

IX

Mar – Apr 2011

# 9Marks Journal

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

**friends or foes?**  
church and parachurch



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**Posted on February 1, 2011**

\* This audio might not be supported by your particular device



Jonathan Leeman

## Editor's note:

**A**re the church and parachurch friends or foes?

The short answer is, they can be either. Healthy and accountable parachurch ministries strengthen local churches. Undiscerning and unaccountable parachurch ministries undermine them.

The question we'd like to pose to you, if you're a leader in a church or a parachurch, is whether you know what makes the difference.

Every author in this Journal is a fan of parachurch ministries. A majority of us work for one! But the first order of business is determining what's unique about each and how the two should relate to one another. Mack Stiles, Carl Trueman, and Aaron Menikoff help us answer these questions by establishing a vision.

Next, we need some practical advice for both the parachurch worker and the church leader on how to pursue a wise and fruitful partnership. Byron Straughn addresses the parachurch worker, Andy Johnson and Jeramie Rinne the church leader, D. A. Carson and I everyone.

What's the ideal partnership? It's one where the parachurch exists to protect the local church, says Mack Stiles. It pursues its good agenda thereby enabling the church to focus on its unique Christ-given mission. In Jeramie Rinne's words, it's one where the parachurch gives church members a venue for fulfilling all the godly ambitions that godly preaching inspires within them.



By Mack Stiles

# Nine Marks of a Healthy Parachurch Ministry

**P**arachurch ministries are everywhere.

From Joel Osteen to John Piper, from Creflo Dollar to Tim Keller, from Joyce Meyer to John MacArthur, it's difficult to find Christian leaders who don't lead a parachurch ministry.

According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, 91,272 non-profit Protestant organizations filled a 990 tax form for Christian work last year. These organizations reported total revenues of \$1.8 billion a year, with total assets of over \$4 billion. And these billions did not include churches, Christian non-profits which reported less than \$25,000 a year, or any of the country's 106,000 Christian educational institutions.

This dizzying array of parachurch ministries feed the hungry, focus on families, evangelize youth, and send missionaries. They publish, lobby, and educate. They broadcast, fund, clothe, and heal. Parachurch ministries serve the Christian community around the world, right down to the parachurch ministry that distributes this very article.

The standard cliché for parachurch is that it's not the church, but an arm of the church. Yet historically, that arm has shown a tendency to develop a mind of its own and crawl away from the body, which creates a mess. Given the grand scope and size of many parachurch ministries, those which go wayward can propagate error for years: missionary organizations become gyms, heretical seminaries pump out heretical pastors, and service organizations produce long-term confusion between the gospel and social action.

So what should mark a healthy parachurch?

## WHAT SHOULD MARK A HEALTHY PARACHURCH?

I've been involved in parachurch ministry for over three decades. I've helped form and now lead a parachurch student ministry in a Muslim nation. I've also been involved in church reform and church planting both in the US and abroad. So I speak from the seminary (another parachurch institution) of hard knocks.

In order to narrow the focus of this article, I write with a number of assumptions. Specifically, I am writing about evangelical, Protestant ministries. I am not writing about parachurch ministries that serve as a front for someone's oversized ego or desire to get rich. I'm assuming fiscal accountability, the personal integrity of the leadership, and a solid, orthodox doctrinal statement. I am writing about parachurch ministries that start with a good heart and a biblical rationale. With these foundational principles in mind, here are nine marks of a healthy parachurch ministry.

**Mark 1: A healthy parachurch ministry knows that it exists primarily to protect the church.**

The parachurch does not primarily exist in order to “step in” and “do the job” which the church is failing to do—even if that is true at times.

The parachurch does not primarily exist to do a certain ministry better and more efficiently with a “targeted, laser beam focus”—though that can happen.

**“So when the many good things begin to encroach on the primary task of the church, the parachurch can take that good ministry onto its own shoulders and so protect the church.”**

The parachurch does not primarily exist to mobilize and equip the church for which they are “para” to—though many do.

It’s not even to be an “arm of the church.”

Not primarily.

It exists primarily to protect the church.

Think of it this way. There are many good things the church can do, but most of these good things are not unique to the church. After all, secular organizations do most of them, sometimes even better. The church has a unique and high ministerial calling that stands above all others: the right teaching and preaching of the Word. So when the many good things begin to encroach on the primary task of the church, the parachurch can take that good ministry onto its own shoulders and so protect the church.

A good biblical model for parachurch ministries is found in Acts 6, in which the Greek widows were being left out of the church’s daily distribution of food.<sup>1</sup> One suspects the Hebrew widows were receiving the food because they had Jewish connections which the Greek widows simply did not have, though perhaps it was a more nefarious case of racism. Regardless, when they complained, the Apostles assigned seven godly men to the case. All these men were Greeks, as evidenced by their names, which was a sure fire way to end any cronyism or racism. But note *why* the apostles took care of this attack on the church in that way: “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:3-4).

And so, it appears that what would become the church’s office of deacon was established to protect the primary ministry of the church, that is, the ministry of the Word.<sup>2</sup>

Parachurch ministries must understand the principles the Apostles employed in Acts 6. Though there are many important things the church can do—as important as feeding widows!—nothing should subvert the primary calling of the church: to preach the Word. Parachurch ministries should come alongside the church both to fulfill important roles and to protect the unique and primary calling of the church.

## **Mark 2: A healthy parachurch ministry makes a clear distinction between church and parachurch.**

One of the things which the parachurch needs most today is a strong and healthy ecclesiology. It's not enough to understand that a parachurch protects the church. If a parachurch ministry doesn't know how it's different than a church, it's doomed to produce unhealthy fruit. To be healthy, parachurch ministries must understand what makes a church a church and what makes a parachurch a parachurch.

I was speaking to an American missionary recently and somehow we started talking about the church and parachurch. When I said the word "parachurch" he raised up in his seat and said, "I don't like that term!"

"What term?" I said.

"Parachurch!" he replied.

"Why?" I said.

"Because we're all church. There's no church and parachurch," he said, with a righteous tone.

This man is a good friend. I love his passion for Jesus and his willingness to put his life on the line for God. But he's flat wrong. Not all gatherings of Christians are "church." The church has specific parameters that make it church. Unfortunately (and this is the great irony) my friend is "into" church planting, and I fear he represents the majority opinion—even among those in ministry.

The church is the God-ordained local assembly of believers who have committed themselves to each other. They gather regularly, they teach the Word, celebrate communion and baptism, discipline their members, establish a biblical structure of leadership, they pray and give together. Certainly the church may do more, but it is not less than this.

On the other hand, parachurch, by definition, is less. That is, parachurch ministries have only a narrow slice of the church's responsibilities and prerogatives.

If this basic understanding of ecclesiology is lost—or worse, rejected—by a parachurch ministry, mental red flags should stand on end. Many negative repercussions will follow, including the two we will discuss in marks 3 and 4.

## **Mark 3: A healthy parachurch ministry avoids acting like the church.**

If a parachurch organization confuses the boundaries of church and parachurch it will begin to practice things best left to the church.

When parachurch ministries begin to act like the church they often allow people involved in their ministries to substitute parachurch involvement for church involvement, which is an unhealthy exchange.

Okay, true confession. When I was a young InterVarsity staff worker on a beach project, I baptized two Ethiopian men who had come to Christ during our week of outreach. After all, what could have been more biblical? They were from Ethiopia! And there was water! But looking back on it, I wish I had been more careful to make sure they had genuinely come to faith. This kind of discernment can only occur in the context of community. And it should have been the local community who was willing to vouch for their professions of faith who baptized them. I needed a stronger theology of the church (and of baptism, for that matter).

The same is true of other things which should be practiced in the church: communion, say, or church discipline.



**Mark 4: A healthy parachurch ministry does not pressure the church to act like a parachurch.**

With some frequency, parachurch leaders will tell “the Church” what “the Church” needs to do. They will advise it to partner with Catholics, to patch holes in the gospel by caring for the poor, to adopt new leadership structures, to become more relevant, to just about anything you might imagine. Often, this advice is disorienting since it can seem both cutting-edge and self-serving.

It's not just the leaders of parachurch organizations who pressure the church to act like a parachurch, either. Church members do, too. The programs run by parachurch ministries are numerous and powerful. From support groups for addicts to camps for kids, the list is endless. Church members who have benefited from them can naturally want these programs to be reproduced by their church. But if this inclination is not tempered by a clear understanding of the differences between church and parachurch, these well-meaning church members will pressure the church to look and act like a parachurch ministry.

Too many people view the church through parachurch lenses. Perhaps that explains why so many churches today look like the campus group or high school ministry of yesteryear?

One specific area in which parachurch movements should be careful not to pressure the church is doctrine. Parachurch ministries often have the luxury of ignoring secondary doctrines. After all, I didn't care that much about the mode of someone's baptism when I was in a parachurch ministry.

But this luxury can lead to an open dismissal of church doctrine, as if secondary doctrine is unimportant.<sup>3</sup>

When I became an elder of a new and growing church plant, those doctrines which I had set aside as a parachurch worker suddenly took on great importance. How do we handle people whose divorce was unbiblical? What will church discipline look like? What should the requirements for church membership be? What is our church's responsibility to the poor? How do we teach on baptism? What is our position on women in ministry?

**“Healthy parachurch ministries should practice and teach the distinction between church and parachurch, so that they don't violate their chief reason for existing: to protect the church.”**

Certainly parachurch leaders have the right to call the church to greater gospel faithfulness. Certainly churches are free to learn from parachurch programs. But a healthy parachurch ministry should avoid pressuring a church to dismiss church doctrine that may not have much meaning in a parachurch context, but which has a real impact on the health of the church.

Healthy parachurch ministries should practice and teach the distinction between church and parachurch, so that they don't violate their chief reason for existing: to protect the church.

**Mark 5: A healthy parachurch ministry humbly heeds the history of parachurch movements.**

Almost no large parachurch movements that existed a hundred years ago are now found faithful to the gospel.

Even fewer educational facilities that started as Christian institutions now proclaim the gospel faithfully. The rocks of history are strewn with the shipwrecks of parachurch ministries which should serve as a warning to us. Parachurch

ministries usually go bad because they are unwilling to hold to biblical principles, tending to seek growth at the cost of principle.

One of the reasons to start a parachurch ministry is that it can grow far beyond the size of a local church ministry. Even smaller parachurch ministries dwarf the size of the average church. But a healthy parachurch ministry does not equate size with spiritual success. With increased size comes an increased difficulty in knowing what is going on with rank and file members. Often a desire for growth can result in bigness for bigness' sake: corners are cut, doctrinal positions are fudged, and the ministry focus shifts with popular opinion.

**Mark 6: A healthy parachurch ministry understands the difference between the pragmatic and the principled.**

There are many pragmatic reasons for a parachurch ministry to exist. Parachurch ministries are effective. They allow a group of Christians to spend years honing specific skills to reach a certain people group or to serve a certain aim. They allow Christians to join together for gospel work across a wide spectrum of denominational affiliations. They can grow rapidly and to enormous size and scope. Parachurch ministries also have the freedom to approach such work creatively.

But these are all pragmatic concerns. They're good ones, but they're pragmatic, which means that pragmatism is an ever-present danger.

The danger of pragmatism is that we can begin to trust in skill, techniques, or programs more than we trust in the Spirit's work or in the clear commands of Scripture. For example, pragmatism tempts us to think that the *method* of our evangelism is as important (or more important) than the *content*. Or that the ambience of the location where we evangelize is more important than the evangelist's faithful walk with God. But God is much more interested in our faithfulness to the message and the faithfulness of our lives than he is with any pragmatic concern.

Healthy parachurch ministries avoid resorting to pragmatic programs (those things that often seem like gimmicks and fads with hindsight) and instead have a strong confidence in the gospel and in the Scriptures.

**Mark 7: The healthy parachurch has a counter-cultural understanding of management and money.**

Modern corporate culture values efficiency, risk management, clean organizational structures, and a strong financial ledger. Corporate culture and structure is routinely imported into parachurch ministry leadership. As a result, many parachurch organizations then also place a high value on what raises the most money, minimizes risk, or produces the most efficient management structure.

But these are not the values that bring spiritual revival, passion for the gospel, or people who are willing to lay down their lives for Jesus. Are there things to learn from modern corporate culture? Sure. Should they be our highest values in ministry? Never. Consequently, parachurch ministries need an understanding of management and money that runs counter to worldly culture.

There needs to be a constant, radical call for the management of parachurch ministries to be like what they call their staff and members to be like. A political, corporate leadership erodes a biblical mindset. When that happens in the leadership of a parachurch organization the death of the real ministry is not far behind.

I was speaking to a friend about her move to the head office of a large parachurch organization. She said that, as she began to get to know the office culture, she made two lists of people in the office: one list of those who were godly, and another list of those who were in power. And she said—tellingly—that they were different lists.

Money can also pose a problem for parachurch ministries, and I'm not merely referring to failures to fulfill financial "best practice." I am assuming accountability with finances. Instead, it's the danger of pressure to raise funds that overrides the confession and mission of a parachurch ministry. Training events for parachurch workers should focus on the Bible and

on integrating the gospel into ministry; if there is time left over, some training on fund raising is okay, too. Unfortunately, the emphases are often the other way around.

This past October, I attended the Lausanne Congress in Cape Town (an amazing parachurch event) and happened to meet an old friend from InterVarsity. We sat for coffee. I had written [an article](#) about IV last year with the hope that it would produce some discussion about worrisome trends within that movement. But the immediate internal response of IV was to distribute “talking points” for IV staff to use if their donors asked questions about my article. So I commented to my friend that I was amazed at the gears that began to spin within IV to protect the “30 million dollar donor base” rather than producing discussion about gospel faithfulness. He smiled, patted my arm, and said, “Mack, it’s more like 60 million . . .”<sup>4</sup> He said it like it was nothing personal: just business.

My, oh my.

There is no question in my mind that IV has the highest ethical standards of fiscal accountability. Even when mistakes were made, humble repentance followed. But an organization like this needs more than a business mentality about money. Nothing so endangers the health of a parachurch ministry than suppressing discussions about gospel faithfulness out of fears that it might hurt the donor base.

Bottom line: healthy parachurch ministries need to issue constant, radical, internal calls for the organization to be driven by the gospel rather than by management principles, finances, and fundraising. That way, the ministry looks like a ministry from top to bottom.

#### **Mark 8: The healthy parachurch maintains a strong commitment to, and understanding of, the gospel.**

One of the best reasons for a parachurch ministry to exist is to bring people together who are passionately committed to the gospel but who might not agree on every secondary doctrine.

To be healthy, all parachurch ministries must maintain a deep commitment to the core of Christianity—the gospel—no matter what else they do. Beware of any parachurch organization that does not hold to the gospel with a firm grip.

The gospel is the *message* from God that leads us to salvation. As we learn from Scripture, the gospel is the message that tells us how a holy and loving God sent his Son as a ransom for sinners, and that through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead any who would repent of their sins and put their trust in Christ can be reunited with God for eternity.

The watchword for all who call themselves evangelical believers is this: “If you love the gospel you’re my partner in ministry.” At the same time we should also say, “If you mess with the gospel, redefine the gospel, turn implications of the gospel into the gospel, or add or subtract anything from the gospel, then we have issues.”

But even then, those who affirm a solidly biblical statement of faith are apt to *assume* the gospel. This is exceedingly dangerous. An assumed gospel leaves the gospel message implicit and unspoken, such that anyone who claims to be a Christian is accepted as a Christian, regardless of their understanding of the gospel or their practice of the Christian faith.

Assuming the gospel is one step toward losing the gospel. Consider how often the Apostle Paul would talk about the gospel. He could barely write a sentence without bringing it up. He didn’t do that because the people had not heard the gospel, but because he knew that people easily assume or forget the gospel message. If you are not hearing the gospel in people’s prayers, in their stories, or in descriptions of their heart’s concerns, you should be concerned that they are assuming the gospel.

Most parachurch ministries have a doctrinal confession that clearly articulates the gospel. But does it matter? Is it relevant on a day – to – day basis? All publications, all literature, and all internal and external communication should square with

the doctrinal statement. All staff from the top to the bottom should know it, believe it, and live it out in every decision—from publishing to hiring. There is almost nothing more corrosive to a parachurch ministry than a doctrinal statement that has become irrelevant.

A tremendous example of keeping the gospel front and center is in the parachurch ministry of the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (AFES), the sister movement to InterVarsity in the US. Their doctrinal statement is no mere formality, but something they live out in their management, their publications, and in the student leadership on campus. In many ways, AFES serves as a model of how parachurch and church can work together towards gospel faithfulness.

### **Mark 9: A healthy parachurch ministry seeks accountability relationships with the church.**

Being in accountability relationships with the church goes beyond mere church membership or attendance; many parachurch organizations already encourage or require church membership. What's needed is transparent accountable relationships, both individual and corporate.

Yes, parachurch ministries should hold their staff and members more accountable to robust involvement in gospel-centered churches, and to a lifestyle of submitting to church leadership. But further, parachurch leadership should seek out evangelical church leaders who are willing to challenge and exhort them about these nine marks.

My first mark of a healthy parachurch outlined how parachurch ministries exist to protect the church. But here is a way for parachurch ministries to be protected *by* the church: if more parachurch ministries sought accountability relationships from a church, both for individuals and for the organization as a whole, they would find themselves protected from the dangers implicit in marks 2 through 8.

A healthy parachurch ministry needs transparent and honest relationships with evangelical churches, and should invite critique from those churches. Parachurch organizations are not above reproach. Defensive postures on the part of parachurch ministries are indications of illness. Parachurch organizations would gain much from submitting, as an organization, to the leaders of healthy gospel-centered churches.

A positive example: the Mustard Seed Foundation has determined that it will not give funding to a local staff or ministry unless that staff or ministry is also funded by a local church. This demonstrates an outstanding understanding of the place of the leadership of the church for the parachurch by submitting to the leadership of the church, first. Does this rule slow ministry down at times? Yes. Is that bad? Not at all. It protects gospel faithfulness.

## **CONCLUSION**

Parachurch ministries are bigger and more influential than ever. And within the vast majority of them, God is at work for his kingdom in powerful ways. But we should never forget that his chosen method for the expansion of the kingdom is his church. So a healthy parachurch ministry keeps the primacy of the church front and center. It makes clear distinctions between church and parachurch, both avoiding the temptation to act like the church and refusing to pressure the church to act like the parachurch. A healthy parachurch ministry humbly heeds the history of parachurch ministries, takes hold of the principles of the ministry over the pragmatism of the world, maintains its commitment to the gospel, and seeks accountability relationships with the church.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Mack Stiles lives in Dubai, with his wife Leeann where he works as the CEO for Gulf Digital Solutions. They are the proud parents of three sons. Mack served as an IV staff worker on most all field level positions for 25 years. Mack now serves as an elder of Redeemer Church of Dubai, and as the General Secretary of the IFES (parachurch) movement in the United

Arab Emirates. Mack is the Author of a number of books, including the recent IVP publication about healthy evangelism titled: *Marks of the Messenger*.

[1] Notice I say model, not biblical basis. You will not find a direct basis for parachurch in the Bible; though some would argue that in 3 John 5-8 John is encouraging support for traveling evangelists who are proto-parachurch workers. Some others point to Acts 13. See, for example, the Lausanne Occasional Handbook 24 on church and parachurch relationships, at [www.lausanne.org/all-documents/lop-24.html](http://www.lausanne.org/all-documents/lop-24.html).

[2] I am not saying that parachurch is diaconal work, or that deacons are parachurch workers. Rather, I'm merely saying that we can learn from the principles of the establishment of the diaconate by the apostles. I do think Acts 6 is why all churches would be wise to assign deacons (or elders) to keep in touch with every parachurch ministry that is a part of their church.

[3] A rule of thumb: Primary doctrines are doctrines we stake our lives on, for example, Christ's deity. Secondary doctrines are not issues of life or death—that is, our salvation—but are of critical importance for faith and practice, for example, whom we baptize. And tertiary doctrines are things which are mentioned in scripture, but are neither a life or death issue nor a issue of faithful practice, for example, head coverings for women in church.

[4] Actually, according to the NCCS, total revenues for InterVarsity in 2010 were \$84 million.





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By Carl Trueman

# How Parachurch Ministries Go Off the Rails

**T**he road to hell is paved with good intentions, goes the old saying. And, in the evangelical world, one might add that it's paved with parachurch organizations which started well and then, at some point, went disastrously off the rails. Why is this the case?

## WHY DO PARACHURCH MINISTRIES GO OFF THE RAILS?

The first point to make, of course, is that the parachurch has no monopoly on theological decline and fall. Church history is littered with examples of churches which were once vibrant and faithful becoming defunct or virtually devoid of anything that might be deemed biblical or Christian. Apostasy and deviance are functions of fallen human nature, and there is no structure or institution which is therefore immune to them.

**“Having started with these two qualifications, however, I do believe that parachurch organizations generally suffer from two particular flaws which render them inherently unstable: they are coalition movements, and they typically lack proper structures of accountability.”**

The second point to make is that, while parachurch organizations are not prescribed in Scripture, they are not therefore unbiblical in the sense of being essentially wrong. I work for a parachurch organization, a Presbyterian seminary that is not aligned to any denomination and does not report to any formal court of the church, and I do not consider myself to be sinning by so doing. I also write for parachurch publishers and (very occasionally) speak at parachurch events. I do not consider myself to be rebelling against God's Word when I do such things.

Having started with these two qualifications, however, I do believe that parachurch organizations generally suffer from two particular flaws which render them inherently unstable: they are coalition movements, and they typically lack proper structures of accountability.

### **Parachurch Organizations Are Coalition Movements**

Coalition movements almost by definition sideline the issues that divide their members in order to find common ground on what unite their members. Thus, in evangelical circles one often finds parachurch groups that, say, agree on the Trinity, the Incarnation, the authority of Scripture, justification by faith, and the need for the new birth. Other matters—the sacraments, the nature of church government, and even, in some cases, issues of predestination and perseverance—are set to one side as not germane to the central task of the organization.

This sidelining in itself is not problematic, provided one major point is kept in mind: the parachurch is not the church. It does not do what the church does, and it should not supplant the church in the minds and lives of those involved in its work. In other words, a self-conscious and strict circumscription of the parachurch is important. The parachurch exists purely and solely to serve the church in a subordinate and comparatively insignificant way. This is perhaps not such a danger when it comes to publishing houses and seminaries, but it is an ever-present danger for groups that offer services which come close to churchly functions, such as preaching services and the like.

Thus, I find it very disturbing when church leaders start to be known more as leaders of a particular parachurch group than as leaders in their churches. This serves to create a confusing image in the mind of the Christian public, whereby the boundary between church and parachurch is eroded, or, worse still, the parachurch is regarded as the place where the real action and excitement take place. This in turn consigns the church to an apparently less important role, and serves to relegate to the level of secondary or even tertiary importance the doctrinal elaboration and distinctives for which individual churches and denominations stand. The Christian public comes to regard these ecclesial distinctives as hindrances to the real work of the gospel—real work that, by inference, is done by the parachurch better than the church.

Just as concerning, however, is the unstable doctrinal matrix that exists when a solid churchly heritage—doctrinal and ecclesiological—is removed from the picture. To take the first point, when certain doctrines are sidelined, problems are never far behind. Baptism is one example: the fact that Christians honestly disagree on this issue should not stop us enjoying fellowship and engaging in co-belligerence across the party lines; but neither should it lead us to believe that the issue is of minor importance. Anyone who thinks that baptism is a matter of indifference is simply not taking the Bible's teaching seriously. Further, as soon as something like baptism is treated in this way, then all the doctrines which connect to it are displaced and somewhat weakened. Of course, the problem is only exacerbated when it's an issue such as election or atonement which is pushed to the side.

Thus, one reason that parachurch ministries go off the rails is the culture such groups create, whereby a non-church body effectively decides which bits of the historic confessions are really important and which can be set to one side. As I noted above, such setting to one side may not be important depending on the organization's mission, as with an organization focused on producing pro-life material. But when the organization focuses on preaching and teaching more broadly, there is an obvious and inherent weakness. This is one of the reasons why my own institution, parachurch as it is, requires all faculty to subscribe to a church document (the Westminster Standards), and to be office-bearers in a confessional Presbyterian or Reformed denomination. Neither the institution's board, administration, or faculty has decided to parse out which bits of our ecclesiastical confession are important; we subscribe to the whole. It is not a perfect system, but it is better than most.

### **Parachurch Organizations Rarely if Ever Have Proper Structures of Accountability**

The second reason parachurch groups go awry is that they rarely if ever have proper structures of accountability. The New Testament makes it clear that the appointed custodians of the faith are the elders, men specially selected because of their qualities of character, ability, and reputation, who have a special duty to safeguard the faith and practice of the



church. Parachurch groups have no such biblically sanctioned structure, and many of them have not thought carefully about the framework of accountability needed to remain orthodox. Further, they tend to be run by the self-appointed, or by people with money, or by those with a can-do attitude.

Again, this is one of the reasons why my own institution has sought to be as close to the church as possible in its confession, in its faculty, and in its governance structure. But Westminster Seminary is the exception rather than the rule. Many broad evangelical coalition parachurch groups think they exist to serve the church, yet they have little resemblance in confession or structure to the church. And more often than not they come to have a higher profile for many individuals—both their leaders and their foot soldiers—than the church. That is a recipe for disaster, and is why, at least in part, the orthodoxy of so many is superficial and short-lived.

I noted above how disturbed I am that some church leaders seem to prioritize the parachurch groups to which they belong over their churches. No pastor or elder should ever neglect churchly duties for such. Yes, of course, I appreciate the laudable desire to engage with other Christians and to give visible shape to the unity believers have in Christ. But too often we forget that such ecumenism is the task of the church, not the task of individuals or of parachurch organizations.

To conclude, I am happy to work at a parachurch seminary, but I rejoice that my institution strives to be as ecclesiastically responsible in doctrine and structure as it can. Further, I am happy to write books and articles for parachurch organizations committed to disseminating good Christian literature. Thankfully, there is little chance of either type of parachurch organization being mistaken for the church. But I am profoundly hesitant about being closely associated with parachurch groups that wittingly or unwittingly might supplant the church or become more important than the church in the eyes of many. Once a group starts offering contexts for preaching and worship, we have a potential problem; and such outfits are, in the long run, more than likely headed for disaster.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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By Aaron Menikoff

# Are Parachurch Ministries Evil? A Defense of their Biblical Basis and Practical Usefulness

**T**he local church and the parachurch seem to be in constant conflict.

Jerry White, former executive director of Navigators, referred to their relationship as an “uneasy marriage.” Uneasy is right. More than one pastor has been faced with the possibility that members in his church are choosing to devote their resources—both time and money—to parachurch ministries rather than to the local church. Meanwhile, parachurch workers can be led to feel that they are doing something less than God’s work because they are working outside the four walls of the local church building.

Are parachurch ministries inherently wrong? If not, what is their biblical basis and practical usefulness?

In this article, I want to critique five common but flawed reasons to promote the parachurch, and then offer four better reasons why parachurch ministries are biblically legitimate and practically useful.

## FIVE COMMON BUT FLAWED REASONS TO PROMOTE PARACHURCH MINISTRIES

### 1. Christian Unity

The first argument is simple: parachurch ministries should be supported for the sake of Christian unity. Citing Ephesians 4:3 and Philippians 2:2, proponents of this view insist that churches and individuals should work with parachurch ministries for the sake of their shared devotion to Christ.<sup>1</sup>

However, the New Testament call for unity is typically a call for unity *within* local churches. Moreover, most who urge unity and cooperation as a basis for parachurch work know that they cannot demand it at all costs since members of different denominations, say faithful Lutherans and Presbyterians, may share a common devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ but find other forms of ministry cooperation difficult.

Therefore, while parachurch ministries may provide an opportunity for Christians to work together in a unified fashion, this argument by itself hardly justifies the existence of parachurch ministries.

## 2. God's Largesse

Parachurch proponents point out the danger of putting God in a box. They argue that God delights in working outside traditional structures.

This argument is put forth by the authors of the book *The Prospering Parachurch*. Israel, they insist, should have caught on to God's desire to work through the nations. They cite Isaiah 49:6, Deuteronomy 7:6, and Isaiah 54:2 and then argue, "For centuries, Christians have been comfortable with an understanding that God works in this world through the traditional church, through denominations. But in the last fifty years, the strength of the independent parachurch has grown by leaps and bounds."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Israel should have seen and delighted in God's plan to reach beyond Israel. But the contemporary application is not that God will utilize the parachurch, but that every church should have a heart for the nations. God is generous, and it's beyond question that he works through other means than the institutional structure of the local church. But we draw this conclusion from his character, not from explicit scriptural teaching about the parachurch.

## 3. Apostolic Example

Many have looked to the apostolic ministry to help defend and shape the parachurch's mission. For example, Ralph Winter put forward a "two-structure theory" of God's redemptive plan. The first structure is local. Local churches are planted for discipleship and evangelism. The second structure is mobile. Apostles in the first century foreshadowed mobile (parachurch) ministers today who work outside the confines of local church authority.<sup>3</sup>

The apostolic ministry *is* exemplary. We have much to learn about ministry from looking at Paul's life. For instance, Paul's evangelistic fervor, his eagerness to defend truth, and his passion for spiritual growth should mark every believer. And yet I do not see how the work of the apostles can be cited as a license or even a guide for contemporary parachurch "ministers." The church was founded upon an apostolic and prophetic ministry (Eph. 2:21). Therefore it remains the responsibility of local churches to protect and promote apostolic teaching.

## 4. The Priesthood of the Believer

Some defenders of the parachurch have used the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer to explain their right to exist. This doctrine states that every Christian has access to God through Jesus Christ alone and does not require the intercession of a local church pastor or other spiritual authority. Therefore, they argue, every Christian is free to serve God within or without the church. As Jerry White puts it, "The spiritual gifts of believers are given for the building up of the entire body of Christ, not just the local church. God certainly uses these gifts in the local congregation, but they are not the property of that congregation. They belong to the whole body."<sup>4</sup>

I believe that Christians are free to use their gifts outside the local body of Christ. But I don't think the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer is the reason why. When Peter refers to his audience as a "royal priesthood," he was not promoting individualism. He was taking language which once applied to the nation of Israel and was now applying it to the church: it's the church which is to mediate and represent God to the world. This corporate nature of this witness becomes even more evident in Peter's next words: "a holy nation." Paul has the same emphasis on the unity of the local church body in 1 Corinthians 12 through different administration of the Spirit's gifts.

The priesthood of the believer is a precious doctrine, but it is not an explanation for ministry outside the local church.

## 5. Obvious Success

Many insist that since parachurch ministries are thriving they must be biblical. This is the assumption behind *The Prospering Parachurch*. If parachurch ministries were not doing good work they would not be successful: "In the final analysis the parachurch prospers because it meets the universal need of every culture and person."<sup>5</sup>

Many parachurch workers are undoubtedly successful. They are translating Scripture, sharing the gospel while counseling mothers who are considering an abortion, witnessing on college campuses throughout the world, and much more. But we must not assume that because something appears to be successful, it is biblical. I have no doubt that one day we will learn of many faithful churches and parachurch ministries that saw little outward “success” and yet greatly pleased the Lord, while many outwardly successful ministries will be revealed as unfaithful. We must look to other reasons if we are going to find a valid basis for parachurch ministries.

## **FOUR BETTER REASONS TO PROMOTE PARACHURCH MINISTRY**

With that in mind, here are four reasons which, I believe, argue better for the biblical basis and practical usefulness of parachurch ministries.

### **1. Christian Liberty**

Christians are free to earn a living by writing books, changing tires, translating the Bible, and a host of other legitimate vocations. When we work honestly, diligently, and for God’s glory, he is pleased.

As a pastor, I am very thankful to be freed up week in and week out to teach, evangelize, and disciple. But I do not believe that God is necessarily more pleased with my work than the work of my sister who stays home to raise her kids, or my brother who practices law.

Every Christian should be under the authority of a local church because every Christian should be a member of a local church. But this does not mean that every Christian’s vocation must be guided, controlled, or directly overseen by a local church. Because there is no biblical prohibition against the parachurch, Christians have freedom to serve in the parachurch.

### **2. Evangelistic Urgency**

Passages of Scripture which speak of the horrors of hell and the necessity of evangelism lead me to believe that Christians have a compelling reason to organize parachurch ministries. Jesus declared that the wicked will face eternal punishment and the righteous will receive eternal life (Matt. 25:46). Paul taught that the faith which leads to salvation comes from a message that must be heard (Rom. 10:14-15). Further, an individual’s only hope is to hear and respond to the gospel message in his or her lifetime (Heb. 9:27). The world is under an urgent need to hear the gospel.

Christians have liberty to teach, disciple, translate, and evangelize outside the direct authority and supervision of the church. Evangelistic urgency implies they should. Thus, we should expect to see Christians who are not necessarily called to be elders or deacons in a local church organizing themselves for these noble purposes. Moreover, we should be thankful when, in light of this urgent need, Christians do organize for such work.

### **3. The Failure of Local Churches**

One can argue that Christians have been doing ministry outside the direct oversight of local churches for centuries. However, the growth of the parachurch movement as we know it is largely rooted in and perpetuated by the failure of local churches to protect and promote the gospel.

The National Association of Evangelicals was birthed in 1942 as Protestants rallied together to give a voice to a biblical theology which had been abandoned by local churches during the rise of modernism. As churches and the institutions they once held dear fell under the attack of liberalism, Christians rallied around the fundamentals associated with the *evangel*. At the risk of oversimplifying, this unity made the NAE possible, and the NAE made interdenominational cooperation possible. And interdenominational cooperation gave birth to parachurch ministries.<sup>6</sup>

I'm not arguing against having an evangelical identity. Rather, I'm simply observing that, had more local churches stood up against the onslaught of modernism, we would not have seen such an acute need for parachurch activity in the mid-twentieth century.

Then, as parachurch ministries boomed, local churches slumbered. They became more interested in protecting market share, promoting their brand, and pleasing their consumers than actually making disciples. As the years rolled by, evangelism and discipleship seemed best left to those ministries with experience in the trenches. Churches instead gave their attention to preaching sermons, building buildings, and sharpening their church growth skills in gospel-saturated cultures.

A vicious cycle emerged. Parachurch ministries saw the churches asleep at the wheel. They stepped up to the plate and served. Local churches saw the expertise of the parachurch ministries and decided that Jesus must have given them permission to outsource hardcore evangelism, discipleship, and missions to these parachurch groups. Parachurch ministries, in turn, observed that churches were even more asleep at the wheel...you get the point.

The failure of local churches may be the best, most enduring reason for the need for solid, gospel-centered, evangelistic parachurch ministries.

#### **4. Resisting “Mission Drift” in the Church**

I am not arguing that if local churches did their job we would have no need for parachurch ministries. Such a conclusion fails to acknowledge the liberty Christians have to organize outside the direct authority of a local church, and that evangelistic urgency may demand creative action. Such a conclusion also fails to acknowledge that not all parachurch ministries are alike. Some ministries operate closer to the heart of the church's mission, while other ministries provide services that are less central.

**“ Parachurch groups have the opportunity to specialize in all kinds of niche ministries. This is much better than asking the local church to do everything under the sun through its limited resources. ”**

Every year, individual members of the church I serve are actively involved in crisis pregnancy centers throughout metro Atlanta. As a church, we financially support these centers. We help for a couple of reasons. First, we are called by God to do good to all men (Gal. 6:10). We consider fighting for the life of the unborn to be doing good. We are also pleased that the centers we support share the gospel with the clients they serve.

However, fighting for the life of the unborn is not at the heart of our mission as a church. At the heart of our mission is making disciples of all nations. Therefore, I'm thankful that God has raised up Christian ministries that come alongside the church to meet these crucial needs with a gospel-centered approach. This allows us to stay focused on equipping our church members to know, love, and share the word of God. Parachurch groups have the opportunity to specialize in all kinds of niche ministries. This is much better than asking the local church to do everything under the sun through its limited resources.

## CONCLUSION

The title of this article is, admittedly, sensational. Parachurch ministries are not evil! But the fact is, the relationship between the church and parachurch remains an “uneasy marriage.” This is in part because pastors who know their members don’t tithe feel like they are competing for scarce resources against ministries that are more exciting than the operating expenses of a local church.

I do believe pastors should teach their churches that a Christian’s first financial obligation is to one’s local church (1 Cor. 9:14). A Christian who doesn’t support those who feed him and his family God’s Word week after work defies God’s Word (1 Tim. 5:17-18). That said, God has allowed for Christians to organize outside the direct control of local churches, and we can expect him to bless their work as well.

Parachurch ministries are here to stay. Their prosperity should challenge local churches that fail to take the mission of the church seriously. Their presence should be a reminder that God is at work to seek and save the lost.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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[1] Jerry White, *The Church and the Parachurch: An Uneasy Marriage* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1983), 78.

[2] Wesley K. Willmer, J. David Schmidt, and Martyn Smith, *The Prospering Parachurch: Enlarging the Boundaries of God’s Kingdom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 10.

[3] Ralph Winter, “The Two-Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission,” *Missiology 2* (January, 1974): 121-39. This view is very attractive, even among those who want to be careful not to draw a direct line between apostles and parachurch workers. The authors of *The Prospering Parachurch* write, “It would be anachronistic to call Paul’s mission work a parachurch organization, but some comparisons are valid” (61).

[4] *The Church and the Parachurch*, 80.

[5] *The Prospering Parachurch*, 199.

[6] See Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially chapter 8, “An Evangelical United Front.”



By Byron Straughn

# For the Parachurch: Know the Difference Between Families & Soccer Teams

**F**ive years ago my family moved to Pennsylvania and began looking for a new church. At the first church we attended, a number of friendly people greeted our family after the service. But interestingly, the conversations kept going in the same direction as soon as they discovered who my employer was—Campus Crusade for Christ. Like clockwork, every single person asked me, “What do you think of the *local* church?”

**“Too often, parachurch workers do have an unbiblically low view of the local church. And their lack of involvement in the local church reflects this low view.”**

After the first conversation, I thought nothing of it. By the third I was mildly annoyed. By the fifth, if it were not for the resurrection power of Christ subduing my sarcastic tongue, I’m not sure what I would have said.

At the same time, I have to admit the question made sense. Too often, parachurch workers (PCW's) *do* have an unbiblically low view of the local church. And their lack of involvement in the local church reflects this low view. Here are a few reasons PCW's sometimes give for their less-than-wholehearted involvement in a local church:

- “What’s the difference? We sing, pray and listen to messages in our ministry.”
- “Our ministry is where it’s at! Churches are old fashioned, stuck in tradition, and irrelevant.”
- “I’m just not here much because of my ministry responsibilities.”
- “I give and give all week. I just want to come to church to be ministered to and fed,” which is really a way of saying, “I’m tired and I’ve done my part.”

This is what I hear from people whose weeks are filled with good ministry. Their hearts are wonderfully engaged in discipleship relationships and evangelism, and such work can be weighty and difficult.

What's critical to understand, however, is that such activities don't replace a church. When I ask a college student or a PCW why he or she has slept in for an eleventh Sunday in a row, and I hear one of these lines, I become concerned about their lack of experience of God's sustaining grace, as well as their basic understanding of the gospel and its corporate implications.

If you're reading this article, more than likely you are a parachurch worker, or maybe you share the opinion that PCW's are ecclesiastical slackers. Either way, let me try to persuade you that parachurch work does not replace church involvement, first, by pointing to the gospel. The gospel helps us to see that belonging to a church is like belonging to a family, while working for a parachurch is more like playing for a soccer team.

## **CHURCH AND PARACHURCH: LIKE FAMILIES AND SOCCER TEAMS**

The gospel is the good news that sinners like us can be reconciled to God through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Read Ephesians 2:1-10 for a picture of this vertical reconciliation. But another set of relationships follows. Being reconciled to God means we're reconciled to God's people. Read Ephesians 2:11-22 for this picture. Becoming a Christian means being adopted into God's family. And joining a local church is like showing up at the family dinner table. Don't tell me you belong to God's "universal church" if you don't prove it on earth by binding yourself to a local church. That's like saying you belong to the family but never showing up at family events.

Working for a parachurch ministry, on the other hand, is like playing for a soccer team. (But wait, Byron, I know you. You've never played soccer. Yes, it's true, but I have friends who play soccer, so hear me out.) You know how soccer teams work. Team members are selected, and then they gather to play soccer. They don't gather to receive math tutoring, to brush their teeth, to give and receive family love, or to care for the elderly. They gather for one purpose and for a limited season of involvement: to play soccer. What's more, everyone on the team usually belongs to the same gender and is approximately the same age.

But a family is different. It's broader and deeper. Whether you're adopted into a family or are born into one, your family is responsible for your entire nurture, growth, and education. Your family is the group of people you live with and learn to love. The relationships are permanent and all-defining. There's no such thing as a "family season" which ends after the championship game, like there is a "soccer season." And "family practice" doesn't end at 5:30, even if soccer practice does. What's more, the family is where you learn to love people who are very different from you in age and gender—siblings, parents, grandparents, crazy uncles. Though you might be disappointed if your soccer league dissolved, you would be devastated if your family disappeared.

As I said before, the gospel makes us members of the family of Christ, a membership made concrete through joining the church on earth, the local church. We "put on" our membership in Christ's body by putting on that membership in a local church, just like we "put on" our righteousness in Christ by walking in righteousness. But as family members, we still have the freedom to pursue all kinds of specific kingdom purposes and activities. Maybe that's playing soccer. Maybe that's working for a parachurch ministry.

With this comparison in mind, let me offer a few reasons why PCW's, together with all other believers, should participate in the life of their churches. Then I'll point to a few more reasons for why PCW's in particular should be active, deeply invested members of local churches.



## REASONS WHY ALL CHRISTIANS SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN THE CHURCH

### 1. For the sake of their own souls and the glory of God.

If you read much from 9Marks this probably sounds obvious or redundant, but it should not be assumed. There are not two ontological categories of believers: church-based and parachurch workers. God calls men and women to himself through the gospel and he calls us into one body, for our good and for his glory.

### 2. Faith is expressed through love.

One aspect of our assurance is seeing Christ-likeness developed in our lives. One aspect of this Christ-likeness is love for others that expresses itself in commitment to others. God's love for us moves us to faithfulness and love toward others.

### 3. Cross-centered implies cross-section.

It's through the life of a church that believers learn to love and serve people who are different yet united in Christ. We also learn what it means to follow Christ in various settings or stages of life. Our maturity deepens and broadens through our participation in a congregation, which is part of God's means of rounding out our discipleship and sanctification. It's a beautiful thing to see a 22-year old helping an 85-year old man to his seat. Think of the power of allowing a young believer from a broken home to watch a godly family that is striving to love God.

### 4. Understanding the fullness of the church's mission.

Your membership in a congregation will expose you to the ongoing, body-sustaining work of the church that transcends culture and situations. Until Christ returns, there will always be the need for God's people to gather, to hear, and to respond together to God's Word. There will always be the need for Christians to watch one another, to pray for one another, and even at times to initiate difficult conversations with one another. There will always be the need for the gospel to make its way out into families, schools, marketplaces, and other countries. These aspects of the fuller ministry of the church will always continue regardless of world wars, technological advances, biomedical challenges, or cultural fads. To reduce Christianity to a particular ministry of any one parachurch organization is not only narrow but short-sighted.

## REASONS WHY PCW'S IN PARTICULAR SHOULD BE ACTIVE CHURCH MEMBERS

Beyond these basics, here are a few more reasons why PCW's in particular should be active members of local churches. I'm now speaking especially to *you*, the parachurch worker.

### 1. Church membership is required by your parachurch organization.

I'm not going to tattle on you, but I'm guessing your organization's leadership would point you to your HR handbook, which communicates the expectation that you would identify or associate with a local congregation within a certain time frame after beginning your assignment. If it's not in your HR handbook, well, it should be.

**“So, very practically, one way you can encourage your church is to let people know how they can pray for your work.”**

## **2. Church membership allows you to cast vision among your fellow members for how the gospel is at work in the world through your ministry.**

As a PCW, you have opportunities to see what others can't. This is not because you have some special power, but because you get a first-hand look at your organization's strategic mission efforts and large-scale outreaches.

You can therefore build up your local church by regularly updating them about how the gospel is advancing outside the church's immediate area. Hearing about God's work in places they have never been will refresh and encourage their hearts, especially on the tougher days. Not only that, it will broaden and enrich the church's vision for ministry.

So, very practically, one way you can encourage your church is to let people know how they can pray for your work.

## **3. Church membership allows you to invite members of your local body to participate in your work and be strengthened by it.**

On a related note, church membership allows you to invite others to join in the work of your ministry. Other church members can pray, give, help you strategize, or volunteer to help you in your work.

I don't know of any ministry that has so much funding that it has returned contributions back to its donors. There is always financial need, and even more so when it comes to labor and manpower. Campus ministries like my own would gladly welcome men and women from our congregations to help with evangelism, follow-up, Bible studies, mentoring and life skills, and so on. The same is true of other parachurch ministries, from mercy ministry work, to missions work, to "building healthy churches" work.

Volunteers from your church may not have the same level of training you do, but their participation in your work should strengthen your parachurch work, as well as the church's overall ministry. For instance, ask some of your fellow members to lead a small group on campus. The experience will be worthwhile in and of itself; plus, it will prepare them to lead a young-married-couples small group or Sunday school class in your church. Or, have them help with logistics or operational needs on campus. That will grow these church members in their capacity to serve on the church's budget committee.

## **4. Your involvement in a church will model Christian love and maturity to those to whom you are ministering in your parachurch work.**

Especially if you're involved in an evangelistic ministry in which new converts are a large part, your participation in the church—or neglect of the church—will serve as a model to these young Christians. They are watching you. You don't need to do a lot of explicit teaching about ecclesiology and membership to set a good example. You just need to be involved in your church. It's like imprinting with ducklings—the first thing the duckling sees it will follow. Think of it as low-impact discipleship.

## **5. Church membership allows you to cultivate personal and organizational humility.**

As a PCW, you must make it your primary calling to live worthy of the gospel, remembering that your identity is ultimately wrapped up in Christ, not a particular ministry or organization. When God calls us to himself, he calls us into his family. Fight the temptation to believe that you are different from every other Christian. You need to be, and were always intended to be, part of a local body.

Because our parachurch ministries are made up of people, there is the temptation to develop a subtle organizational pride. "We're so great." "We're so right." "We're so accomplished."

By God's grace, these are easy bubbles to burst. Just remind yourself: Jesus did not establish your parachurch ministry on the pages of inspired Scripture. He did establish the church.

Furthermore, PCW's would have no salary if it weren't for the members of local churches who sacrificially give and support our work. Doctrinally, we stand on the shoulders of the church's orthodox tradition and local expressions. It's a good thing for ministries to recognize their need to partner with other organizations and churches if they are to faithfully carry out their mission.

#### **6. Church membership offers accountability and a corrective to parachurch groupthink.**

People outside of a given group are often well equipped to look inside a group and offer valuable insights that members of the group themselves cannot see. They aren't stuck to the same commitments or subject to groupthink. Thus, your involvement in a local church body and its involvement in your work might be one of the ways God speaks into your movement or ministry.

**“Nothing stays the same, but I've noticed that parachurch ministry teams especially dwell in a state of flux.”**

One of my colleagues said he believes that people like us (PCW's) need the accountability of a church more than almost anyone, since we often have great opportunities to influence. We need the leaders and members of a congregation to provide formative input and sometimes the gentle, corrective word of a friend.

#### **7. Church membership offers continuity and stability for the Christian life.**

Nothing stays the same, but I've noticed that parachurch ministry teams especially dwell in a state of flux.

One of the benefits of being rooted in a church is that it offers you some measure of stability and continuity in your friendships and fellowship. Congregations experience moves and deaths, but they are far more stable than a campus team and the constant turnover of students that takes place every four or five years.

The constancy of a church's fellowship might be God's enabling grace for you to minister long-term at your particular assignment or location. Furthermore, who will you lean on should you need to leave your parachurch, or if your ministry hits some crisis? Who will encourage you to persevere?

#### **8. You can bless a smaller congregation.**

Smaller churches often do not have access to lots of resources or opportunities. Through your work in the parachurch ministry, you might have developed operational skills, discipleship material, evangelism training, or communication experience that your pastor would love to see threaded into the congregation's ministry.

Or you might have contacts and connections with believers overseas who could help coordinate and foster a long-term partnership. For instance, maybe your ministry has you regularly involved with work in India. It could be that God uses this involvement to connect your church to that area of the world.

#### **9. You will cultivate love in its many forms and expressions.**

If you worked in campus ministry like me, you would be tempted to believe that most people in the world are between the ages of 18 and 22, wear a backpack, and have excessive amounts of piercings or tattoos.

If you work in humanitarian aid, you will constantly be thinking about malnourished children, or maybe HIV infected women.

Maybe you contribute to the Bible translation process and so you've prayed daily for years for a tribe tucked away in a southeast Asian jungle.

My point is not that you should stop trying to reach these specific groups of people. Rather, you must remember that God has sovereignly placed you in a family with men and women from a broad cross-section of life (see the section "Cross-centered implies cross-section" above) who may seem normal, but who are no less urgently in need of your care and love.

Consider the brother who just lost his job. Or the senior woman who has followed Christ twice as long as you've been alive and needs to talk about the sadness of outliving all her friends. There might be someone who you think is rough around the edges. Loving these varied men and women and children will move us beyond what we're familiar or comfortable with. Loving these believers will help us to see what kind of selfless and impartial love God has for all of his people. Such love will also be a beautiful testimony to the world and the angelic realm of God's manifold wisdom and immeasurable love.

#### **10. Church membership might even allow you to cultivate your support base.**

I'm not advocating mercenary membership. One of our leaders told me, "People give to people justified by the cause." Joining a church allows people to know you and trust you. And hopefully it helps make you trustworthy. In other words, Christians *should* be able to give their money to people that they know and trust, and your membership in a church allows this to happen.

Honestly, this seems like the most natural way to cultivate and raise ongoing support. Of course it's not the only way, but as you live out your faith locally, fellow members might be more inclined to partner with you in these ways.

#### **11. You will experience the ordinances as Scripture intends.**

Maybe sharing that communion experience with your freshman women Bible study felt like a bonding time for all of you. Maybe getting baptized in the Jordan River on your missions trip was a spiritual jolt. The problem is, Jesus gave the local church authority to exercise the ordinances, not your Bible study or your missions team.

Other than in missionary contexts where no church exists (as in Acts 8), Scripture always places the practice of the ordinances in the setting of the local church. The Lord's Supper and baptism should be practiced among a community of believers who have promised to keep one another accountable through the formative discipline of the preached Word and the corrective discipline of rebuke and excommunication.

In some ways this point is the culmination of other points above. We should share the bread and cup of communion with those who are alike and different from us, those whom God has brought together, so that we might corporately declare his death until he comes again. Communion among affinity groups can cloud the universal and inclusive nature of gospel.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Byron Straughn is a deacon at East Brandywine Baptist Church (Downingtown, PA) and the mid-Atlantic director of theological development for Campus Crusade for Christ.



By Andy Johnson

# For the Church: Which Parachurch Ministries Should You Support?

**J**ust about every week, I get a call or email from the representative of a Christian organization. They want to meet with me to tell me how they can help the members of my church do missions, or evangelize students, or understand postmodernism, or disciple children, or (most recently) use instant messaging to do evangelism. This kaleidoscope of Christian groups which are not churches, but which want to help fulfill the duties of a church, is enough to make a pastor's head spin.

I do believe there is biblical precedent for parachurch activity, as when we read about in 2 John, 3 John, and Philippians about one church supporting workers sent from another church. Presumably, some sort of administrative structure may have helped manage these inter-church cooperative relationships. Still, how do you decide who to meet with, let alone who to support?

This topic is too complex to comprehensively address in a short article. But I can suggest a few principles that help me in deciding which parachurch organizations to consider cooperating with and which to simply pass over.

## **1. Look for groups that realize they are not the church.**

Most parachurch organizations acknowledge somewhere in their official documentation that they are not the church, but are merely a servant of churches. But for many, the distinction ends with that formal declaration.

**“In short, look for parachurch groups that are happy with a limited, subordinate role. Bridesmaids who think and act like they are the bride are seldom helpful at a wedding, no matter how nice they look in their dress.”**

I recall a young man from our church who hoped to go to Asia as a student worker with one of the largest student-focused parachurch organizations in America. As he completed their application process he came to me perplexed that they never once asked him for a recommendation from a pastor, and never asked for any proof that he was a member of any church in good standing...nothing. He listed the name of the church he attended on a form once and that was it. They required lots of career references, lots of references from friends, some personality profiles, but there was no communication with or about his church at all—nada, zero, nothing.

And yet, on paper, this group says they exist to help, not to replace, churches. Really? I'm thankful this organization proclaims the gospel, but I'm afraid that their intention to partner with churches doesn't mean in practice as much as it may sound like in theory.

When you are looking to work through a parachurch organization, try not to settle for this. Try to steer your people toward groups that, in their structure and actions, demonstrate a real love for Christ's church. At a minimum this might mean the organization requires a church affirmation before accepting a worker. Amazingly, many groups don't even do that. Much better, it might mean that the group partners with local churches in their actual work. Campus Outreach<sup>2</sup> and International Students Incorporated<sup>3</sup> are two examples of parachurch organizations that establish relationships with local churches before they start building relationships on local campuses. Such groups understand the unique role of the church as they *come alongside* (the meaning of the "para" in "parachurch," by the way) the churches they mean to serve.

In short, look for parachurch groups that are happy with a limited, subordinate role. Bridesmaids who think and act like they are the bride are seldom helpful at a wedding, no matter how nice they look in their dress.

## **2. Look for groups that hold to acceptable theology, and that leave room for better.**

I have a preference for relating to people, not organizations. So typically I work to support individuals with whom I'm building a relationship. I don't generally see myself as supporting the parachurch ministry for whom an individual works.

Having said that, I do care about what the group as a whole affirms. I expect basic theological agreement between myself and the individual's organization. But if I find that a parachurch group is characterized by a position on a secondary issues that I don't like, I'm generally content to work with them so long as they don't force those ideas on the people I support. I'm content if the group merely leaves room for clearer, more faithful theology on the part of their members.

**“If a group doesn't have specific churches to which it is accountable, it's worth asking why.”**

## **3. Prefer groups that are tied to a defined fellowship of churches.**

I know this is not supposed to be the age of denominations, but many scholars have noted that parachurch groups such as mission boards have a much better track record when they are accountable to a particular denomination or a group of churches.<sup>4</sup> If parachurch organizations intend to serve churches, it only seems natural that they would want close relationships with actual churches, in order to know whether or not their service is truly helpful.

If a group doesn't have specific churches to which it is accountable, it's worth asking why.

#### **4. Don't support just any parachurch organization.**

In the end, my advice is, just don't do it. Don't support just any parachurch organization. Instead, use them to support efforts, individuals or teams that you trust.

This means not giving money to a parachurch organization apart from significant knowledge of efforts the organization is doing, or of a team or an individual working with that organization that you appreciate and want to support. I realize that in practice, this is the way most people and congregations end up supporting parachurch groups anyway, but it's good to be explicit that this is what we are doing. I know and trust and appreciate a person, so I use a parachurch organization to manage my support for them. But I am supporting the person or the team—I am almost certainly not merely supporting the organization (other than the necessary overhead).

In the case of “deputation” kinds of support, I want to consciously realize that I'm not supporting a parachurch group, but rather it is simply a useful but expendable means to help my church do the work given to it through specific teams or individuals.

With other para-church groups that advance a particular goal or mission (9Marks being an example of one) I want to make sure I understand not just what they say they are doing—“promoting healthy churches”—but something of “how” they are doing it. This means doing a little bit of due diligence. But if you are willing to fund just a few groups lavishly, rather than a bunch of groups meagerly, that won't be nearly such a daunting thought.

#### **5. Find a few groups that work well for your church members and focus on them.**

Don't be passive about your member's relationships with parachurch organizations. Instead, be proactive. Identify groups that may help your church with missions or student evangelism and work to forge a relationship with these groups. This means that you should encourage members of your church to be sent out through a few more trusted organizations rather than a wide range of organizations you don't know very well.

Then, as your personal relationships with an organization grow, work to become a church that is known to the whole organization. Invest in serving on committees or advisory boards. Get to know leaders who are directly over your members. Make the effort to help these organizations remain methodologically sound and appropriately connected to the churches. Almost certainly there will be times of frustration, but try to stick it out. Parachurch ministries need close accountability with churches, even if they are often not wise enough to recognize it. And this will help you to use the services of parachurch groups respectfully and wisely, too.

These are just a few ideas. At the end of the day, this is still a complicated matter. But we serve our churches well and we serve parachurch groups well by being both thankful and discerning about those who want to “come along side” and assist the only organization that Jesus himself founded: the church.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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[1] Ott, Craig and Stephen Strauss. “Encountering Missiology” Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI USA, 2010, p. 203.

[2] [www.campusoutreach.org](http://www.campusoutreach.org)

[3] [www.isionline.org](http://www.isionline.org)

[4] John Hammett, “How Church and Parachurch Should Relate: Arguments for a Servant-Partnership Model.” *Missiology*, Vol. 28, No. 2. April 2001, p. 201



By Jeramie Rinne

# For the Church: How Can You Support Parachurch Ministries?

**F**or months, even years, you've heard your pastor preach on the need for Christians to be salt and light in the world. You've listened to expositions of Jesus' command to "go and make disciples of all nations" so many times you could preach it yourself. Your minister has exhorted you from Luke to emulate the Good Samaritan's compassion for the needy, and to avoid the rich man's callousness toward Lazarus in his poverty.

And finally, it sinks in. You step out in faith to explore compassionate gospel ministry to the homeless or international students or battered women or veterans. You even discover other Christians who are doing the same ministry. In fact, they've formed an organization to coordinate their work more effectively. So you join up. And then you tell your pastor the good news that at long last you're putting his words into practice.

To your shock, he doesn't celebrate this new venture of faith. He begins to lecture you! He talks about the dangers of parachurch organizations and the centrality of the local church.

Are there dangers and theological challenges for parachurch work? Yes, most significantly, there's the danger of replacing the bride of Christ with another organization that Jesus didn't establish. The parachurch can easily become a pseudo-church.

**“ Pastor, do you want parachurch workers to love the church?  
Then don't merely argue for the centrality of the local church from the  
Bible. Show them what biblical church life looks like. ”**

Other articles in this Journal will address these problems. But assuming, as I do, that there is still a legitimate role for a parachurch ministry (like 9Marks!), I want to address the question many pastors may have: How can our local churches support parachurch ministries?



## PASTOR A HEALTHY CHURCH

The most vital thing we can do to help the parachurch is to foster healthy, biblical churches.

All followers of Jesus, including those who serve in parachurch organizations, are called to grow as members of local congregations. We all need to be fed by regular, gospel-centered, expository preaching. We all need to be encouraged and prayed for by a committed body, inspired by the role-modeling of godly elders and deacons, and fortified through baptism and communion. The New Testament vision of discipleship is church-shaped.

Unfortunately, some Christians gravitate toward parachurch work because they are repelled by experiences in unhealthy, unbiblical congregations. They have experienced superficiality and trendiness, lack of discipleship and shallow teaching, legalism and traditionalism, complacency and indifference. They're disillusioned by churches where the members seem more concerned with feeding sacred cows than with working in fields white for the harvest. And so they move into parachurch work, sometimes making that ministry their *de facto* church.

Pastor, do you want parachurch workers to love the church? Then don't merely argue for the centrality of the local church from the Bible. Show them what biblical church life looks like. These brothers and sisters need the church to grow in grace, so let's strive to lead attractive churches filled with the Word and the gospel, holiness and love, where they can flourish spiritually and be equipped for their work.

## PROVIDE ACCOUNTABILITY—FOR YOUR MEMBERS

This leads to a second way the church can support the parachurch: providing spiritual accountability for the members of your church who work with parachurch groups.

As church members, we are called to submit our lives to one another, both for encouragement and for scrutiny. Further, God appoints shepherds to watch over these local flocks, and he calls members to submit to their leaders. Jesus even gave authority ("the keys of the kingdom") to churches to exclude members from the congregation who embrace sin and won't repent. Just like being in a family, belonging to a church includes being open to the loving audit of others.

A church can support its members who are parachurch workers by providing this biblical accountability. Although a local church may not have direct authority over a parachurch institution, it can always challenge and encourage members who work in those institutions. You may not be able to keep a prison ministry or a food pantry from error or imbalance, but you can lovingly broach concerns with a church member serving in that prison or pantry.

Pastors can chafe at parachurch organizations because they sometimes appear to pick the pockets of the church and take the keys to the kingdom, usurping the church's calling to provide spiritual oversight. But are we providing accountability for our members? Let's not assume that because a church member leads a vibrant local ministry, she has no need for pastoral care and oversight. Learn about, love and lead your members who compassionately minister the gospel outside the doors of the church.

## PARTNER AND PROMOTE

A third and final thought: take advantage of the synergy afforded by church and parachurch partnerships.

Most congregations already do this with missionaries and missions agencies. The missions agency (a parachurch group) helps churches to send missionaries by supplying logistical support, a coordinated strategy, and more.

Why not also promote the work of the sister who leads the Bible study as a volunteer staffer at the home for pregnant teens, or the brother who spends hours each week sharing the gospel at a nursing home with a chaplaincy organization? Certainly we can find ways to highlight their ministries and partner with them without supporting every cause financially. Lend your facilities, libraries, people, and prayers. And as your church grows in biblical health, don't be surprised if it spawns new parachurch efforts.

Simply acknowledging these ministries might ignite lethargic church members. Sometimes people need concrete ideas about how to put our sermons on service, evangelism, and missions into practice. Seeing a fellow church member serving in a parachurch effort might inspire that revolutionary, life-changing thought, "Maybe God could use me too!"

## **GO WITH THE FLOW**

A healthy church has a strong tidal rhythm. We flow in as a congregation, gathering to display God's glory (this means getting serious about church polity, biblical worship gatherings, membership, discipline, and fellowship). And then we must flow out with the tide. We disperse into the world to be fishers of men and to care for the broken man in the ditch on the road down to Jericho.

Let's support those groups that beckon us outward into the ocean where the fish are.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# What is Christianity all about?



Check out Greg Gilbert's book *What is the Gospel?* — a basic introduction to the most important news in the world.

Go to [9marks.org/books](https://9marks.org/books)

# Praying for Parachurch Ministries

**H**ere are six reflections on how I pray for parachurch ministries:

1. Should there be any difference between the way I pray for a local church and the way I pray for a parachurch organization? No and yes.

No, because in both cases I am praying for brothers and sisters in Christ, and in both cases the focus of my praying ought to be for the kinds of things that the apostles prayed for. For example,

- that the love of these brothers and sisters might abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight and that they might be able to discern what is best (Phil. 1:9-10);
- that God might make them worthy of his calling and that by his power he might bring to fruition every desire for goodness and every deed prompted by faith (2 Thess. 1:11);
- that they might have power, together with all of God's people, to grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ's love for them so that they might become mature (Eph. 3:17-19);
- and so forth.

We ought to pray *for people*, and insofar as we are praying for brothers and sisters in Christ gathered in the local church or working in the context of a parachurch organization, one is still praying *for people*.

On the other hand, yes, there will be a difference, in that the church is the only human organization sanctioned and mandated by the new covenant Scriptures, the only organization that is said to be the body of Christ. At some level or other, the distinction catches up with us, as we shall see. But consider how I might pray for the ministry of, say, Bob and Sally Smith (the names have been altered), who are working to translate the Bible into several languages in Papua New Guinea under the auspices of Wycliffe Bible Translators/SIL. Even though I know that Bob and Sally have been sent out and are supported by specific local churches, I think of them in the context of the organization in which they are discharging their specific ministry, and I pray for the specifics of their ministry, including the way their mission functions, in ways that scarcely apply universally.

2. I suppose it is possible to pray "for all truly Christian organizations everywhere" or something of that order, but in reality this sort of sweeping general prayer is usually immature or lazy or both.

One is far more likely to pray usefully and intelligently for parachurch organizations with which one has special connections: it may be an organization with which I am affiliated (e.g., The Gospel Coalition) or in which I have close friends in whose ministry I am personally invested in some way (e.g., Together for the Gospel, Wycliffe/SIL). At very least they will be organizations God has laid on my heart for some reason—perhaps because I have observed the strategic nature of their work, and I want to petition God to preserve and deepen that work.

3. The Bible lays out specifics regarding the organization, accountability, and distinctive roles of various leaders in the local church (though admittedly the relevant passages in the Bible are variously understood by different Christians). That means my prayers for particular blessings or outcomes or discipline in the context of the church will be shaped by my understanding of those passages. The Bible does *not* lay out specifics regarding the organization of TGC or Wycliffe/SIL. Nevertheless, the Bible says plenty about the morality, quality of life, integrity of relationships, love, and unreserved commitment to service of all Christians. Insofar as Christians serve in parachurch organizations there is therefore plenty to pray about with respect to the structures, discipline, and relationships within parachurch organizations, even though the specifics of organization are less clearly mandated.

4. Organizations whose aims are shaped by the priorities of the gospel and in whole-hearted submission to the Lordship of King Jesus as disclosed in Scripture should take a priority in our praying that other organizations should not have. Inevitably that means there must be some effort on our part to evaluate the faithfulness of the organization's commitments to worthy goals. A seminary that constantly strives to be faithful to Scripture and to be rich in gospel understanding as it trains people for service *ought* to call forth intercessory prayer from Christians to the end that God would prosper this ministry more and more. Correspondingly, if that seminary begins to drift, believers should feel impelled to pray for corrective action, for necessary changes in leadership, for repentance. In the worst cases, it may be the part of wisdom to pray *against* the institution, precisely because it is doing great damage by undermining faith in the living God.

**“I am far more suspicious of parachurch organizations that are constantly talking down to churches, display no love for the church, and run competition with churches—all the while knocking on the doors of churches to ask for money to support their ‘ministries.’”**

5. I have sometimes felt a special burden to pray for parachurch organizations that are going through transitions that will purify them and make them more faithful. I can think of four or five seminaries or theological colleges for which I have sometimes prayed during the last three decades, institutions that were being rejuvenated and brought back into line with Scripture by leaders who were struggling to reform their organizations. Sometimes the prayers are people-specific: for example, that God would stifle the efforts of those who are leading the organization astray; that God would replace them with faithful servants of the Word; and the like. Of course, there are analogies in the way one prays for local churches.

6. I am drawn to pray for parachurch organizations that self-consciously seek to strengthen local churches, that see themselves as useful extensions of churches and whose leaders are responsible to local churches. I am far more suspicious of parachurch organizations that are constantly talking down to churches, display no love for the church, and run competition with churches—all the while knocking on the doors of churches to ask for money to support their “ministries.” For the one I am happy to pray—indeed, I may pray that the organization will become better related to, even integrated with, local churches; for the other I rarely pray, except, in the worst cases, to pray against them.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

D.A. Carson is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He is the author or editor of more than sixty books and is one of the leaders of the Gospel Coalition.



By Jonathan Leeman

# How Church Discipline Will Save the Parachurch

**F**or years now I've been hearing Mark Dever say that a previous iteration of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary "went liberal" because "local churches weren't doing their job."

What?! Why was it the local churches' fault?

Mark's point is that, when those professors began to say things like "the resurrection is not historical," then the local churches where those professors were members should have excommunicated them for denying this basic element of a statement of faith.

But what if the churches were already liberal?

Well, there's not much more you can do. But the point still stands: Jesus authorized only one institution on earth to clean the kingdom gutters and unclog its pipes—the local church.

Take a look at Matthew 16:13-20 and 18:15-20. What you'll find is that Jesus is deeply interested in the composition of the people who gather together "in his name" (ch. 18). They must profess the right things (ch. 16) and live the right way (ch. 18). When we gather *in his name*, after all, we identify ourselves with him and therefore represent him. We say to the entire world, "Hey, World, want to know what Jesus and God are like? Look at us!"

Jesus therefore gives the keys of the kingdom in chapter 18 to the local church for exercising this terrifically important activity of church discipline. Church discipline corrects sin and, if needs be, excludes the unrepentantly sinful. Jesus did not authorize seminaries, campus evangelism ministries, Christian publishers, Christian mercy ministries, or even 9Marks to clean kingdom gutters. He gave that job to the local church.

Parachurch ministries staff their cubicles and write their books with whatever supply of people the churches hand them. If the churches hand them "bad fruit" and "wolves" (Jesus' metaphors, not mine), that's who will be sitting in the cubicles and writing the books. Don't first blame a seminary, a publisher, or an evangelism ministry; first blame a church.

What's disconcerting, then, is Carl Trueman's observation that so often evangelicals see the real action as occurring in the parachurch institutions (see his 9Marks article [here](#) and an earlier blog post [here](#)). Since at least the 1950s, evangelical leaders have made a name for themselves out on the parachurch green, and all of us have turned our heads to watch the fun and games, now to extol, now to excoriate. But two dangers have followed: leaders have been promoted without accountability, and ecclesiological distinctives have been made unimportant. Trueman [writes](#), "For some [the parachurch

evangelical institutions] become the key theatres of action, the forums in which little fish can be big shots, and the deviant and heretical can flourish without proper accountability. For others they become the primary centres of Christian identity, the reason why they become evangelicals first, and Presbyterian or Baptist or Pentecostal only second.”

Modern media, social networking, and celebrity culture being what they are, I don’t think we can expect evangelicals to stop watching the fireworks in the parachurch park anytime soon. But assuming we care about the reputation of Christ on earth, what should we do?

First, we should continue emphasizing the primacy of the local church for the Christian life.

Second, we should swallow the polity pill. We must make use of the accountability structures which all those ecclesiological distinctives afford. Be a Baptist. Be a Presbyterian. Be a something. Just don’t adopt what one theologian whom I respect unfortunately recommends as a “mere ecclesiology,” one shorn of these distinctives for the sake of “peace.” It’s a temporary peace because the stuff of which these distinctives are made actually protect the Christian body. Some polities are better than others, and a baptistic, congregationally-governed, elder-led polity is best, as all wise people recognize. But pick something. Jesus cares about polity. So should we.

(I’ve been wondering if there’s some way we could make polity cool again—maybe a book called “Po:Lity Is Kool,” accompanied by a website and a road show. What do you think?)

Third, we who work for parachurch ministries should be willing to heed—somehow—acts of local church discipline. Now, I’m a congregationalist, which means that I don’t think one church’s act of excommunication formally binds another church or a parachurch ministry, the way I would if I were Roman Catholic. But I do believe that prudence recommends some measure of deference in the face of this kind of action by the Jesus-established local church.

No doubt, prudence-guided deference will look different from case to case. When a parachurch ministry (or another church) has the luxury of carefully investigating the circumstances of such an action, it might choose either to affirm or to contravene the original church’s decision. When it does not have the luxury to investigate, time being scarce, I would encourage the parachurch ministry, in most circumstances, to defer to the local church. Yes, that might mean reconsidering someone’s employment status or publishing future.

I expect this might sound radical to people, but let me point again to two biblical principles. First, a Christian ministry’s primary concern must be with the reputation of Jesus Christ in the world. Second, Jesus authorized the local church to exercise the keys. Every other ministry must understand, therefore, that it plays a subordinate role.

**“Imagine what the evangelical landscape would look like if local churches took their responsibility to correct sin seriously. I expect there would be a few less bad books out there. Fewer media scandals. Maybe less bickering in the blogosphere over whether “so and so” is a good guy or not. Less sheep following bad seminary professors into the crevasses.”**



Can local churches get it wrong and excommunicate people unjustly? Of course. So, if you work for a parachurch and you find yourself confronted, say, with an employee who has been excommunicated from his church, you should investigate the church's action so that you can disagree and act against its decision knowledgeably. You'll give an account to God for your disagreement on the Day of Judgment. *That's* the final court of appeal. Go whichever way you must now, but be informed and wise so that your conscience might be prepared for that day. Don't just wave your hand and decide "it's only a dumb church" whom you can safely ignore. Jesus died for that dumb church and gave it the authority to bind on earth what will be bound in heaven, and to loose on earth what will be loosed in heaven. He didn't give that authority to individual you or individual me.

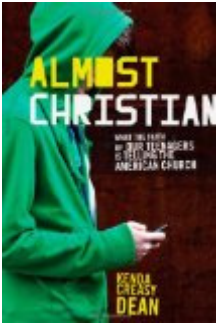
Imagine what the evangelical landscape would look like if local churches took their responsibility to correct sin seriously. I expect there would be a few less bad books out there. Fewer media scandals. Maybe less bickering in the blogosphere over whether "so and so" is a good guy or not. Less sheep following bad seminary professors into the crevasses.

Church discipline surely helps make local churches healthier. Yet I would also wager that taking church discipline and our polity distinctives seriously will promote health, peace, and unity across our God-given parachurch landscape.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jonathan Leeman is the editorial director 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) and *Reverberation: How God's Word Brings Light, Freedom, and Action to His People* (Moody).





Reviewed by Matt McCullough

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*

Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. Oxford University Press, 2010. 264 pages. \$24.95

In 2005, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Denton published *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, the first book to draw from the groundbreaking discoveries of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). Their description of teen religiosity as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” has been eagerly embraced by journalists, ministers, and other interested pontificators.

Kenda Dean, a professor at Princeton Seminary and a collaborator on the NSYR, draws from the same research in her recent book *Almost Christian*. But where the analysis of Smith and Denton was mostly descriptive, Dean offers the American church a solution to the problem of watered-down cultural Christianity.

## AN ACCURATE INDICTMENT AND SOME HELPFUL INSIGHTS

There’s a lot to like about this book. It’s sharply written and consistently insightful. And it’s spot on in its central claim: the generic faith of America’s youth is an indictment of the church culture that nurtures them. But Dean’s proposed solution, unfortunately, doesn’t go far enough.

### **A Two-layered Problem: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and Muddled Ecclesiology**

First, let me summarize her description of the problem. It has two layers.

The first layer was identified in the NSYR: the majority of American teens don't hold to a specific or committed faith. Their Moralistic Therapeutic Deism urges them to be nice people who get along with others, to feel good about themselves, and to keep any notion of God—much less a God made flesh in Christ—at arm's length. Hardly surprising, then, that the NSYR found most teens to be not hostile to religion but just plain indifferent. They don't seem to care, and why would they, if religion is no more to them than an indistinct, non-exclusive set of rules to live by? They may as well get their values from the *Twilight* series or *Harry Potter* or *Glee* as from Jesus or Paul.

But Dean sees another layer to this problem, an unsettling reality she believes to be the source of youth-group malaise. For Dean, “The elephant in the room in the discussion about the National Study of Youth and Religion is the muddled ecclesiology of American churches, a confusion present, not only in the young people but in congregations themselves. Put simply, churches have lost track of Christianity's missional imagination” (37). In other words, she believes the church's primary failure has been not methodological but ecclesiological. While many twentieth-century churches spent their energy wondering how to keep teenagers coming to church, they neglected to cultivate the kind of faithful Christian communities that could have a significant impact on the youth who did show up. Again, Dean is dead right: “If churches practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism in the name of Christianity, then getting teenagers to come to church more often is not the solution (conceivably, it could make matters worse). A more faithful church is the solution to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (23).

### **Dean's Solution: An Incarnation-shaped “Missional Imagination”**

So what would it take to recreate this sort of faithful church? That's the question the bulk of this book tries to answer, and Dean's insights are often helpful.

For example, she draws from the sociology of religion to describe what things are true of those teens who do have serious religious commitments, whether they are Mormons, black Protestants, or white conservatives. These youth hold fast to their tradition's creed, what she calls a “God-story”; they belong to communities that live out that story; they find in the story a sense of calling to some larger purpose; and they claim hope for the future promised in the story. This sociological insight into committed faith is useful not because it's authoritative, but because it helps clarify why things the Bible authoritatively prescribes matter so much.

Beyond the findings of sociology, Dean eventually offers practical tips—some better than others—for cultivating a distinctly Christian version of what she calls “consequential faith.” Treating teenagers as some sort of alien species, she argues, was one of the great mistakes of the twentieth-century church. We should rather challenge them to mature responsibility as members of the Christian community, for “Christ views young people as participants in God's mission rather than as targets of ours” (97). Underlying all the detailed proposals in this book is Dean's conviction that the way forward lies with recovering a “missional imagination” modeled on God's self-giving love in Christ.

For Dean, the Incarnation is the key: “The point of God's Incarnation was mission, the sending of God-as-love into creation” (91). By her definition, it was there that God expressed himself in terms we humans could understand, and what he expressed about himself was a radical self-giving love that “stops at nothing—not even death—to win us back” (60). The Incarnation, then, provides “the template for the church's missional way of life” (90), a way of life which aims to translate God for the world through radical acts of love. A church committed to this self-denying mission—and that calls young people to join in—is the antidote to the self-indulgent and self-preserving religiosity of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. That's Dean's main point.

## **BUT DEAN'S SOLUTION DOESN'T GO FAR ENOUGH**

As I've said, there's much to like about Dean's critique of counterfeit Christianity and her call for a more faithful church. She is nothing if not robustly Christological. I'm not quoting her here, but it seems that she wants to say that the real problem with Moralistic Therapeutic Deism begins with the Deism. Deism, of course, envisions a distant, uninvolved, and

practically non-existent God who doesn't require anything of you. So her solution strikes here first, with a proper understanding of the Incarnation as God's preeminent involvement in the world. According to Dean, the fundamental flaw in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the lack of any perceived need for Jesus as God-made-flesh.

That's an argument I affirm wholeheartedly. The problem, however, is that her view of the Incarnation may be too constrained to offer a viable solution to the Moralistic and Therapeutic elements. Jesus doesn't just show us what God is like and how much he loves us merely in order to inspire us to live better. The Incarnation is at least that, but it's much more. I'd argue that the only effective antidote to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism begins with an objective substitutionary atonement as the foundation for the radical transformation of the new birth.

### **Substitutionary Atonement Must Be the Foundation of Transformation**

Let me elaborate, beginning with the Moralistic element. Substitutionary atonement is the antidote to moralism because it demonstrates that you could never be nice enough to erase your failures and warrant the favor of a holy God. You need propitiation, not a change of habits.

But in Dean's description Jesus' life and death come off as primarily demonstrative. They represent "the extraordinary measures God took to woo us back into God's arms" (89), never the objective satisfaction of divine wrath. To effectively combat moralism, it's not enough to say we need Jesus: we must be more specific about what it is we need Jesus to do for us. Do we need Jesus to give us an example of how we should live, or do we need Jesus to stand in our stead in order to reconcile us to God and transform us to the core?

The answer to that question separated Paul from the Judaizers, Athanasius from Arius, and Anselm from Abelard. A Jesus whose righteousness grounds a fundamental transformation of the individual stood at the center of Luther's protest against medieval Rome. It bolstered Edwards's case against the moral philosophy of the 18th century. And it separated an earlier generation of Princetonians from the rising tide of Protestant liberalism.

I don't mean to say that Dean explicitly denies Christ's unique, unrepeatable work of wrath-bearing. She seems thoroughly orthodox. But insofar as she proposes a new sense of mission—even a mission modeled on God's incarnate love—shorn of the need for a prior radical work of God's grace rooted in a substitutionary atonement, her solution rings hollow.

### **Regeneration and the Call to Repentance and Faith must be Central**

What's more, the antidote to therapeutic, feel-good spirituality is not, as a first step, to call people to self-denying mission, as intuitive as that may seem to our innately legalistic minds. Rather, it's to remind people of how utterly helpless they are. A person cannot see the kingdom, said Jesus, unless they have been "born again." God, for his part, must do the work of regeneration. We, for our part, must repent and believe. Young people—and, for that matter, adults—need to be told they're not okay as they are, and in a real sense they shouldn't feel good about themselves. What they need is not better self-esteem but a new self, a new birth, a transformation into the image of Christ.

**“It's just that Dean's strategic starting point is missional—with a heavy focus on what we do—when we should instead begin with what Christ has done in the gospel.”**

To be fair, Dean does speak repeatedly of the need for individual transformation by God's grace through the Holy Spirit (see, e.g., pp. 15, 50, 80, 88). But for her, transformation happens primarily as a byproduct of missional living, not, in the

first instance, as a precursor to it, and as far as I could see, she never discusses the need for regeneration. “It is in participating in the mission of God that God decisively changes us into disciples” (15), she writes. In one way, I’d say, “Absolutely.” But we have to distinguish between the transformation that is the sanctification process and the transformation that is the new birth. And the order really matters. Dean’s confidence in the transforming power of participation in mission seems overblown, and it’s risky. It’s risky because starting with a new set of prescribed practices—even practices modeled on the sacrificial love of Christ—is not much different than moralism.

## A WORTHWHILE CRITIQUE OF QUASI-CHRISTIANITY

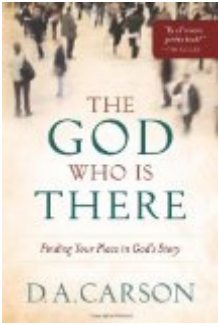
So, pastors, if you’re not worried about the presence of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism in your flocks, you should be. And I believe *Almost Christian* is worth your time as a penetrating indictment of quasi-Christianity and a source of some helpful advice about how to fight back.

It’s just that Dean’s strategic starting point is missional—with a heavy focus on what *we do*—when we should instead begin with what Christ has done in the gospel. First and foremost, youth—and adults—raised in a culture of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism need to understand and embrace the word of the gospel. They need to know they’re not okay and cannot fix themselves. But Jesus offers them forgiveness and transformation and a hope that is sure and unfailing.

If what youth need is transformation, then what we’ve got to offer them is biblical preaching rooted in the confidence that the Word does its own work and won’t return void. We’ve got to call them to live in communities of radical love and accountability embodied in a formal covenant of membership. And then we’ve got to send them out to proclaim this good news in word and deed.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt McCullough is the pastor of Trinity Church in Nashville and is a PhD candidate in American Religious History at Vanderbilt University.



Reviewed by Nicholas Piotrowski

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story*

D.A. Carson, *The God Who is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story*. Baker, 2010. 240 pages. \$16.99

In his 1998 book *Losing Our Virtue*, David Wells comments that systematic theologies are more commonly written for the academy than for the church. To do the latter, he says, “would require that theology understand the life of the Church as well as the way life in the postmodern world works, and not simply orient itself to the preoccupations of the academic guild” (10).

The same observation could be made in reference to biblical theologies. With only a few exceptions (Strom, Roberts, Lawrence), much recent biblical theology has been driven by scholarly questions that only bear secondarily, if at all, on the life of the church. While D. A. Carson does not explicitly say that he wrote *The God Who Is There* to help fill this lacuna, happily the book does.

## A CANONICAL SURVEY OF THE BIBLE'S MAIN THEMES

In what was originally a series of talks over two weekends in Minneapolis/St. Paul (accessible at [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org)), Carson covers fourteen biblical-theological themes in roughly canonical order.

The first four chapters focus on important themes arising from the Pentateuch which are necessary for reading the rest of the biblical narrative. Chapter five covers the crucial Davidic material from 2 Samuel 7, and chapter six surveys the poetic corpus.

After a brief survey of the prophetic literature, the remaining eight chapters address important New Testament doctrines like the Incarnation, the death and resurrection of Christ, justification, regeneration, and the eschaton.

Pages 117 through 119 provide an apt illustration of what Carson is trying to accomplish in this work. He describes a Muslim friend who came to a trenchant understanding of John the first time he read the New Testament because he

already had a foundation of ideas that the gospel writer presupposes. Carson writes, “He was a Muslim. He understood about a God who has laws, who has standards, who brings terror, who sits in judgment over you, a God who is sovereign and holy and powerful. He understood all that” (119). Because he already believed these things, the gospel made sense to him. Most in the West, however, do not have this pre-understanding. Therefore, Carson methodically lays down these themes (and others) which are necessary for comprehending the gospel.

While Carson’s treatment of the Old Testament is disproportionately brief, one can understand why. Not everything can fit into a 200-page book; content-limiting decisions have to be made. One may wish to see more on the flood (where we see that God *does* wipe out rebels, contrary to chapter two’s title), the exodus event and the Passover (Carson goes directly from the burning bush to the Ten Commandments), the theology of the temple (the chapter on 2 Samuel 7 would have been a good place to discuss at least the role of David’s son in building it), or the preaching of the prophets (to which Carson gives only 6½ pages).

Since the book is written to an audience almost entirely unfamiliar with the Bible’s content, however, one can see why Carson wants to get quickly to Jesus Christ, to whose person and work all these Old Testament institutions testify. In fact, Carson demonstrates this teleological leaning of the Old Testament well, showing how to see the gospel in it. When he deals directly with the Lord’s person and work, Carson makes rich use of the hermeneutical foundation the Old Testament provides for reading the New Testament (even if every Old Testament type is not discussed).

## GOOD FOR PASTORS

While the book is clearly intended to serve as an introduction to the Bible’s narrative, it is not too remedial to serve experienced pastors.

**“Carson doesn’t opt for gimmicks or forced paradigms into which to fit the gospel. Instead, he straightforwardly lays out the Bible’s storyline without any bells or whistles.”**

For one, Carson’s illustrations are poignant and relevant, reflecting an awareness of longstanding cultural trends and not merely the latest football story. Further, perusing the beginning and end of each chapter, as well as the endnotes, will provide pastors with helpful references for connecting biblical teaching with the ideas their congregations are commonly exposed to. Specifically, I would point pastors to the chapters on creation (“The God Who Made Everything”) and on the church (“The God Who Gathers and Transforms His People”). Other than a postmodern aversion to truth claims and a fear of commitment, I think the most common objections to the gospel among people today are “Hasn’t science disproven God’s existence?” and “Religion is violent!” Carson deftly addresses such quips.

## HELPS US SEE THE FOREST, NOT JUST THE TREES

Secondly, the book is well suited for pastors to pass along (i) to believers who perhaps miss the forest for the trees in their Bible reading, (ii) to those who do not know the Bible’s content at all, (iii) to young believers, and (iv) even to unbelievers. Carson avoids all technical jargon and provides thorough definitions and descriptions for new ideas. Further, he shows how all biblical themes converge on the person and work of Christ.

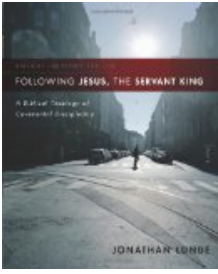
Carson doesn't opt for gimmicks or forced paradigms into which to fit the gospel. Instead, he straightforwardly lays out the Bible's storyline without any bells or whistles. With each page, readers know they are getting an exposition of the Bible's content, not a reworked therapeutic myth fit for the latest *zeitgeist*. Instead Carson takes on a host of the latest *zeitgeists*.

I cannot imagine a Christian pastor who would not want his congregants to become familiar with the overall storyline of the Bible which Carson here makes accessible. So I would confidently recommend this book to any pastor, especially for the purpose of giving it away to church members. A study guide for groups is also available.

This is biblical theology that "understand[s] the life of the Church as well as the way life in the postmodern world works." It joins only a few like it.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Nicholas Piotrowski is a PhD student in New Testament at Wheaton College.



Reviewed by Bobby Jamieson

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *Following Jesus, the Servant King: A Biblical Theology of Covenantal Discipleship*

Jonathan Lunde, *Following Jesus, the Servant King: A Biblical Theology of Covenantal Discipleship*. Zondervan, 2010. 320 pages. \$24.99

**D**iscipleship is fundamental to Christianity. To be a Christian is to be a disciple—a follower, an apprentice—of Jesus. This entails a lifetime of grace-driven effort in pursuit of greater and greater conformity to Christ. Yet in many churches, real spiritual growth among church members is an anomaly. Stagnation is the norm.

There are many mutually reinforcing reasons for this apparent lack of genuine discipleship among members of evangelical churches. Our consumeristic and anti-authority culture predisposes us to chafe at the submission Jesus demands. Church leaders fail to proclaim and model a robust, biblical vision of what it means to follow Jesus. Entire congregations fail to hold their members accountable to actually follow Jesus because they do not practice church discipline.

Yet even if we clear away these hindrances, discipleship can still seem a dauntingly complex topic. What does it mean to really follow Jesus? How are we supposed to know how to apply Jesus' teachings to our lives, much less the rest of the Bible? If we're saved by grace, what's with all this talk about effort and submission and obedience?

## ANSWERING THREE CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP

Jonathan Lunde's new book *Following Jesus, the Servant King: A Biblical Theology of Covenantal Discipleship* aims to address these kinds of questions. The second volume in Zondervan's new "Biblical Theology for Life" series, of which Lunde is the general editor, this book attempts to bring serious biblical theology to bear on three crucial questions about discipleship. First, "Why should I be concerned to obey all of Jesus' commands if I have been saved by grace?" Second, "What is it that Jesus demands of his disciples?" Third, "How can the disciple obey Jesus' high demand, while experiencing his 'yoke' as 'light' and 'easy'?"



The book's subtitle "A Biblical Theology of Covenantal Discipleship" may lead some readers to expect that the book will address the whole Bible's teaching about discipleship, yet the book's scope is much narrower. In chapter one, Lunde states that his goal is to explore how the persistent experience of Jesus' grace undergirds discipleship. Thus he explains, "What I have therefore written is part biblical theology of covenant, part life of Jesus, and part discussion of discipleship" (32).

After a brief introductory chapter, the body of the book addresses the three questions mentioned above. In chapters two through five, which address "The 'Why' Question," Lunde first introduces the major biblical covenants, carefully delineating the difference between a grant covenant and a conditional covenant (ch. 2). He then explores the gracious grounding and righteous demand of each of biblical covenant (chs. 3 and 4), and the relationship between faith and obedience in each covenant (ch. 5). In all of this, Lunde gives special attention to the New Covenant in which Christians participate.

In chapters six through ten, which address "The 'What' Question," Lunde explores Jesus' role as the "Prophet Who is the King" (ch. 6) and then looks at three different facets of Jesus' relationship to the Old Testament law. As "Filter," Jesus climactically fulfills and therefore abrogates certain aspects of the Old Testament law, such as sacrifices and circumcision. Though, as Lunde explains, these Old Testament injunctions have ongoing ethical implications (ch. 7). As "Lens," Jesus clarifies the original intent of the Old Testament law and clears away distorting accretions (ch. 8). As "Prism," Jesus intensifies the law's demands in light of the new era of redemptive history which he ushers in (ch. 9). Rounding out the "What" section, chapter ten explores several key texts about the mission to which Jesus summons his followers.

Chapters eleven through sixteen address "The 'How' Question," though the reader should note that the "how" question is not so much "What are the practical steps we should take to grow as disciples of Christ?" but "How is it that we are motivated and enabled to obey all that Jesus commands?" Thus, these chapters explore how different aspects of Jesus' life and ministry motivate, enable, empower, and shape our covenantal obedience. Specifically, Lunde discusses Jesus' role as our representative (ch. 13), our Redeemer (ch. 14), the restorer of God's people and kingdom (chs. 15 and 16), and the reigning King (ch. 17). The book closes with a brief chapter which reflects further on practical application.

## **BRINGING THE COVENANTS INTO THE FOREGROUND**

This book's most notable contribution to a practical theology of discipleship is that it brings the biblical covenants into the foreground where they belong. It explores all of the major biblical covenants, amply expounding the nature of the New Covenant, and precisely details how Christians relate to the stipulations of prior covenants. As a result, this book does exactly what biblical theology should do: it helps us put the whole Bible together, so that we can rightly interpret and apply various portions of Scripture depending on how they relate to Jesus and the New Covenant.

For example, Lunde's crisp and memorable discussion of the various ways in which we relate to the Old Testament law through Jesus is exactly the kind of thing pastors need to understand so that they can equip their people to read and apply the whole Bible correctly. Further, Lunde's discussion of the ongoing moral implications of the sacrifices required under the Mosaic Covenant is a superb example of tracing out the New Testament's interpretation of the Old Testament and applying the Old Testament through that lens to the life of the church today (see pp. 128-132).

Have you ever wondered how to preach Leviticus? Or how to apply the Old Testament's ethical teaching? Or how we as Christians relate to the various biblical covenants? If so, this book can help beef up the biblical-theological horsepower under your hood so that you are able to accurately explain and apply the whole Bible. If you're well versed in biblical theology, this book may offer you little that's brand new. Yet Lunde's expositions of biblical texts, especially select portions of the Gospels, would still be well worth working through.

## WHAT ABOUT THE EPISTLES?

My only substantive critique of the book has to do with its scope. Throughout the book, Lunde indicates that his aim is to help us understand what it means to follow Jesus and obey Jesus' teaching. As one would expect, he therefore spends a lot of time unpacking Jesus' own teaching as presented in the Gospels in relation to antecedent Scripture.

**“Aren't the epistles the Bible's own device for unpacking what Jesus said and fleshing out what it means to follow him?”**

Yet one thing he fails to do is explain in even the most condensed, summary form what the ethical teaching of the rest of the New Testament contributes to the total picture of what it means to follow Jesus. Lunde does explore the alleged tension between Jesus' demands of discipleship and Paul's gospel of free grace (106-108), yet throughout the book he tends to make only passing reference to ethical teaching outside of the Gospels. Thus, while Lunde does a wonderful job relating the Gospels to the Old Testament, he provides little help in relating the Gospels to the ethical teaching of the epistles, or even in simply interpreting and applying the epistles on their own terms.

This neglect of the epistles results in an incomplete portrait of Christian discipleship. For example, the book contains almost no explicit discussion of the thoroughly corporate, congregational shape of discipleship, which is one of the most striking features of the ethical teaching of the epistles, especially to contemporary Western ears. Further, by failing to explicitly indicate that all that the apostles teach in the rest of the New Testament belongs in the category, "What is it that Jesus demands of his disciples?" Lunde unwittingly lends aid to those who would somehow privilege Jesus' teaching in the Gospels over the rest of the New Testament.

Aren't the epistles the Bible's own device for unpacking what Jesus said and fleshing out what it means to follow him?

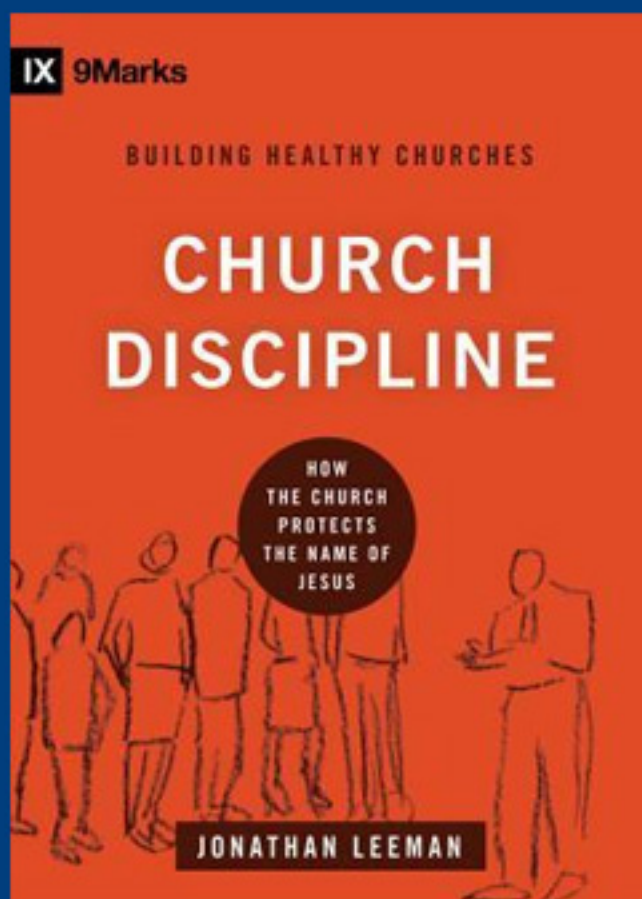
## CONCLUSION

Overall, I'm very grateful for how well this book does what it does, and I genuinely recommend it. I wish it did a couple of crucial things it didn't do, namely, consider both the epistles and the corporate nature of the Christian life. Still, *Following Jesus, the Servant King* is an illuminating exposition of much crucial biblical material that bears on discipleship. It is a model of biblical theology done in the service of the church, and pastors and other readers stand to benefit deeply from it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

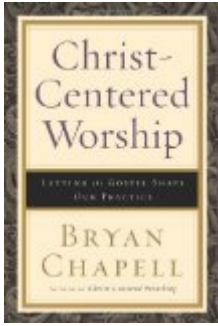
Bobby Jamieson is assistant editor for 9Marks.

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Reviewed by Josh Manley

## BOOK REVIEW:

# ***Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape our Practice***

**Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape our Practice*. Baker Academic, 2009. 307 pages. \$24.99**

In his recent book *Christ-Centered Worship* Bryan Chapell writes, “Worship cannot simply be a matter of arbitrary choice, church tradition, personal preference or cultural appeal. There are foundational truths in the gospel of Christ’s redeeming work that do not change if the gospel is to remain the gospel. So, if our worship structures are to tell this story consistently, then there must be certain aspects of our worship that remain consistent” (85).

“I can’t count how many times I have heard a Christian answer the question ‘How did you like the church you visited?’ by saying, ‘I really did (or didn’t) like the music.’”

If boredom overtakes you before the end of this review and you don’t finish, I want these three outstanding sentences to remain embedded in your mind. They are the sum and substance of Bryan Chapell’s excellent book *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape our Practice*.

I can’t count how many times I have heard a Christian answer the question “How did you like the church you visited?” by saying, “I really did (or didn’t) like the music.” Without realizing it, the person insinuates that what really mattered about the

so-called “worship” part of the service was whether or not it suited their musical tastes. Sadly, too many pastors feel an unbiblical pressure to make the music appealing so that the people will be engaged.

Into the midst of such confusion about the basic purpose of corporate worship enters Bryan Chapell, President of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. Chapell is not interested in an esoteric, abstract discussion about a topic that’s important for an hour or two every Sunday. Instead, he understands that worship is fundamental to understanding the Scriptures and therefore reality. Worship is at the core of who we as image-bearers are. It’s vital for us to understand it rightly.

## OVERVIEW

Chapell divides the book into two parts: “Gospel Worship” and “Gospel Worship Resources.” From the outset, Chapell is clear that nothing less than the gospel is at stake in our worship. He states, “We tell the gospel by the way we worship” (19). You might think of how the architecture of church buildings changed during the Reformation from cathedrals to something else. Their planners wanted to say something through structure. So it is with how we structure our worship in the local church today: “Structures tell stories” (15).

As in every other area of life, we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us when we worship the living God. With this in mind, Chapell gives a brief and helpful historical sketch of the liturgical developments in Roman Catholic worship and a few of those who reacted against the liturgy of Rome: Luther, Calvin, and the Westminster divines. He describes how the Protestant liturgies moved away from sacerdotalism and back to gospel truths.

Further, Chapell demonstrates that regulating worship by the Scriptures is the surest way to help the worshiper see what he or she needs most: the gospel.

Chapell also provides an overview of the evolution of worship in the modern church. Characterized by a desire “to connect with people” (70), churches in the twentieth century began to elevate connecting emotionally with people over engaging with God on the terms he alone has the authority to set and by which his people are graciously invited to respond. There have been a number of corrective reactions to this movement, and Chapell focuses on Robert G. Rayburn’s 1980 publication, *O Come, Let us Worship*, which “sought to reintroduce evangelicalism to its history and liturgy” (72). Rayburn’s correctives sought to bring the traditions of the Reformation to bear on contemporary evangelical practice.

Synthesizing his historical survey, Chapell argues that there has been a consistent pattern of gospel-driven worship from the early church to the Reformation to the present: it follows the sequence of adoration, confession, assurance, thanksgiving, petition, instruction, charge, and blessing. Chapell repeatedly demonstrates how this gospel structure naturally manifests itself throughout the Scriptures.

Chapell devotes the second half of his book to walking the reader through these various components of the corporate worship service and listing resources that will enable the church to biblically carry out each one. He walks through the Call to Worship, Affirmation of Faith, Confession of Sin, Assurance of Pardon, Rubrics (Transitions), Historic Components, the history and practice of Scripture-Reading, the Sermon, and Benediction. To top it all off, Chapell provides several examples of worship services that accord with the gospel structures seen throughout Scripture.

## GOSPEL, GOSPEL, GOSPEL

Do you remember the theme of President Clinton’s presidential campaign in 1992? “It’s the economy, stupid!” If there is a single theme that undergirds Chapell’s book, it would be, “It’s the gospel...”—well, you get the point.



Nothing other than the gospel and the structures it yields must propel corporate worship, and Chapell drives home this point with precision. He realizes that the structures of our worship not only reveal what we value, but shape us. So he goes to great length to demonstrate how the gospel carries within itself a worship-shaping structure, and a structure that's revealed throughout Scripture.

If, as the Bible teaches, worship is our supreme need, and God has met this need in the gospel, we can rest in God's sufficient care for us to teach us how to maximize the power of the gospel through worship. Chapell includes several such examples of gospel structures from the Scriptures (Isaiah 6, Deuteronomy 5, 2 Chronicles 5–7, Romans 11–15, Revelation 4–21). He states, "Where God intentionally provides models, they consistently echo the gospel patterns the church will later practice" (102). These corporate patterns then teach God's people each week how to understand "the progress of the gospel in the life of an individual" (99). And this means that God's people are repeatedly taught that the gospel is every bit as necessary for sanctification as for justification.

In short, the gospel that saves is the gospel that propels and orders worship.

## FROM CONSUMER-DRIVEN TO GOSPEL-DRIVEN

The worship wars that have too often characterized churches have sadly been driven by stylistic preference rather than the desire to be faithful to Scripture. Bryan Chapell rightly argues that the only solution for such battles is the gospel.

When gospel-empowered, Christ-centered worship is embraced, it carries with it priorities that "make it plain why worship choices must be made and give a rationale for those choices" (133).

It is only when believers "see that the main concerns of worship are about meeting biblical priorities rather than personal expectations [that] leaders can unite behind a worship style that does not entirely match their preferences because they are convinced it advances the gospel" (133).

Only the gospel has the power to enable us to give up our preferences and to prefer others above ourselves (Rom. 12:10), and Bryan Chapell directs the church to embrace such worship.

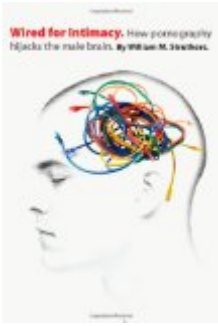
## GET THIS BOOK!

*Christ-Centered Worship* is theologically sound, historically rooted, and biblically driven. In this book, Bryan Chapell pushes church leaders to shape the corporate worship of God's people with the paradigms and structures found in the gospel.

If you are a pastor or church leader with responsibilities for worship or want to better understand this massive topic in Scripture, read this book! Chapell is a sure guide who provides a solid tool for the pastor's toolbox.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Manley is a master of divinity student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.



Reviewed by Deepak Reju

## BOOK REVIEW:

# ***Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain***

**William Struthers, *Wired For Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain*. Intervarsity Press, 2010. 216 pages. \$16.00**

**T**alk to ten males, and you shouldn't be surprised to discover that a strong majority of them struggle with internet pornography.

Sex seduces. Sex sells. And sex powerfully affects the male brain. Now William Struthers, associate professor of psychology at Wheaton College, has helped us to better understand *why* sexual images so powerfully affect men in particular with his book *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain*.

## HOW PORNOGRAPHY REWIRES THE BRAIN

Struthers begins the book by helping us understand why something as harmful as pornography can be such a fixture of our society (ch. 1). Three factors keep the pornography industry alive.

- First is the definitional dodge. The porn industry starts with a game of semantics, making it difficult to define pornography.
- Second is the constitutional dodge. Proponents argue that the U. S. Constitution protects the freedom to produce, market and distribute porn because of the rights of free speech and free press.

- Third, the industry hides behind the causal dodge. Because of the ethical quandaries which surround researching porn, correlation research (in which the relationship of one variable to another variable is traced out using mathematics) is the only possible way to research porn. The porn industry quickly and easily debunks correlation research because it cannot establish a direct causal relationship between pornography and its effects.

After this introductory chapter, Struthers explains that men and women were made for relationship, and so they crave intimacy. Yet the power of the image of a naked woman is more than just the illusion of intimacy. A woman's willingness to expose herself is "hypnotizing" to men. The more lifelike the image, the more it creates a "hormonal and neurological tsunami" in the man's brain. But it is not just the actual visualizing that causes problems. The male brain's one-track and visuospatial traits make it the "perfect playground for sexual fantasy...As porn and fantasy take control of the mind, it becomes a dream theatre that is transposed over the waking world" (44-45).

A properly oriented human conscience will feel guilt for such immoral behavior. But with enough time and exposure, a porn addict's conscience becomes seared and loses its ability to signal trouble. I've sat with men who have viewed pornography for years. The warning signs they experienced when they first started viewing porn had long since been obliterated. As fixation on sexual gratification grows, tunnel vision causes the addict to focus more on his pursuit of arousal and less on male-female relationship. This leads to the objectification of women and the tragic loss of real intimacy.

In chapters 4 and 5 Struthers goes on to provide a staggering amount of detail related to the biology and neurochemistry of porn addiction. This portion of the book will definitely require patience for those who didn't like biology in high school.

Struthers doesn't go the way of most biologists by assigning a fatalistic, powerless future to the addict. Instead, he argues that redemption can counter this biological rewiring through the process of sanctification (ch. 8). Confession, repentance, understanding, and accountability all serve to counter porn's harmful effects.

## LOTS OF BIOLOGY, LITTLE THEOLOGY

While Struthers makes a noble attempt to talk about biology and theology in the same book, his theological material is sparse and biology too often dominates the book's agenda. One might ask, "What's the point of the book?" If Struthers is trying to sort through the biological, social, cultural, and personal implications of pornography, he does a good job collating a lot of data into one book. If he is trying to help us think through the problem using a biblical and theological lens, then Struthers fails. The problem is that biology *without theology* is dangerous for Christians. Our doctrine of creation tells us not to be afraid of the sciences, but our understanding of biology and the other sciences must reside within biblical and theological framework. In that way, Scripture remains our authority over every realm of thought and life, including biology.

**“Understanding is important, but it's only the first step.”**

Another, less significant, issue with the book is Struthers' discussion of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in chapter seven. While no one will deny the essential human needs (water, food, etc.), Struthers should have debunked more biblically questionable categories like self-esteem or self-actualization (156).

## HELPFUL FOR UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

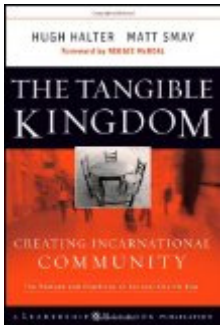


Struthers' research helps us to understand how pornography rewires the brain. Those who want to understand the biology that contributes to porn addiction will be well served by Struthers' book. All told, I'm grateful for this book, because it's one of the only popular-level resources of its kind written by an evangelical Christian.

However, be forewarned that his discussion of theology and sanctification is sparse. He also leans heavily on the side of trying to understand the problem but offers very little in the way of how to fight it. Understanding is important, but it's only the first step.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Reviewed by Bobby Jamieson

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community*

Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community*. Jossey-Bass, 2008. 224 pages. \$23.95

**H**ugh Halter and Matt Smay are fed up with how we're doing church today.

Their book *The Tangible Kingdom* provides a vent for their frustrations. It tells the story of how they've sought a better way. And it prescribes how other church leaders can go about "creating incarnational community" by recovering "the posture and practices of ancient church now."

Halter and Smay believe that most churches today are program-driven, inward-focused bunkers where Christians come to hide from the world. As a result, when Hugh Halter looks around at Starbucks, he thinks to himself, "I can't picture any of these people, or my friends, or your friends, going to church...any church...ever!" (3). This book is their response to that problem.

After walking through some personal experience and introducing the broad outline of their vision for the church in the first six chapters, Halter and Smay diagnose the problems they see in churches today. This includes

- an irrelevant, too-small gospel (ch. 9),
- an institutionalism inherited from Constantine that has plagued the church for seventeen hundred years (ch. 7),
- an attractional rather than missional model, and a cultural captivity to modern, Western categories of thought (ch. 8).

After some more ground-cleaning work, Halter and Smay lay out their reprogrammed way to do church, which includes

- cultivating the practices of leaving (ch. 14),
- listening (ch. 15),
- living among non-Christians (ch. 16),
- loving without strings (ch. 17),
- and developing the habits of togetherness (ch. 19), oneness (ch. 20), and otherness (ch. 21).

## A NO-HOLDS-BARRED WILLINGNESS TO LOVE, LISTEN, AND SACRIFICE

The most commendable aspect of the book is simple: the authors demonstrate a no-holds-barred willingness to love others, listen to others, and sacrifice their comfort and preferences for others. That's wonderful.

For example, Halter tells the moving story of how his church cared for a recovering heroin addict who was involved in their music ministry (119-120). Hugh Halter and Matt Smay clearly love people right where they're at. Like Jesus, they befriend sinners.

Further, Halter and Smay are responding to real problems in our churches, and many of their critiques are accurate. Sadly, far too many churches are hostile and judgmental toward non-Christians. And far too many Christians' lives are characterized by conformity to this world rather than the transforming power of the gospel.

## PROBLEMS

Yet I'm afraid that Halter and Smay's proposed remedy is just as problematic as the symptoms they're diagnosing. I'll discuss three issues with their vision for the church which I would consider to be among the weightiest.

**“And the gospel is good news precisely because it announces that sinful people can be reconciled to God and declared right in his sight despite everything we've ever done, things which have only earned us condemnation from God. To say that the gospel is what we do turns the gospel on its head and makes it no good news at all.”**

### Gospel Confusion

I hope Halter and Smay believe better than they speak, because in this book they speak as if the gospel is something that we do, not the announcement of what God has done. The authors explicitly pose the question “What is the gospel?” And then they answer:

It is the tangible life of God flowing into every nook and cranny of our everyday life. No, blessing doesn't mean our financial 'cups running over' or the absence of disease or pain. But it does mean that the 'other-world' life does make a tangible difference that can be felt in this life. And when this other-world life shows up, even in the smallest form, it is attractive, and people unconsciously move toward it like thirsty horses stumbling toward a

watering hole...When someone adopts a child, brings a kind word of encouragement to someone in jail, renovates a dilapidated home in the inner city, mentors a struggling student, plants trees in an ugly city block, plays music for the elderly, or throws a party for friends...it's all Kingdom, and it's always good news!" (90)

The most serious problem with this definition of the gospel is that it's the exact opposite of the biblical gospel. The Greek word *euangelion* means "good news." It's a message about something that has happened totally apart from anything we've done. As we see throughout the New Testament, the gospel is the announcement of what God has done to save sinners through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the gospel is good news precisely because it announces that sinful people can be reconciled to God and declared right in his sight *despite* everything we've ever done, things which have only earned us condemnation from God. To say that the gospel is what we do turns the gospel on its head and makes it no good news at all.

It's one thing to pastorally exhort a congregation to "live out the gospel." Most people know that means something like "live out all the implications of the gospel" or "live consistently in light of the gospel." It's something else altogether to ask the question "What is the gospel?" and answer by pointing to things we do to make people's lives better.

Regrettably, this quote aligns with how Halter and Smay speak of the gospel throughout the book. For example, they write,

When we focus on the message only, what are we saying to people? Maybe that they really aren't dear to us? Is it possible that to share four great truths about God without giving the listeners a part of our lives might communicate the wrong thing? Paul knew that a message without an attractive tangible person embodying and delivering it would fall on deaf ears or be lost amid all the other faiths of that time. What makes the gospel good news isn't the concept, but the real-life person who has been changed by it. (42)

Now, I agree that a Christian's changed life must be inseparably linked to a Christian's message. But the last sentence here is disastrous. It puts the cart before the horse. What makes the gospel good news is absolutely not your or my transformed life. The gospel is good news because it addresses every human being's most fundamental need: to be reconciled to God rather than suffer his just condemnation for all eternity. Denigrating that momentous truth as a mere "concept" as opposed to a "real-life person" may score rhetorical points, but it obscures the truth of the gospel to the point of rendering it unrecognizable.

But do the authors really mean to say that what makes the gospel good news is how we live? Aren't they simply telling us that living in a transformed way will be attractive to unbelievers?

I hope so. Maybe I'm misunderstanding them. But the problem with saying that our good deeds are what make the gospel good news to others is that our good deeds are not the gospel. Our good deeds can pique interest in the gospel and bear witness to the power of the gospel, but that's it. In order for someone to find the gospel to be good news, they must embrace the truth of what it says. This includes the inescapably offensive news that all people are guilty rebels who justly deserve God's wrath and the glorious announcement that Jesus Christ bore that wrath in his own body on the cross, suffering for our sins in order to bring us to God.

### **Making the World's Approval the Standard of Success and Faithfulness**

The second major problem with the book is that the authors believe the church should adopt a posture of "advocating" for the world (39 ff.). By this they mean that we are to adopt a loving, inclusive, non-judgmental attitude toward non-Christians that, instead of alienating non-Christians, causes them to be attracted to the truth (41). Much of what Halter and Smay say in this section is helpful, but as they practically work out this idea, they make it sound as if God will measure the church's success by whether or not the world approves of them.

For instance, Halter and Smay write, “We have to be honest with ourselves and realize that if the message isn’t attractive, and the people of God aren’t attractive, then we must not be telling the story right, or we aren’t living the story correctly” (88). Ergo, God disapproves of what we’re doing. In marked contrast to this, Jesus anticipated that not everyone would find his followers and their message attractive. And he didn’t tell them to change the story in order to make it attractive, but rather to wipe the dust off their feet and move on to the next town (Matt. 10:14). Jesus’ standard for our success is not acceptance by the world, but faithfulness to his Word.

This posture of “advocating” for non-Christians also leads to several practical problems. For example, in order to argue that we shouldn’t preach the gospel to anyone until we’ve known them for quite a long time, Halter and Smay write,

Advertisements by their very nature are intended to coerce thinking and behavior. They are needed when there is no personal relationship between the seller and the buyer. This type of coercion is expected when you’re trying to decide what beer to drink or car to buy, but it’s highly offensive when people try to tell you important truths without any tangible relationship. (40)

Given what they say about the offensiveness of speaking important truths outside the context of a tangible relationship, it’s surprising that Halter and Smay decided to write a book about such a weighty reality as the kingdom of God. After all, how many of their readers will have a tangible relationship with them before hearing about these important truths?

### **Blurring Conversion**

A final issue I’ll discuss is that the authors cast some confusion over the nature of conversion.

Halter and Smay write concerning their new “ancient/incarnation” paradigm for conversion, “How does the conversion process actually happen? How is it different than what we are doing now?” (93). It’s a little odd to speak of conversion as something we church leaders *do*. It sounds like they’re suggesting that we have power to create faith in Christ, as if we could go out and *convert* people.

In a slightly different vein, Halter and Smay write, “This systematic, linear, attractional flow [of the common view of conversion] unintentionally communicates to people that there is a clear line of who’s in and who’s out, based on a moment of belief. We also communicate that you can’t really belong with us unless you believe what we believe. In other words, belief enables belonging” (94). Of course, they’re saying this view is wrong.

The problem for their case is, the Bible actually teaches that there is a clear line of who’s in and who’s out of God’s kingdom (Matt. 25:31-46, Jn. 3:1-15, 1 Cor. 6:9-11). Further, the Bible teaches that there should be a clear line of who’s in and who’s out of the church (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). And this line *is* in fact based on whether or not someone believes in Jesus Christ. If they do, that faith began at some specific moment in the past, however long a road someone walked in order to get to that point and however uncertain a person may be of when they first came to faith.

**“But to say that belonging enables believing makes conversion something that’s within our power to effect. It also makes belief a consequence of experience, not of hearing (Rom. 10:17; Gal. 3:1-6).”**

Halter and Smay argue that “there’s no belief without belonging” (144). By this they mean that people will not come to faith in Christ unless they participate in an “inclusive community” first. While “belonging before believing” is a common refrain among church leaders today, Halter and Smay go further than some when they write that “*Belonging enables believing*” (98, italics original).

As Christians, we should certainly seek to build meaningful relationships with non-Christians. Further, we should weave non-Christians into our relationships with other Christians so that they will see our love for one another and observe something of the glory of the gospel (Jn. 13:34-35, 17:21). But to say that belonging *enables* believing makes conversion something that’s within our power to effect. It also makes belief a consequence of *experience*, not of *hearing* (Rom. 10:17; Gal. 3:1-6).

## CONCLUSION

I’ve discussed these three issues at some length because they are matters of utmost importance, especially for pastors. Pastors must clearly proclaim the gospel. Pastors must recognize that faithfulness, not the world’s approval, is the measure of their success. And pastors must understand the biblical doctrine of conversion and minister rightly in light of it. These three issues are immensely weighty, and they will shape the entire course of a pastor’s ministry.

While I celebrate Halter and Smay’s love for people and their willingness to throw anything overboard that gets in the way of reaching others with the gospel, I fear that some of what they’re getting rid of is actually the precious cargo we’ve been charged to deliver.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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