, “The Next Big Thing,” is a helpful reflection on evangelicalism’s common infatuation with novelty, which is contrasted with the Reformed emphasis on the ordinary means of grace.

Horton is very good at expressing the extraordinary power and adventure of ordinary church.

Now, that doesn’t mean that what happens at church through these ordinary means in ordinary services of ordinary churches on ordinary weeks is itself ordinary. What happens is quite extraordinary indeed. First and foremost, God shows up. He judges and justifies, draws sinners and gathers his sheep to his Son by his Word and Spirit. He unites them to Christ, bathes them and feeds them, teaches and tends them along their pilgrim way. He expands his empire even as he deepens it. It is through this divinely ordained

event that “the powers of the age to come” penetrate into the darkest crevices of this passing evil age (Heb. 6:3–6). (83)

In Part Two, “Ordinary and Content,” Horton argues that we need to “run from the frantic search for ‘something more’ to ‘something more *sustainable*’ . . . We need to be content with the gospel as God’s power for salvation” (126). These chapters outline God’s methods and means of building his church. The analogy of the church as God’s garden, needing common fertilizing and pruning was very good. In contrast to the radical, individual, and novel approaches to the Christian life, Horton highlights the common, communal, and confessional nature of true personal and societal transformation. Though most of what Horton says here will be familiar to Reformed pastors, I found it to be a very encouraging and motivating reminder of God’s extraordinary work through our “ordinary” gospel ministry. When the “super-pastor” down the road seems to be getting all the press and enjoying all the success, “ordinary” pastors will find food for the soul in these pages.

*Ordinary* is not a perfect book. It is a bit repetitive and wanders off the track from time to time. Horton also, at times, tries to establish principles from the thin air of personal preference. For instance, he argues that a multi-site church, where the message is broadcast via video, “runs against the grain of the incarnation” (116) since the pastor isn’t present in flesh and blood. There may be valid reasons one could argue against the multi-site church trend but surely this isn’t one of them. I don’t see how Paul’s epistolary ministry could not be charged with the same incarnation infraction. Horton also argues that John 10:27, “My sheep hear my voice *and I know them*” (his emphasis), means that pastors need to be able to personally know each of their sheep. Practically, this would mean that no local church should grow beyond the capacity of the pastor to remember names. Is that really what Jesus meant to convey in John 10:27? The imperfections of *Ordinary* are however, in an ironic way, evidence of the main thesis: God uses imperfect sermons (and books) from imperfect men to accomplish his extraordinary gospel purposes. And to that end, *Ordinary* is useful.

The strength of *Ordinary* is that it is a hopeful and grace-filled book. As it calls us away from our self-righteous, guilt-laden, and soul-wearrying efforts to do more and be more for Jesus it invites us into the wonderful good news of God’s own work accomplished for us and in us. We receive a kingdom rather than build one. We participate in God’s economy of grace—where we delight in God’s goodness and share his lavish gifts—rather than labor in the joyless, self-justifying economy of merit with its abundance of guilt and scarcity of rest.

There is a great need in the church for this message. So many believers (including pastors) wrestle with a lingering sense of inadequacy and failure. The truth is, we aren’t the Christians we wanted to be. There is a long list of things we aren’t doing well: evangelism, discipleship, family worship, etc. In our discouragement we can easily lose sight of the things that Christ values: resting in his finished work and freely loving others. Maybe all you did today was make lunch for your kids and offer an encouraging word to a friend. You smiled at a harassed mother in the store, accomplished some of the tasks you had before you in reliance on God’s grace and strength, and offered a prayer of tired thanksgiving at the end of an ordinary day—and the Father was pleased. That’s good news for harried Christians.

*Ordinary* could work fairly well for a small-group study, though I would take several chapters at a time. It has a few questions at the end of each chapter to get a discussion going.

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# On the Brink *by Clay Werner*

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by Stephen Magee

*On the Brink: Grace for the Burned-Out Pastor*, by Clay Werner. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014, 143 pages, \$12.99, paper.

This book is a call to ministerial endurance through the power of the cross of Christ. In two sentences from the opening paragraphs Werner gives a good introduction to the message of this honest volume. The first is about the cross: “One look at Jesus hanging on the cross will teach you that if you make a conscious decision to deeply and sacrificially love sinners, it’s going to hurt something awful” (13). The second leads pastors to the cross again for the hope and strength they need to stay at their posts and even flourish in the Lord’s service: “One look at Jesus will also teach you that if God loved us even to the point of death on a cross, he’ll provide strength to endure and hope to persevere through the incredible and humanly impossible calling of loving *fellow* sinners” (13).

The author, a pastor in the PCA, makes it clear that the lessons that he writes about have been learned through personal adversity. In the midst of his own struggles, Werner received the help of trusted advisers. He also profited from the heritage of ministerial reflection handed down to the church from prior generations. Werner’s central message is the important truth that both pastors and their congregations need to find the “remedy of the cross” (73) as they seek to serve the Lord together. Their only help is in the Lord who not only died for his people, but who also rose from the dead.

The truths of the Christian gospel are richly illustrated and presented in an engaging way for suffering servants of our Messiah who may be struggling in the exercise of their calling. Though the author focuses especially on the anguish of conflict among church leaders, his message is also very applicable to those who are weary in well-doing because of other painful trials that they have faced in their lives.

The first part of the book presents the reader with the familiar territory of real pastoral life. From the experience of Moses to the writings of well-known contemporary pastors, the troubles common to the ministerial calling are plainly outlined. A brief consideration of living out the theology of the cross of Christ (based on Calvin’s *Institutes*, 3:8, “Bearing the Cross, A Part of Self-Denial”) provides the transition for weary servants of God who may wonder whether the pressures and difficulties of church leadership today are just too much to bear. The second half of the book uses this good “theology of the cross” to direct all of the Lord’s children toward the power of the resurrection as they pursue fruitful ministerial opportunities in the Lord’s vineyard today.

The final chapter of the book reminds all who would stay in the battle that they need the strength that can only come from considering the faithfulness of Almighty God. Because “the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever” (e.g. Ps. 138:8), pastors can honestly face the worst conflicts and the most wrenching personal providences with fresh courage. No experience in their lives is beyond the redeeming power of the Savior’s blood. No one needs to hide in shame or despair because of their troubles. God is able to give his ministers the grace of renewed faith and repentance. He can help them through their darkest hours by his Word and Spirit.

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# The Psalter Reclaimed *by Gordon Wenham*

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by David A. Booth

*The Psalter Reclaimed*, by Gordon Wenham. Wheaton: Crossway, 2013, 205 pages, \$15.99, paper.

The production of a new Psalter-hymnal underscores the obligation we share as ministers and elders to explain why we are singing the Psalms while rightly interpreting them to God's people. This is no easy task. We need a reliable guide who will show us not only why the Psalms have always been treasured by God's people but also how they can be used to shape our piety and worship in the twenty-first century. Ideally it would be a non-technical work yet attuned to the very best historical and biblical scholarship. It would be a volume that enlightens our understanding while inspiring us to draw nearer to our Lord in both public and private worship. This is that book.

Wenham begins by quoting the Scottish politician Andrew Fletcher: "Let me write the songs of a nation, and I care not who writes its laws." Wenham continues:

[Fletcher's] comment is the more intriguing in that as a member of the Scottish parliament he was very active in promoting legislation. Yet he recognized the power of song to capture and mold people's imaginations and attitudes to life. This insight, though, seems to have eluded most biblical scholars. The significance of the Psalms for biblical ethics has been surprisingly overlooked. (13)

The faith and piety of our congregations is formed more through the psalms, hymns, and songs that we sing than through our official catechisms. Therefore, it makes sense to include the singing of God's Word as a regular part of our corporate worship.

The book is divided into eight fast-moving chapters: (1) What Are We Doing Singing the Psalms?; (2) Praying the Psalms; (3) Reading the Psalms Canonically; (4) Reading the Psalms Messianically; (5) The Ethics of the Psalms; (6) The Imprecatory Psalms; (7) Psalm 103: The Song of Steadfast Love; (8) The Nations in the Psalms.

Wenham draws on church history to demonstrate how pervasively the psalms were used in prayer for the first thousand years of the church. One striking example is the rule of St. Benedict which "prescribed the reciting of psalms at the eight times of prayer each day. In this way the monks prayed every psalm at least once a week" (40). The rule of Benedict became very popular in the Middle Ages and many lay people adopted the practice of praying all of the psalms once per week or once per month. The historic principle of *lex orandi, lex credenda* ("the law of praying is the law of believing") is clearly sounded. We should therefore expect that the regular singing and praying of the psalms in ancient Israel and the early church would have profoundly shaped the faith and piety of God's people. Wenham persuasively argues that immersing ourselves in the psalms through song and prayer would make a similar impact today.

One of the highlights of this volume is Wenham's robust defense of the Messianic nature of many psalms. Commenting on the use of Psalm 72:8 in Zechariah 9:9–10, Wenham writes:

Whatever the exact date of Zechariah and the editing of the psalms, this quotation clearly shows that messianic interpretation of some psalms occurred long before the Christian era, because Zechariah is clearly prophesying a future ruler, not commenting on a past one. (83)

Wenham also points out the interesting fact that:

The early Jewish translations of the Psalms into Greek and Aramaic indicate that Jews understood the Psalms messianically too. Again the date of these translations is a matter of some conjecture, but the Septuagint of the Psalms may date from the early second century B.C. and the Targum and Syriac a few centuries later. For example, the Targum paraphrases Psalm 21:1 as "King Messiah shall rejoice in your strength, O Lord," and the Syriac heads Psalm 72 with the title "A Psalm of David, when he had made Solomon king, and a prophecy concerning the advent of the Messiah and the calling of the Gentiles." (83)

Wenham follows Gerald Wilson in commending a canonical reading of the Psalter. Reading the Psalms canonically is the effort to understand the Book of Psalms as a whole rather than simply as a collection of individual Psalms. Just as we wouldn't read Romans 9 without considering its relationship to Romans 1, 4, and 8, those who argue for reading the Psalms canonically insist that paying attention to the structure of the book of Psalms is an important tool for interpreting any individual psalm. Wenham makes numerous interesting observations about the organization of the Psalter. For example, the earlier Psalms tend to focus on the nations as God's enemies while the later Psalms tend to focus on the nations being gathered together with Israel to worship the true God. The transition between these two foci is Psalms 66–68. While acknowledging that the Psalter has been purposefully structured by an editor, this reviewer takes a more minimalist view and would see thematic parallels as being illustrative rather than determinative of the meaning of any particular psalm. Nevertheless, Wenham helpfully presents what is the majority view among contemporary Bible-believer experts on the Psalms.

The most disappointing chapter in the book is on singing the imprecatory psalms. Wenham provides helpful background material both for and against the Christian use of imprecatory psalms but fails to make an unequivocal recommendation in favor of doing so. While many of us might be sympathetic to his struggle, it would have been helpful if one of the world's leading Old Testament scholars had taken the risk of getting off the fence.

This is a very helpful and stimulating introduction to some of the issues around reading, singing, praying, and studying the psalms. It is well suited for all officers as well as thoughtful laypeople. Highly recommended.

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# Servant Poetry

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Christina G. Rossetti (1830-1894)

## The Common Offering

It's not the deed we do,  
    Though the deed be never so fair,  
But the love that the dear Lord looketh for,  
    Hidden with lowly care  
    In the heart of the deed so fair.

The love is the priceless thing,  
    The treasure the treasure must hold,  
Or ever the Lord will take the gift,  
    Or tell the worth of the gold  
    By the love that cannot be told.

Behold us, the rich and the poor,  
    Dear Lord, in thy service draw near;  
One concecrateth the precious coin,  
    One droppeth only a tear;  
    Look, Master, the love is here!