



# Call to the Ministry

Ordained Servant

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# *Ordained Servant Online*

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**CURRENT ISSUE: The Call to the Christian Ministry**

**April 2026**

### *From the Editor*

Please note that two letters of apology appear in this issue as a response to editorial oversights in the March issue, one from the editor and one from the Committee on Christian Education.

It is commonplace in our circles when we speak of men being called to the ministry of the Word to refer to the external and internal call. This is an important distinction that Presbyterians have made throughout our history. Elisha Walker, “On the Call to the Christian Ministry,” issues a clarion call to properly understand the nature of the internal call, not as an irrevocable compulsion but as something more directly related to the gifts and virtues enumerated by Paul in the pastoral epistles.

Shane Lems reviews a superb recent book, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*, by Dane Ortlund. Ortlund’s portrayal of the character of Jesus as gentle and lowly sets the supreme example that we officers of the church are to follow.

David VanDrunen reviews *Christian Natural Law and Religious Freedom: A Foundation Based on Love, the True, and the Good* by Alex Deagon. VanDrunen expresses thankfulness for a defense of religious freedom from a very different perspective than his.

Darryl Hart’s review of Sean Michael Lucas’s *Presbyterianism (Blessings of the Faith)* laments the lack of militancy in Lucas’s book, a militancy that characterizes Presbyterian history. “Whether or not Presbyterians took too much delight from controversy is one consideration, but the consequences of their sometimes heroic, wise, and godly pursuit of a truly Reformed church might not merely orient but inspire would-be Presbyterians.”

Our poem this month is one of mine, “The Marcescence of Oaks.” Marcescence is the botanical phenomenon where certain deciduous trees retain their dead, brown leaves through the winter. These are the feckless dreams of poor sinners.

The cover photo is of the climbing rose at Chestnut Cottage in Manchester, New Hampshire.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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### FROM THE ARCHIVES “CALLING A PASTOR”

[http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject\\_Index\\_Vol\\_1-33.pdf](http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject_Index_Vol_1-33.pdf)

- “On Calling a Pastor.” (G. I. Williamson) 6:2 (Apr. 1997): 26–27.

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*Ordained Servant* exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

Dear fellow OPC officers:

I apologize for not having followed the proper editorial process with Mr. Mize's article "In Defense of Union, Not Patriarchy." I should have consulted the Subcommittee on Serial Publications, and I also should have had Mize interact with Mr. Van Doodewaard.

I also apologize for neglecting to have Mr. Mize delete the offensive sentence in his article, that reads, "Van Doodewaard's logic is not the logic of the gospel, but of the bestial kingdoms of this world." Pastor Mize has assured me that he meant no offense and did not intend to impugn Pastor Van Doodewaard's ministry or personal integrity. As the editor I should have caught this and had Mr. Mize eliminate this and any other possibly offensive references to Mr. Van Doodewaard.

I privately apologized to Mr. Van Doodewaard after he contacted me shortly after the article's publication, assuring him that I had no intent to impugn the integrity of his person or ministry. He assured me of his forgiveness as soon as the article was removed from the website.

I also inadvertently added quotes to a sentence that Mize intended as a summary of a page from Geerhardus Vos's *Dogmatic Theology*. I do not believe that AI played any part in the composition of Mize's article.

I will work more closely with the Subcommittee on Serial Publications on future publications. As servants of the General Assembly and the entire church, the Committee on Christian Education oversees the work of its two periodicals through the Subcommittee on Serial Publications.

The sheer volume of emails I have received will be impossible to answer individually with a few exceptions. I hope that this apology will suffice.

Last fall I determined to step down from my membership on the Committee on Christian Education after twenty-five years of service. This included my retirement as editor of *Ordained Servant* at the end of this year. This had nothing to do with the controversy over the March issue since it was decided six months earlier. At age seventy-seven it is time to move on. I am grateful for the privilege of membership on this committee.

Blessings in the Lamb,

Greg Reynolds

The Committee on Christian Education (CCE) of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) acknowledges a number of editorial oversights with respect to an article in the original March 2026 edition of *Ordained Servant*. The CCE deeply regrets these oversights and extends its apologies to those immediately affected by them and to the church as a whole. This letter provides some explanation of what happened and how the CCE has attempted to rectify the situation.

When the March edition of *Ordained Servant* was published on March 1, its lead article was largely a critique of an online essay by an OPC minister and claimed that this essay followed “bestial logic,” which suggests satanic reasoning. While debate and analysis of theological claims is one legitimate purpose *Ordained Servant* serves, no *Ordained Servant* article should include such accusations against an OPC minister. Furthermore, the author of the critiqued essay was not notified in advance of the *Ordained Servant* article, a courtesy he should have received.

As these issues came to light, the CCE removed the article from opc.org a few days after its publication. The CCE subsequently removed the entire March issue while it assessed how to respond and move forward. The editor of *Ordained Servant* apologized privately to the author of the critiqued essay. Following discussion between the editor of *Ordained Servant* and the author of the *Ordained Servant* article, and between the editor and other members of the CCE, the CCE determined at its March 17 meeting to concur with the editor’s recommendation not to republish the article in modified form. The CCE has apologized to the author for how its editorial oversights have affected him and has explained to him why it is not republishing the article. The other contributions to the original March issue will be republished in the May edition.

# Servant Work

## On the Call to the Christian Ministry

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by Elisha W. Walker

### Introduction

Question 158 of the Westminster Larger Catechism asks, “By whom is the Word of God to be preached?” The answer, “The Word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office.” Since only those “duly approved and called to that office” may preach, then every candidate for gospel ministry should endeavor to ensure that he is “approved and called.” The natural question that follows is, “How may the individual be assured that he is called?”<sup>1</sup> This leads us to ask, “What is a call to the ministry?” Uncertainty on this point can generate anxiety in a ministerial candidate. Where is he to turn?

Evangelicals and Protestants more generally often recommend reliance on an “inner call,” defined as “that inner persuasion or experience whereby a person feels himself directly summoned or invited by God to take up the work of the ministry.”<sup>2</sup> This is a sense of compulsion, driving one to the work. Spurgeon’s words are well-known: “There must be an irresistible, overwhelming craving and raging thirst for telling others what God has done to our own souls.” If a candidate is content to be employed in any other occupation, he should, Spurgeon claims, “in the name of heaven and earth . . . go his way.”<sup>3</sup>

Against this view, this essay argues that there are two calls to ministry (the external and internal) rather than one. Moreover, the external call is not the church’s concurrence that a candidate’s sense of calling is valid, but an objective assessment of the candidate’s aptness to the work. Historically, the Reformed considered this aptitude—the giftings and qualities requisite to ministry—to constitute the internal call, rather than an inner certainty. Consequently, the candidate may be assured of his calling, not because of an inward, subjective call, but because of God’s outward and objective calling, heard as the voice of the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Or as James Bannerman asks, “In what manner is the call or commission or warrant, which every real minister receives from Christ to the ministerial office, obtained; or in what way may the individual himself come to know that he has received it?” James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 1 (Banner of Truth, 2015), 429.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Niebuhr, *Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (Harper and Row, 1956), 64. The same idea is present in Edmund P. Clowney, *Called to the Ministry* (P&R, 1964), v; R. Albert Mohler Jr., Donald S. Whitney, and Dan Dumas, *The Call to Ministry* (SBTS, 2013), 13–15; David T. Harvey, *Am I Called? The Summons to Pastoral Ministry* (Crossway, 2012); Allan M. Harman, *Preparation for Ministry* (Banner of Truth, 2015), 3–6; Darrin Patrick, *Church Planter: The Man, the Message, the Mission* (Crossway, 2013), 16; Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (HarperOne, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 2.1.

## Backdrop of Reformed Doctrine of *Vocatio*

The Reformers defined the doctrine of *vocatio* in response to the Roman Church, which held that a true calling, or “vocation,” was reserved exclusively for those who served in a churchly role. God called a priest or nun, but not a farmer or milkmaid. The Reformers insisted that God calls all Christians to labor faithfully “as to the Lord” (Col. 3:23 NKJV), whether in a secular or religious position.<sup>4</sup> This went beyond an argument for the legitimacy of work. The Reformers taught that God, in his regular providence, assigned a place and work for each person.<sup>5</sup> How was an individual to discern his *vocatio*? For Calvin, one only had to look around him. He argued that this was God’s solution to the “boiling restlessness”<sup>6</sup> in every human heart. Paul, he said, “condemns the restlessness which prevents an individual from remaining in his condition with a peaceable mind and he exhorts, that everyone stick by his trade.”<sup>7</sup> *Vocatio* also included marriage; how was a person to know who his spouse should be? The answer is easy, if one is already married: your spouse!<sup>8</sup> Following a mystical voice, or one’s subjective feelings, would be to disobey the Lord, for he assigns a life to each person, and they are to “lead the life . . . to which God has called” them (1 Cor. 7:17). This may be termed the “earthly” or “general call.” Such was the Reformers’ essential restructuring of society away from the two-tiered, secular-religious divide the Roman Church had established.

## Biblical Data on Calling

The office of minister must be understood against this backdrop of general calling. A “special call,” as Turretin notes, is one “peculiar to pastors, by which certain men are selected for the public ministry and [their life and doctrine having been approved] are consecrated to God by a solemn ceremony and put in possession of the office.”<sup>9</sup> There is, however, much continuity between Christian vocation generally and the special calling of the minister. Whether a teacher, farmer, lawyer, or minister, each one has received his position from the Lord and so must serve him in his calling.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the Reformers' doctrine of *vocatio*, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, chs. 6–10; Martin Luther, *The Freedom of the Christian*; Luther, *Genesis*; Luther, *Sermon on the Mount*; Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Wipf & Stock, 2004); James M. Hamilton Jr., *Work and Our Labor in the Lord* (Crossway, 2017); Max Weber, “Luther's Conception of the Calling: Task of the Investigation” (chap. 3), in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Allen & Unwin LTD., 1930), 79–92.

<sup>5</sup> God “has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life. And that no one may thoughtlessly transgress his limits; he has named these various kinds of living ‘callings.’ Therefore each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life.” Calvin, *Institutes*, III.x.6.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.x.6.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. John W. Fraser (Oliver & Boyd, 1960), 7:20.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle (1856; repr., Kessinger, 2010), 107–08. In this context, Calvin is comparing the Roman prohibition on marriage for monks, priests, and nuns to the ancient errors of Encratites, Manicheans, and Montanites. Montanus was “the first that dissolved marriage.” He required this of his followers because of private “revelation.”

<sup>9</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 2 (1679–85; repr., P&R, 1992), 215.

Perhaps the most memorable instance of God's calling a man for a particular office is that of Moses. The Lord summoned him, saying, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt" (Exod. 3:10). Moses's response is to shrink back, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh . . . ?" (3:11). Clearly, this prophet did not feel an inner compulsion to the work. It is noteworthy that not all Old Testament offices were filled by immediate revelation. Soon after addressing Moses directly, the Lord instructs him to make Aaron his priest (Exod. 4:14–17). Because the words Moses spoke were God's own, Aaron's office was not less divinely established than Moses's, even though it was mediated by a man. The same principle is evident in the Levitical priesthood and in the calling of Elisha through Elijah (1 Kings 19:16, 19). By contrast, the calling of Jeremiah was unmediated (Jer. 1:4).<sup>10</sup> Like Moses, he was uncertain of his fitness, seeking to refuse: "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth" (Jer. 1:6).

The categories of calling in the New Testament are very similar. The disciples were called by God's own mouth—the voice of their Good Shepherd, who summoned them from their labors to be fishers of men (Matt. 4:18–22). To have seen and been called into that work by Christ himself was one of the distinctives of an apostle (Acts 1:21–22). Paul shared this calling, having been converted on the Damascus Road by a face-to-face encounter with the ascended Christ (Acts 9). It was by the "laying on of [Paul's] hands" that Timothy received "the gift of God" (2 Tim. 1:6)—his calling and ordination were of God, but by the means of the apostle. In his writing to Timothy, the apostle instructs the young pastor that "if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task" (1 Tim. 3:1). This text should be noted as the exclusive explicit statement in the canon regarding what is typically considered the "inner call." Following quickly on the heels of this statement are the many qualifications for an elder.

With these examples, we can clarify the special call. Sometimes it is immediate, proceeding directly from God, as was the case with Moses, many Old Testament prophets, and the apostles. Contrasted with this is the mediate call, when God remains the source but is pleased to use means—as in Aaron, the Levitical priesthood, and Elisha. It is not any less the call of God than the immediate; every special call has its origin in God but is mediated to its recipients by the church.<sup>11</sup> This mediated calling is the manner in which God calls pastors today.

A legitimate call, then, is a calling from God. The question is, how is God's will to be discerned? In the lives of the prophets and apostles, God's calling was unmistakable and extraordinary—not so today. It must be affirmed with James Bannerman that in the present age "there is no miraculous light thrown across the path, no voice from on high, like that which met Paul on the road to Damascus."<sup>12</sup> In the Christian ministry, calling is "always mediate, that is, through and in conjunction with, the instrumentality of man."<sup>13</sup>

Can the mediated call, by the instrumentality of the church, still be identified as God's voice? This is certainly so. To the elders of the church in Ephesus, Paul affirms

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Jeremiah was already called by God to the priestly work (Jer. 1:1).

<sup>11</sup> As Turretin notes, "Although from God originally as the primary author, [the call] is still through the intervention of men whom God employs as instruments when he calls by the church; such is the call of sacred ministers at the present time." *Institutes*, 2:216.

<sup>12</sup> James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (1869; repr., Banner of Truth, 1974), 1:429.

<sup>13</sup> George Howe, D. D. "A Discourse on Theological Education and Advice to a Student," in *Southern Presbyterian Review*, vol. II, no. 2 (1848): 158–83.

that “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). These church officers had not received an immediate call; nonetheless, it is God who granted them their position. The apostle writes further that Christ “gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers” (Eph. 4:11).<sup>14</sup> Though the Ephesian “shepherds and teachers” at that time did not walk with Christ during his incarnation, their office is still regarded as a gift of his to the church—as legitimate as that of the apostles themselves. Though they had not seen his face, they could still be confident they had heard his voice, confirmed to them in the calling by the church. As R. L. Dabney writes, at their root, “both are, in some form, from God, and both summon men to a ministry for God.”<sup>15</sup>

### Some Definitions

Bringing these various themes together, I suggest some tentative definitions. First, it is better to conceive of the internal call as the qualifications necessary for the minister.

Attending this is a “desire” or “aspiration” (as Paul writes to Timothy), but this is not to function as a form of guidance, determinative of actions. Calvin prefers to “pass over” such inner forces driving a man, referring to them as “that secret call.” He does not disparage it, writing that each minister “is conscious [of it] before God . . .”<sup>16</sup> But for Calvin, the “secret call” has to do with sincerity of motive, not impulse: “There is the good witness of our heart that we receive the proffered office not with ambition or avarice, not with any other selfish desire, but with a sincere fear of God and desire to build up the church.”<sup>17</sup> Turretin converges on the same point, calling the internal disposition “rather a disposition of mind to receive the call than a call properly so called.”<sup>18</sup> For both, the internal sense is not a burning “need” to preach, but testimony within oneself that the aspiration issues “from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5).<sup>19</sup>

Bannerman argues that internal calling consists in the biblical qualifications for the office. After asking how a ministerial candidate might be assured of his calling, he points to the Scriptures, for they describe “the gifts and qualifications” which constitute Christ’s call.<sup>20</sup> It is because “the gifts and graces for the office, when conferred, are God’s commission and call to the office” that no “supernatural call personally addressed to [the]

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<sup>14</sup> The same idea is present in 1 Corinthians, where Paul states that “God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers” (12:28). It is the express act of God to establish and make an officer. Indeed, only God can make a minister.

<sup>15</sup> Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* (1891; repr., Banner of Truth, 1967), 2:26.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.11.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.11. The ministerial vows in OPC BCO 23.8.2 are in Calvin’s terms: “Have you been induced, as far as you know your own heart, to seek the office of the holy ministry from love to God and a sincere desire to promote his glory in the gospel of his Son?” Note that it is not prescribed for the candidate to be asked, “Do you feel called?”

<sup>18</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 3:23.3. He goes on to clarify that even these pure motives are “not sufficient unless there is added an external manifestation and confirmation, either by an appearance of God himself or by a declaration of the divine will, joined with an agreement of the doctrine proposed with the doctrine revealed by God in his word, that it may not be confounded with the impostures of fanatics who boast of divine breathings and revelations.” Where is this declaration of the will found?—in the church. *Institutes*, 3:23.4.

<sup>19</sup> A subjective sense of “falling in love” with the work is never to be raised to a standard for calling. For who can dispute with love? Fair assessments must fall by the wayside if the candidate feels a “love” for preaching, etc. Dabney, *Discussions*, 2:34.

<sup>20</sup> Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 1:429.

man to assure him of his warrant to serve the Church of Christ” is necessary.<sup>21</sup> If the internal call is the gifts, graces, and godly motives for the office, then—if a man has these—he may consider himself called.

However, the question of certainty has not been resolved, because in the same context Bannerman goes on to say that if a man “feels” these qualifications are his, he can conclude it to be the call of Christ.<sup>22</sup> But how does this help the ministerial candidate? It seems too great a burden to place on his own senses. The problem is only exacerbated when Bannerman writes, “There must be, first, Christ speaking to the soul of the man by a secret voice, heard only by himself . . .”<sup>23</sup> How can a man know that it is Christ whom he hears speaking to his soul?

To hold that the internal call is a sort of Christ “speaking to the soul” argues too much—it is tantamount to extrabiblical revelation. What Bannerman writes of here is specific life guidance (whether a man should pursue the ministry), which is beyond the scope of the Scriptures’ sufficiency (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6). Just as they do not tell Christians the particular person to marry, where to go to college, etc., neither do they tell a particular man whether or not he should be a minister. But if Christ himself is “speaking to the soul,” then this is conclusive and ought to be followed without reserve. These, then, are the two options: Either God speaks to a man and calls him to be a minister (immediately), in which case he is obligated to obey and the church is obligated to accept him; or, God calls his ministers mediately, by the church, on the basis of an assessment of the man’s fitness for the ministry by Scripture.

Samuel Rutherford provides some clarity. He writes that the immediate breathings of the apostles “were allowed in themselves to be not less authentic than the canon of Scripture since they contained, of their very own selves, the formal will of God.” Notwithstanding, “those breathings, as far as to us, are not formally the regulating rule of faith, but with respect to us are a rule having been regulated.”<sup>24</sup> Most germane to our topic is Acts 17:11, where the Bereans are praised for “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” The apostle Paul, recipient of the immediate breathings of God onto his soul, was also tested by the rule of faith. If even the inspired apostles were to be weighed according to Scripture, how much more a man today when he has an internal sense that he is called to the ministry? The rule by which the legitimacy of an internal call can be determined is the biblical qualifications for pastoral office, and the only one authorized to assess whether the gifting is present is the church. The external call of the church provides a man with warrant to believe that he is called by God to serve.

In summary, the traditional Reformed definition of internal calling does not consist in a sense of divine compulsion, but in testable gifts and graces joined to a man’s testimony that he aspires to the office from a pure desire for Christ’s honor and the good of the church. It is the position of this essay that it is wiser to, with Calvin, specify this sense as the “secret” rather than “inner” or “internal” call, and with Turretin, to prefer not to refer to it as a call at all, but as a preparation to receive the call. What is available to the church

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<sup>21</sup> Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 1:429.

<sup>22</sup> Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 1:429.

<sup>23</sup> Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 1:447.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *Examen arminianismi, conscriptum & discipulis dictatum a doctissimo clarissimoque viro* (Antonii Smytegelt, 1668), 683–84.

for evaluation?—whether the candidate is self-controlled, hospitable, apt to teach, etc. The internal call should be seen as pure motives and the requisite gifting provided by the Holy Spirit, and not as a form of subjective guidance.

Based upon this objective evaluation, the external call is issued—the voice of the Spirit of God heard in the verdict of the church. Quite simply, it is “the call that comes to one through the instrumentality of the church.”<sup>25</sup> This call may note the presence of desire and question concerning motive, ensuring that the candidate does not aspire to the office to advance himself. However, the church’s deliberation is not to rest on whether the candidate’s desire is sufficiently comprehensive. It is not an evaluation of his sense of the Spirit’s leading, but whether the candidate possesses the true internal calling: the Spirit’s provision of the requisite gifts and motives. Bannerman states that “until this formal and outward call of the church is superadded to the inward call of Christ, the individual’s title to the ministerial office . . . is not, in ordinary circumstances, complete.”<sup>26</sup>

## 5. Responding to Objections

But what of the various Scripture passages which seem to describe an “overwhelming craving and raging thirst”? There are two which are typically pointed to: the apostle Paul’s self-maledictory oath, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16), and the prophet Jeremiah’s expression, “If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ his message becomes a fire burning in my heart, shut up in my bones, and I become weary of holding it in, and I cannot prevail” (Jer. 20:9 Berean Study Bible). Each will be considered in turn.

In the beginning of this verse the apostle states, “For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me,” and then, “If I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship” (1 Cor. 9:16,17). He is saying that he has received a divine commission from his Lord, which obligates him to fulfill his ministry. Does this mean that those who have not received this face-to-face encounter with Christ have a lesser commission? Certainly not. Christ appoints each minister. The only king and head of the church continues to supply his church with ministers, even if not immediately. Therefore, each duly called pastor must have this same motivation of “necessity,” because he has been called by God into his work, no less than an apostle. However, a non-ordained man, who has yet to receive the external call of the church, does not have the confirmation of this divine commission.

The same is seen in the case of Jeremiah. When the Lord had first called him to the work (Jer. 1:5), he expressed uncertainty and doubt. But in chapter 20, he claims he cannot refrain from preaching the message of the Lord—this despite the intense opposition he faced: “The word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long” (v. 8). What has changed in this man between chapter 1 and chapter 20? He has received an official appointment. The Lord has called him, made him a prophet, and so he is constrained to fulfill this work.

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<sup>25</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Banner of Truth, 2021), 613.

<sup>26</sup> The scenario Bannerman pictures is that of shipwrecked Christians on a desolate island, unique circumstances, indeed. *The Church of Christ*, 1:432.

This is far from an argument against zeal. It is an observation that the zealous statements appealed to come after an official appointment. Both the apostle and the prophet express a controlling necessity that is mandatory for all those in possession of the ministerial office but cannot be required of those who have yet to receive the external call.

### Practical Benefits

Those who emphasize the inner call (defined as a subjective sense that compels one to the work) claim that only this will sustain one during the difficulties of pastoral life. Is this valid? Not necessarily. A minister must have a personal conviction that he is called to the work—but where is he to obtain this? The voice of God was heard in the external confirmation of the church, which reached his ears upon his ordination. From that point on, unless providence prevents him, he is obligated to do the work of a minister. There may be times when he does not desire to “do his job.” But in this, he is like every other person who has a *vocatio*, who at times tires of the mundane. What should he do? Remember that he has been called of God, and there is no doubting it.

This stress upon the legitimacy of the outward call has many practical benefits. The “secret call” (as Calvin referred to it) cannot be assessed by the church. However, candidates must still be examined. Calvin argued that the church is to base its evaluation upon four criteria: the candidate’s giftedness; the possession of sound doctrine; a holy life; and the “skills necessary for the discharge of [his] office.”<sup>27</sup> The Reformer further clarified that, for a call to be true, the gifts of the candidate must be observable to the people and not only those in high office.<sup>28</sup>

A proper view of the external call also promotes good order in the church. It prevents candidates who are convinced in themselves that they are to be ministers—who have not been called by the church—from taking possession of office. Calvin refers to Hebrews 5:4 (“And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God...”), placing this calling “by God” as the external, and not the “secret call.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, if anyone thrusts himself forward, “tak[ing] this honor for himself,” he was to be regarded as self-appointed and not a duly called minister. Chafing under the constraints of the church evidences a man’s lack of calling, even if he has a strong conviction that he ought to be a minister.

The process of examination and external call is essential. If a man is unwilling to submit to the voice of the church, then he is the exact opposite of the sort of man who should be in the pulpit—for humility is the attitude requisite of all ministers as they imitate their Lord who “came not to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:28). Besides the matter of patience and humility, a candidate’s belief that he is uniquely called by the Spirit to the work of the ministry may reveal a heterodox pneumatology. What may he teach God’s people, if he believes the Spirit has spoken directly to him?

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<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.12.

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.15. One author notices the modern inversion: “See how we have turned this around. Presbyterian churches. . . have come to feel that they must be impressed primarily by testimonies of an inward call, and ought seldom to allow judgements about education to frustrate a sincere desire for ministry.” Alexander McKelvey, “The Importance of Calvin Studies for Both School and College,” in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Westminster, 1990), 137.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.10.

Another benefit of the re-establishment of the external call is the role of the local church. George Howe argues that “[i]n calling persons into the Christian ministry, there is a great work to be done by the church”<sup>30</sup>—not merely in the final act of ordination, but in identifying and encouraging candidates to the office. He likens this to the saving call of the gospel, which God is pleased to make through the “instrumentality of the church to whomsoever the Lord our God shall call.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, “believers generally . . . are under obligation to see to it that this ministry is perpetuated and maintained, and to use every proper means to secure this end.”<sup>32</sup> If churches recognized that it was their duty to inculcate such aspirations in their young men and to encourage them when gifts were apparent, there might be far more ministers. However, whenever churches believe that a call to the ministry requires extraordinary or direct guidance by the Holy Spirit, they will typically have a dearth in supply.

The commonly held position that only an intense inner call will enable perseverance in the pastorate is, therefore, inaccurate. Rather, the external call has been designed to promote zeal in ministers of the gospel, whereby they can be assured that God has truly called them into their office. This biblical and historical balance not only assists an individual pastor but is also how the church of Christ may maintain good order and a perpetual ministry, as believers recognize their role in the education and encouragement of their young men to the pastorate.

## Conclusion

This essay has not argued that an inner desire for the work of the ministry is improper. Indeed, it is often (but not always) the way in which God begins to move a man towards the office. What has been presented here is an extended critique of the necessity of an “all-consuming passion” for the work in a ministerial candidate. Prior to ordination, inner certainty is unnecessary. The calling of the church, understood as God’s own, provides a confidence that one is duly called, enabling the minister to set about his work with zeal. This confidence rests on the ordinary working of God’s providence; on the scriptural witness that many called men did not at first have a total willingness; and on the Reformed historical practice of defining the “inner call” as those giftings and qualities requisite for the faithful execution of ministerial labors. The biblical descriptions of “all-consuming desire” belong to those who already possessed confidence in their call because it came by the immediate voice of God—and so those who hear the external call through the church may likewise be assured. An unbiblical view of calling, which waits for the Spirit to sensibly call before a man may proceed, is an abdication of the church’s role in raising up her young men. May the Spirit of God cultivate in us the fruits necessary for the Christian ministry.

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Smyth, “A Discourse on Theological Education and Advice to a Student,” in *Southern Presbyterian Review*, vol. II., no.2. (1848): 158–83.

<sup>31</sup> Howe, “A Discourse,” 173.

<sup>32</sup> Howe, “A Discourse,” 173.

# ServantReading

## Tender and Compassionate: The Gentle Love of Christ

A Review Article

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by Shane Lems

*Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*, by Dane Ortlund.  
Crossway, 2020, 224 pages, \$19.99.

It is no secret that the Bible is filled with examples of and statements about Christ's steadfast, tender, and compassionate love for his people. There are numerous adjectives, stories, and assertions in Scripture that describe our Savior's love and show that he loves us now, always, and forever. Sadly, Christians sometimes forget the truth of Jesus's gentle affection for them. Some preachers rarely talk about the depth of Christ's love for us, and when they do talk about it, they fail to emphasize the fact that it is a warm, tenderhearted affection. Other preachers are more concerned with law than Christ's love, which results in people thinking they need to earn his love. Certain Christians view Jesus as someone who is very stern, strict, and cold. Still others have an idea that Jesus is a macho, gunslinging hero who kicks rear ends and takes names. No Christian will deny Christ's love, but the truth is, we do not always teach it correctly or believe it rightly.

Because of this tendency for Christians to forget, misunderstand, or fail to consider the truth that Jesus loves us with tender affection, we need to hear it often. And we need to hear it clearly. Thankfully, there are many good Christian resources that wonderfully explain the heart of Christ towards his people. Dane Ortlund's 2020 publication, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*, is one such book that emphasizes the life-changing reality that the Lord loves us with tenderness, sympathy, and deep affection. Ortlund's main goal in this book is to explain the biblical truth that Christ delights in showing love and mercy to his people. In other words, Ortlund expounds on the reality that Jesus has deep, heartfelt, loving affections for us, his sinful, weak, and often disobedient people.

Although the title of the book says it is about Christ's heart for sinners, Ortlund also talks about the Father's love for us (these two topics are of course related). *Gentle and Lowly (G&L)* is a book meant for Christians from all walks of life. It is just over 200 pages and was written in a devotional style that is full of Scripture references and quotes from various Puritans and other Reformed theologians. Some readers might find that *G&L* requires extra attention because of its tightly packed writing style that is full of adjectives and descriptive language. Ortlund's way of writing includes longer sentences with various clauses and phrases, which can sometimes require a second reading.

*G&L* has twenty-three short chapters. The first twelve chapters are about Christ's heart of love for sinners. The thirteenth chapter is on the Holy Spirit, who, Ortlund argues, helps us feel Christ's love for us. Chapters 14 through 19 are about God's heart of love for sinners. Chapters 20 through 23 return to the topic of Christ's love for sinners, specifically that he loves us forever. For me, the flow of the chapters was a bit haphazard and did not seem to have a logical progression. By the end of the book, I was thinking there was too much repetition. However, to repeatedly hear about Christ's love for us is actually a good thing. To follow Ortlund's emphasis, there is no such thing as hearing too much about Christ's love! Who would ever say, "Please stop talking about Jesus's heartfelt love for me"?

Various parts of *G&L* are based on Thomas Goodwin's 1642 publication, *The Heart of Christ*. If you have read Goodwin's work, *G&L* will, in various ways, be a review for you. Ortlund also draws from the writings of John Flavel, Richard Sibbes, John Owen, John Bunyan, B. B. Warfield, and Louis Berkhof. (As a side, *G&L* made me think of Octavius Winslow's *The Sympathy of Christ*, although Ortlund did not mention it.) Each chapter of *G&L* is basically an exposition of a Bible text about the heart of God/Christ and then a theologian's discussion of that verse or concept. For example, in chapter 8 Ortlund explains the following phrase from Hebrews 7:25: "He always lives to make intercession for them." The chapter contains a brief and helpful exposition of Christ's loving intercession. It also weaves in some reflections about Christ's intercession from John Bunyan's work *Christ a Complete Savior*. Ortlund notes that "Christ's heavenly intercession is the reason we know that he will save us to the uttermost" (83).

To give another example, chapter 12 is about the lovely truth that Christ is the friend of sinners (Matt. 11:19). Ortlund says that Christ's "heart takes shape as our never-failing friend" (113). Ortlund gives some explanation of Matthew 11 and then illustrates it in various ways. "In Jesus Christ, we are given a friend who will always enjoy rather than refuse our presence" (115). After discussing the reality that Christ is a friend of sinners, Ortlund uses Sibbes's description of Christ as a friend. For Sibbes, Ortlund notes, the *mutual* aspect of Christ's friendship with sinners is key. Love is a mutual part of our friendship with Christ. He is ours, we are his.

One subjective critique I have of *G&L* is its writing style. Throughout the book, I noticed many phrases that seemed like a strained effort at relevance, using trendy, emotion-oriented language. I very much agree that modern authors should use modern, everyday language, but sometimes Ortlund's fashionable writing style struck me as strained and awkward. For example, Ortlund says we should "romance the heart of Jesus" (99). He means that we should be drawn to Christ's love for us. However, from another angle, the phrase means *we* should try to win Christ's affection. At one point Ortlund suggests that things about ourselves which make us "cringe most," make God "hug hardest" (179). Other ambiguous phrases include, "Our law-ish hearts relax as his lavish heart comes home to us" (188). "Law-ish" is an unclear phrase because, to me, "ish" means "sort of" or "roughly." At a different place Ortlund says that God's "glory is his lowliness" (147). I am not sure that phrase is exactly accurate. I could list many more examples, but the writing style made this book harder for me to enjoy and appreciate. I prefer reading about Christ's amazing love in clearer, more straightforward language.

Minor critiques aside, *G&L* is a wonderful devotional book that helps Christians better understand the unchanging fact that Christ loves us with a tender love. "His is a

love that cannot be held back when he sees his people in pain” (46). And Jesus’s love is not like our love which fluctuates from week to week (and sometimes from day to day!). Even the best love Christians display is but a pale, weak comparison to Christ’s love for us. Christ “will love you to the end. Not only is your future secure, on the basis of his death; your present is secure. . . .” (204). *G&L* emphasizes and describes Christ’s love from different angles, helping the reader better understand what it means to be loved by him. “This is heaven’s delight. Come to me, says Christ. I will embrace you into my deepest being and never let you go” (66).

Yes, Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the Lion of Judah and will one day return to judge the wicked with a sword of vengeance. But for us, Jesus is also gentle, lowly, loving, patient, kind, tenderhearted, affectionate, caring, merciful, and meek. Sadly, there are people in this world who are cruel, forceful, aggressive, and assertive, who try to get their way with big, dominating personalities. But—thank God!—Jesus is not like that at all. When you are weighed down in life and you go to Christ with this weight, he will not beat you down with any sort of mighty bravado or toxic masculinity. Not at all. “He does not say, ‘Whoever comes to me with sufficient contrition,’ or ‘Whoever comes to me feeling bad enough for their sin,’ or ‘Whoever comes to me with redoubled efforts.’ He says, ‘Whoever comes to me I will never cast out’” (65).

I would like to end this review with a pastoral note. *G&L* is indeed a great overview of Christ’s tender and amazing love for us. When we go to him in faith, he *does* willingly and lovingly embrace us forever. And when Jesus calls us to come, he also says *learn from me* (Matt. 11:29). As the reader takes a wonderful tour of Christ’s love in *G&L*, it does help us rest in his steadfast love. But we can also *learn* from the love of Christ. Relying on grace, we should seek to love other people with a Christ-like, tender, kind, and compassionate love. Husbands, love your wives with a warm, gentle, self-sacrificing, serving love that makes her feel profoundly cherished and highly valued. Wives, love your husbands with affection, support, and Christ-like patience. Parents, show your children a kind of love that is heartfelt, sympathetic, forgiving, and gracious. Pastors, show the people in your care a loving gentleness, a servant-like affection that shows up in humility, respect, encouragement, and peacefulness. And do not forget, our Lord’s profound, undying love for us actually enables us to love others: “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19). As Augustine might have said it, *to be loved* and *to love* are two of the greatest blessings ever.

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# Christian Natural Law and Religious Freedom: A Foundation Based on Love, the True, and the Good *by Alex Deagon*

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by David VanDrunen

*Christian Natural Law and Religious Freedom: A Foundation Based on Love, the True, and the Good*, by Alex Deagon. Routledge, 2025, 164 pages, \$200.00.

Early American Presbyterians embraced religious liberty, even modifying the Westminster Standards to reflect those convictions. Although religious liberty became entrenched in the American constitutional order and remains widely protected in the United States and many other places today, influential voices on both the secular “left” and the conservative Christian “right” are raising serious doubts about it, or at least about its importance vis-à-vis other social-political priorities. Whether there are good reasons for religious liberty is a live question in contemporary political and theological circles, hence the relevance of this new book. Australian law professor Alex Deagon wrote it to promote a “sound theoretical foundation” (1) for religious freedom, especially through what he calls “Christian natural law.”

Part 1 lays the natural-law foundation of his subsequent treatment of religious liberty. Chapter 2 begins by noting that there is a long Christian history of natural-law reflection, but different writers and traditions have different emphases. While Roman Catholics focus on nature, tradition, and reason, Protestants tend to emphasize sin and grace. Deagon argues that these traditions are largely unified substantively and that their respective emphases complement each other. Thus, Deagon feels justified in speaking of a “Christian natural law,” which is rooted in Christian theological convictions and yet is also accessible to non-Christians since it is revealed in nature. Chapter 3 examines the work of several writers—both Christians and non-Christians—who present natural-law theories allegedly independent of whether God exists. Deagon argues that such attempts are ultimately impossible and that these writers have not avoided theology. Natural law theory, he claims, is intrinsically theological and thus never “theologically neutral” (62). In chapter 4, Deagon proposes that the foundational theological principles of love, the true, and the good form the content of Christian natural law. Here he introduces Radical Orthodoxy as an effective paradigm to capture these ideas. Radical Orthodoxy is a recent movement whose most prominent advocate is the British Anglo-Catholic theologian John Milbank.

Part 2 argues that Christian natural law is foundational for religious freedom, understood through these ideas of the good, truth, and love, respectively. In chapter 5, Deagon claims that religious freedom encourages people to pursue the *good of religion*, whose ultimate end is the beatific vision, that is, intimate eschatological communion with God. Religious freedom, Deagon says, also promotes the *common good* of our earthly societies by respecting and promoting inherent human dignity. Chapter 6 argues that religious freedom is good because its goal is *pursuit of truth*, and more specifically of *true religion*, which is knowledge of God and reconciliation with him. Finally, chapter 7 contends for religious freedom because *love* does not try to compel people to belief. “Coerced religion is not true or good religion” (152).

Deagon is correct about a number of important big-picture issues, in my judgment. He is right to insist that natural-law theorists cannot avoid certain kinds of theological judgments, even if they avoid speaking about God. God is the creator and upholder of the natural order, after all, and the law it communicates is his. We can be grateful that the content of the natural law—such as the immorality of murder and theft—impresses itself upon non-Christians, and Christians do well to take advantage of that as they participate in moral conversations in public life. But no one can really understand any law without accounting for the authority behind it. One might consider how ridiculous it would be to develop a comprehensive account of American law while trying to remain neutral on whether the United States Congress and Supreme Court actually exist.

Deagon is also correct to note the many important continuities in the natural-law theologies of different Christian traditions. With respect to the medieval theological inheritance, the way early Protestant writers viewed natural law was more similar to how they viewed the doctrine of Christ's two natures in one person than to how they viewed the doctrine of justification. That is, they thought natural law was a Christian idea they could largely embrace from the earlier tradition without need for major reform. Whether Deagon has too quickly elided Roman Catholic and Reformed versions of natural law, however, is a valid question.

Perhaps most important is that Deagon is correct to defend religious liberty and deserves commendation for taking up the cause.

Nevertheless, several drawbacks impede the book's overall effectiveness. For one, Deagon's writing style makes the book difficult to read. Rather than offering his own tight, linear argument in support of his claims, Deagon often proceeds by reporting what one person after another has written about the issue at hand, thereby leaving readers to intuit an argument from these reports. I invite Deagon to take this criticism as an indirect compliment. He is an interesting thinker. This is *his* book, and I would like to hear more of his distinctive voice and less of a compilation of other people's voices.

Second, Deagon engages very little with the long history of Christian *opposition* to religious liberty. In fact, one would not even know there is such a long history from reading this book. This not only gives a distorted picture of historical Christian attitudes toward religious freedom but also leaves readers unprepared to address the contemporary reemergence of some older arguments in favor of religious intolerance. On a related note, Deagon's brief biblical argument for religious freedom (113–17) makes many good points but is fairly shallow and non-rigorous, and it does not address the arguments against religious freedom that many pre-modern Christians drew from Scripture.

Third and finally, I regret that Deagon offers his theological defense of religious freedom through the lens of Radical Orthodoxy. It is not an attractive perspective to my confessional Reformed eyes and not one I can recommend to *Ordained Servant* readers. Nevertheless, since Deagon apparently embraces Radical Orthodoxy, I am glad that he still argues strongly in defense of religious liberty. Readers familiar with Radical Orthodoxy may know that it is not the likeliest place to look for support on this issue. Sustaining religious liberty in any society requires people to defend it from different angles and with different rationales. In light of that consideration, I am grateful that Deagon adds his voice to the contemporary defense of religious freedom, even if his approach to its biblical and natural-law foundation is not exactly my own.

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# ServantReading

## A Kinder, Gentler Presbyterianism

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by Darryl G. Hart

*Presbyterianism (Blessings of the Faith)*, by Sean Michael Lucas. P&R, 2025, 136 pages, \$15.99.

Pastors, seminarians, and church members may not read John Frame's provocative essay, "Machen's Warrior Children," anymore, but its sentiments still capture an important dynamic in the conservative Presbyterian world (mainly the OPC and PCA). Almost twenty-five years ago, Frame wrote his criticism of the infighting that in his estimation characterized conservative Presbyterianism after J. Gresham Machen's death and the formation of the OPC. At the time, Orthodox Presbyterians, if General Assembly reports are any indication, were debating women serving in the military, acceptable views of creation, and the Federal Vision. Perhaps Frame had these disputes in mind when he wrote, "The Machen movement was born in the controversy over liberal theology." He conceded that contending against liberal theology was commendable. But "martial impulses" characterized conservative Presbyterianism and carried over into church life even after liberalism stood condemned. "Being in a church without liberals to fight," Frame observed, conservative Presbyterians "turned on one another." This interpretation of Presbyterian history divided the Reformed world into the fighters and the easy-goers, or the mean and the nice.

That fault line seems to persist in NAPARC circles, if Sean Michael Lucas's *Presbyterianism* for the P&R Publishing series *Blessings of the Faith* is any indication. Instead of approaching the topic in a way that necessarily involves differentiating Presbyterianism from other versions of Protestantism on doctrinal, ecclesiological, and liturgical grounds, Lucas chooses a softer approach. His overriding theme, as the book's series has it, is that Presbyterianism is good for you—it is a blessing of the Christian faith. This is not quite an "eat-your-broccoli" approach, though Lucas's case for Presbyterianism lacks the pizzaz and zowie of the writings of John Calvin, John Knox, and Samuel Rutherford. Lucas recommends Presbyterianism on the grounds that nothing could be more beneficial for believers than to have a sound congregation with church officers who care about members and their families. As Lucas writes in his introduction, "my goal is to persuade you that Presbyterianism is good for you, for your soul, for your family and ultimately for God's church and the world" (16).

To do this, Lucas takes what this reader considered a strikingly indirect approach. Instead of looking directly at New Testament patterns of church government (or the long and detailed debates in Protestant history over councils and bishops), Lucas chooses the Trinity as the frame for understanding Presbyterianism. Under God the Father, he tackles the doctrine of predestination admirably with a substantial explanation of God's sovereignty. This approach allows Lucas to include the doctrines of creation and providence in consideration of God's sovereignty. What makes this distinctly Presbyterian is not entirely clear except that many Christians associate Calvinism with predestination. The topic Christ the Son leads to a discussion of the lordship of Christ and how such rule is mediated through the church and her officers. Lucas also explains the work of elders as shepherds, their authority over doctrine,

worship, and discipline, and their collective rule through presbyteries. In the chapter on the Holy Spirit, Lucas uses the recently popular topic of ordinariness to describe the church as a fundamentally ordinary enterprise. He writes, “As this ordinary church gathers and ordinary men and women are served by an ordinary ministry, they find that God works through ordinary means” (86). Throughout, Lucas explains that the Holy Spirit accomplishes an extraordinary salvation through ordinary means. This chapter is not so much an explanation of Presbyterianism but an appeal to Presbyterians to acknowledge and appreciate the unremarkable character of their churches.

Because Presbyterianism has a track record of militancy—from the Covenanters to twentieth-century defenses of Calvinism over against evangelical Arminianism—readers may be tempted to think that Lucas goes out of his way to avoid polemics. The one contrast Lucas draws explicitly is between Presbyterianism and non-denominational congregations, which outnumber Presbyterian congregations five to one. But Lucas’s point in this contrast is to notice that non-denominational churches wind up functioning like denominations. It is a way to defend Presbyterians against the charge of being denominational. The book also ends with the largest section—a series of questions and answers about Presbyterian church life, from baptism of children and ordaining men only, to procedures surrounding sexual abuse and creedal subscription. One perhaps unintentionally revealing question is why Presbyterians engage in “so much conflict” (103). Trying to list all the “Split P’s,” Lucas writes, would require another book. The reason for so much controversy, he theorizes, is the failure of officers to submit to one another, along with the remnants of “corruption and sin.” These features of church life make Presbyterians all the more dependent on “the Holy Spirit’s guidance and empowerment” (104). Lucas leaves the impression that controversy is undesirable while not mentioning that Presbyterianism, from Calvin and Knox to Hodge and Chalmers, has clarified (and strengthened?) its witness through polemics. Previous generations were not squeamish in regarding the body of Christ this side of glory as the church militant.

Lucas’s first sentence likely gives away his intended audience. He observes that for more than twenty years he has conducted new member classes in the PCA churches he has served. In that light, the book may be useful for such instruction. But such readers are likely already comfortable with Presbyterianism in need of further perspective.

But at a time when young men especially are turning to vigorous expressions of Christianity where manliness seems to be encouraged—such as Eastern Orthodoxy, traditionalist Roman Catholicism, or alt-right Protestant Christian nationalism—Lucas’s book will likely look rather tame. Lucas need not have written a book with male Generation Z readers in mind, though the study committee on Christian Nationalism, recently appointed by the PCA’s General Assembly, is one indication that burly versions of Protestantism are having some effect in the NAPARC world. If so, Lucas might well have given more attention to the argumentative sides of Presbyterianism, opposition to the papacy, resistance to British monarchs—from England and Ireland to the United States—and the doctrinal disputes that they have encouraged. Such a presentation would not need simply be a posture for younger audiences. Instead, it would draw attention to the doctrinal, ecclesiological, and liturgical battles and debates that actually defined Presbyterianism. Whether or not Presbyterians took too much delight from controversy, the consequences of their sometimes heroic, wise, and godly pursuit of a truly Reformed church might not merely orient but inspire would-be Presbyterians.

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# ServantPoetry

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## The Marcescence of the Oaks

Gregory Edward Reynolds (1949–)

Unlike the leafless bare choirs  
Of the barren branches of the maple  
The oak retains its dead brown leaves  
That hang like memorials of the staple

Of knowledge left behind by the dead.  
What black ink still retains of the wisdom  
Of souls deceased will be immortal  
As long as minds can those texts plumb.

This is the essence of the oak, mark  
Well this lesson from a stubborn tree  
That seeks to defy the mortality of fall,  
Longing from certainty of death to be free.

Dead leaves are like the empty dreams  
Of mortal men and their fair wishes  
To continue on as if the doom of death  
Would live on as delightfully meretricious.

But memorials of the literary dead  
Cannot raise their rotting leaves from dust,  
For in their mortal lives there does reside  
A single requisition of a living must.

Call forth the hopeful tree of life  
Whose leaves are bright and green,  
Won for us by the awful tree of death  
That by Jesus' sacrifice makes us clean.