

NEW HORIZONS

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IN THE ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



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Editor: Danny E. Olinger
Managing Editor: Judith M. Dinsmore
Editorial Assistants: Ayrian J. Yasar
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A GOD WHO SAVES

ERIC B. WATKINS



Is there anyone our God cannot save? One of the greatest challenges to evangelism often lies within our own hearts as we view some people as being so lost that they seem utterly *unsavable*. I know that I can be guilty of this, and I imagine that we all can be at times. There are people whose lives may seem so ruined, their moral choices so depraved, their minds so gone. Whether it is the homeless person wandering the streets or the political activist who seems loudly anti-Christian, we are often tempted to view people as being hopeless. Exodus 18:10–12 offers a wonderful corrective, demonstrating that there truly is no one who bears the image of God who is beyond the reach of the grace of God. This is true, not because of what exists in our hearts, but because of the grace that exists in the heart of our God. Our God is not simply strong; he is a God who saves.

“THAT MY NAME MAY BE PROCLAIMED”

Exodus 18 draws an unlikely character onto a beautiful stage that displays the drama of God’s redemptive grace. Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, comes to bring Moses’s wife and two boys back to him after the Exodus. This is a remarkable reunion between a man and his family. Moses, like a soldier on the other side of battle, is given the great gift of seeing his wife and kids again after his spiritual duel with Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. Before focusing on the individual story of Jethro, it is important to remember what brought him into the story—the Exodus—and what the Exodus was all about.

It may be tempting, and in some ways correct, to say the Exodus was for Israel. But it was much more than that. God did not simply redeem Israel out of Egypt for Israel’s sake; he did it ultimately for his glory, that his glory might be manifest among the nations. Two things in the book of Exodus make this clear. First, in Exodus 9:16, God says to Pharaoh (through Moses), “But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.” God declares to Pharaoh that he could have already struck Pharaoh and all the Egyptians down. Six plagues had already occurred. Each of them was a miniature theater of war. God, like an encroaching military army, was toppling every layer of defense that supposedly protected Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

Each of the plagues was not simply a display of God’s power, it was also a death blow to the so-called “gods” of Egypt, one at a time. Yet the entire event had one singular purpose—that God’s name might be proclaimed in all the earth. That is why Pharaoh was “raised up.” When God finally brought Pharaoh down, it was like a huge rock hitting the stilled waters of the surrounding nations. This is the point made in the Song of Moses found in Exodus 15, especially verse 11: “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?”

When I was a seminary student, the first OPC my wife and I attended had this verse on a large banner hung behind the pulpit of the Seventh Day Adventist building that we rented. The banner covered a large mural that to most would be perceived as a distracting violation of the second commandment. My first impression was that Exodus 15:11 seemed like a strange verse to display so prominently. Over time, however, I realized it was really a great verse for a church to see and think about every Sunday. Who is like our God? Who can do what our God can do? Who is not only strong to defeat our enemies but strong to save us? And who deserves all the glory for doing so? The answer is

the LORD. He alone can do all these things, and that is why he is worthy of all glory and honor.

This is the statement that God was making through the Exodus. God was not simply witnessing *to* his people; he was witnessing *through* his people. The nations would quickly hear what the Lord had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Even in a day before the internet or phone lines, news like this would travel fast—and the nations heard it! Exodus 15:14–15 displays a collage of panicking nations. Pangs have seized Philistia; the chiefs of Edom are dismayed; trembling seizes the leaders of Moab, and all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. The unambiguous point here is that what God did for the people of Israel was not just for them; it was ultimately to proclaim the saving power of God to the surrounding nations. Pharaoh and the armies of Egypt (including their false gods) were like pawn pieces on a chess table that God set up and knocked down—effortlessly. The gods of Egypt were powerless to save Pharaoh and his armies. Not even the son of Pharaoh (who was called by the Egyptians a “son of god”) would be spared. Who is like the God of Israel? No one. And as this message is spread among the nations, it is more than just information; it is life-changing, and it is what brings Jethro into our story in Exodus 18.

JETHRO'S CONFESSION AND WORSHIP

If you ever wondered what a conversion story in the Old Testament might look like, the story of Jethro is about as good as they get. Jethro has heard what the God of Israel has done. By occupation, Jethro was a pagan priest in the land of Midian. His full-time job was idolatry. He offered sacrifices to false gods professionally, at least until he heard about what the God of Israel had done to the Egyptians. And what Jethro said and did was quite remarkable. In Exodus 18:10 Jethro begins by saying, “Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you” Think about how many times the phrase “Blessed be the Lord” or some form of that phrase is used by God’s people. We hear it countless times in the psalms. Israel sang it, and so do we to this day. But here in Exodus 18, those beautiful words flow from the lips of a (now formerly) pagan priest! He not only uses the proper name of Yahweh (the LORD) to identify God’s person, but the reason he blesses the LORD is for what the LORD has done. It is the saving person and work of the LORD that has captured the heart of Jethro, transforming his idolatrous songs of paganism into the proper praise of Yahweh.

Jethro, once a pagan priest, now professes that “the LORD is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people.” The Hebrew grammar

may be intentionally vague. The “they” in this verse (the ones who dealt arrogantly with the people of God) could either refer to the Egyptians, or it could refer to the gods of Egypt. Either way, the LORD dealt a crushing blow to them all, and Jethro now celebrates the victory of God against his humiliated enemies. Such is the strength of the arm of the LORD. Thus far, however, we have only considered the words—the profession of faith that Jethro utters. If it is true that actions speak louder than words, what Jethro does next wonderfully embodies his newfound faith.

Verse 12 says that Jethro “brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God.” This language is intriguing because of where it fits in the canon of Scripture. We are still in Exodus 18. The law of Moses has not yet been given, yet the sacrifices that Jethro offers are in keeping with what the LORD will require of Israel. Something similar was seen in sacrifices offered by Abraham. What God forbids (pagan sacrifice), Jethro has now put away. But what God requires (sacrifices that are prescribed by him) is now what Jethro brings. In short, what Jethro now offers to the LORD is in keeping with that which is well-pleasing in the sight of God. It may be anachronistic to say that Jethro’s worship was in keeping with the regulative principle of worship, but it would not be far off!

As John Calvin notes, proof that Jethro’s worship was acceptable in the sight of God is found in the small audience that joined him. We are told that “Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses’ father-in-law before God” (v. 12). The fact that these men participated in what Jethro was doing is an implicit sign of their approval. This is an Old Testament worship service, with the elders and officers of the covenant present. Jethro beautifully professes his faith and offers right worship in the sight of God and in the sight of Aaron, Moses, and the elders of Israel. What happens last is truly splendid—they eat bread together in the presence of God!

Two things about this eating of bread are worth noting. First, what bread was it? Most commentators agree that this was likely manna. If that is true, then it would be a remarkable thing to imagine that Jethro, a former pagan priest, is now partaking of the manna that comes from heaven—in the presence of God! Jesus will later liken himself to this very same bread. He is the True Bread that will come down from heaven for the salvation not only of our souls, but for the souls of lost sinners. Jesus is that Savior who brings about a better Exodus, a better Passover, and a better covenant. What Jethro experienced in Exodus 18 was but a foretaste of the better things to come in Christ. Yet what he experienced in the presence of God was truly beautiful. It is a portrait of the gathering grace of

God at work early in the pages of redemptive history. But what is seen here—in the faith of Jethro—should also be seen against the backdrop of Israel's wavering faith and unbelief.

Exodus 18 sits in an interesting spot. It was only two chapters ago, in chapter 16, that God gave the manna from heaven in response to Israel's grumbling and unbelief. In chapter 17, they complain again not just about food, but also about water. This is the chapter where Moses infamously strikes the rock and is judged by God. Jethro's profession of faith in the LORD of Israel to save his people must be seen against the backdrop of Israel's weak faith and inclination to distrust the promises of God. Jethro's profession is like a diamond of faith set against the black cloth of Israel's unbelief. Yet there is a beautiful, albeit convicting lesson here that relates very much to the subject of evangelism.

The people of God often struggle to trust in the promises of God. Like Israel in the wilderness, we can doubt God's power and plan to save. And the question is not always "Will he deliver *us*?" but can often be "Will he deliver *others*?" Will God save my unbelieving friend, enemy, neighbor, or even my wayward family member who, unlike Jethro, has heard the gospel story many times, yet seems as far away from the faith as ever? This is why we find a story like Jethro's to be beautifully helpful. Who would have imagined that a pagan priest would profess faith in the person and work of the LORD, offer right worship in the sight of the LORD, and then join Moses, Aaron, and the

elders of Israel in something like a communion service, partaking of the manna that came down from heaven *coram Deo*—before God?

PROOF OF GOD'S SAVING POWER

Exodus 18 teaches us the beautiful lesson that there is no one that our God cannot save—no one. No one who bears the image of God is beyond the reach of the gracious grip of God as long as they still draw breath in this world. Our God, the LORD, is not only strong to save his people and defeat their enemies; he is also strong and sovereign enough to convert his enemies into his friends. He did it with Jethro, and he has done it with us. We too are proof of God's saving power; and if he saves people like us, there is no one that our God cannot save.

Few things hinder the work of evangelism more than a dim view of God's saving power. Yet few things fan the flame of evangelism more than a strong confidence that our God not only *can save*—but that he also *will save*. And he uses means. His means to build his church is the power of his Spirit working in and through the church. From the pulpit to the living room to the street corner, God is still gathering a people unto himself. He promised that he would do this until the end of the age, and our God always keeps his promises. Our God is a God who saves. **NH**

The author is planting Salt and Light Reformed Church in Daytona Beach, Florida, and directs the Center for Evangelism at Mid-America Reformed Seminary.



James Tissot,
Jethro and Moses,
watercolor, c. 1896

COVENANT THEOLOGY AND THE CONTOURS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

HARRISON PERKINS



How do you relate to God? Since the triune God is truly transcendent, what binds us to him that we might know that he is near to his people? We long for certainty and assurance to know that our God is with us. So, how might we have confidence that we belong to God for blessing?

Covenant theology is the Reformed way of bringing Scripture to bear upon these questions. A covenant is a formal relationship. It binds two or more parties together in an official way. It has personal dynamics, thus the relationship aspect. It is also legal and authoritative in some sense so that this relationship, as such, is fixed and defined. A covenant establishes a relationship in a certain way so that those involved have specified connection to one another that is hard or impossible to dissolve.

This essay surveys the basics of Reformed covenant theology. The aim is to make these concepts that structure

our reading of Scripture and its grand narrative of salvation more familiar. The further payoff is that covenant theology furnishes reassurance for our questions about our relationship with God.

GOD MEETS US FOR BLESSING

Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 7.1 more specifically explains covenants, particularly covenants that God makes with his people.

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

Marking the religious purpose of God's covenants with humanity, this statement's key insight is that God's covenants with us are one way that he voluntarily condescends to promise blessedness and reward. In each covenant, God freely stooped down to forge a way to offer himself to us as our greatest blessedness.

Before and after Adam fell into sin, creaturely obedience *per se* could not force God to reward us. For Adam in his first condition of original righteousness, God created him, as WCF 4.2 says, "having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it" (see Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24). Though Adam had natural ability to obey God as he should, this obedience on its own would be insufficient to obligate God to offer him greater blessings (see Luke 17:10). For us, after sin entered through Adam's transgression, our works are even less suitable—even entirely inadequate—to warrant blessing from God. Rather than blessing, "all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them'" (Gal. 3:10). Sin intensified our inability to demand reward from God, making our works unacceptable as anything except reasons for our condemnation.

How then would we receive any blessing from God? In both situations, before and after Adam's fall, God freely stooped down—voluntarily condescended—to meet us in our condition to offer himself as our greatest blessedness. These arrangements whereby God enables us to receive him as our highest blessedness in everlasting glory are covenants.

This understanding of covenant already offers encouragement for the Christian life. It shows that God *wants* to bless his people. Nothing obligates him other than his own free commitment to reward his people. God struck

covenants with us because he is kind, generous, and desires to bless us. Believers should never doubt that God has a heart to give you blessings.

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ADAM

God's first covenant with humanity was *the covenant of works*. Adam was created good and upright, fully able to obey God's law and so fulfill his vocation to represent God at the creaturely level as the divine image bearer. Nevertheless, Adam outright owed God perfect obedience and, thus, had no claim upon higher reward than to continue in his original condition without penalty.

God, however, covenanted with Adam to address Adam's inability to warrant reward as a mere creature. Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) 12 explains God's voluntary condescension with Adam:

What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created? When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, upon pain of death.

Let us think about the terms and Adam's experience of this covenant.

God condescended to meet Adam in his condition to offer him heightened fellowship with God as his blessedness and reward. This covenant rested upon the terms of obedience because Adam still stood upright in original righteousness. Adam would not struggle to render the obedience required of him. This obedience merely required fulfilling his calling to reflect God's image according to the moral law and by filling the earth. This covenant's principle appears every time Scripture invokes works as the basis—which sinners cannot fulfill—for justification and reward (see Lev. 18:5; Matt. 19:16–29; Luke 10:25–29; Rom. 2:6–16; 10:1–13; Gal. 3:10–14).

In Adam's experience, this covenant revolved around two trees. God built a garden in Eden and put Adam in it. There, "The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:9). Trees filled this garden, but two were central for Adam's covenant life with God. The tree of life represented the prospect of living forever with God in glorified life (Gen. 3:22; Rev. 2:7; 22:14). The tree of knowledge was a test so that Adam could have defeated the serpent and proved himself righteous so to be confirmed into everlasting glorified life—for himself and his posterity (WSC 16).

God appointed these trees so that Adam would have practical experience of his covenant life with God. They were tangible features of his relationship with God, show-

ing him what was required of him as well as what blessing awaited him.

This aspect of the covenant of works stresses again covenant theology's encouragement for the Christian life. God does not leave us to wonder about our relationship with him. He appoints features of our life to direct us about this relationship. He still works through Word, sacrament, and prayer (WSC 88). Through these means of grace, God still meets us to give his redeemed people an experience of our relationship with him through Christ.

THE TRIUNE GOD'S COVENANT OF REDEMPTION

God did not leave us in our estate of sin and misery that Adam's fall brought upon us (WSC 20). Although God's grace is a solution to our plight of sin, this grace in Christ was not God's Plan B. From eternity Father, Son, and Spirit decreed according to their one, shared will in the divine essence to bring upon salvation for the elect (Rom. 9:1–13; 2 Thess. 2:13–14). According to this decree, Father, Son, and Spirit would each have a mission to contribute a specific aspect of bringing this plan to bear upon the elect. Reformed theology uses the label *the covenant of redemption* to refer to this eternal, pretemporal intratrinitarian arrangement for Father, Son, and Spirit each to manifest himself by executing his mission in history.

For this covenant, we need care with categories. First, Father, Son, and Spirit never work independently of one another. Rather, these missions are how we explain the biblical testimony's way of associating specific aspects of salvation most closely with one divine person. In Ephesians 1:3–14, the Father elects, the Son purchases the elect, and the Spirit seals them. Still, the Son was certainly involved in election (John 6:70), and the Spirit accompanied the Son throughout his incarnate work (Matt. 3:16–17). These instances demonstrate how Father, Son, and Spirit always work inseparably together, even though specific aspects of salvation appear most closely associated with one person in our historical experience.

Second, this covenant is not an act of voluntary condescension. God's covenants *toward humanity* are his free choice to meet us in our condition to offer blessing to us. The covenant of redemption is God's free choice insomuch as he did not have to decree to save sinners. Nonetheless, the relationships that hold among the missions of Father, Son, and Spirit are not acts of condescension toward one another. These missions are the historical manifestation of the triune God's decree to save the elect by Christ's work applied to the Spirit.

What are the missions according to the covenant of redemption? The Father appointed and sent the Son as

mediator for the elect (John 10:25–30; John 17:1–25; Eph. 1:3–6; Heb. 5:1–6; Heb. 7:15–22). The Son came to do the Father’s will and furnished the perfect obedience needed to earn our entry into everlasting life, as well as dying to pay our penalty debt for sin (John 4:31–38; John 10:17–18; Phil. 2:5–11; Eph. 1:7–10). The Spirit comes from the risen and ascended Christ to apply his life-giving work to us by working saving faith in us (Rom. 8:9; 2 Cor. 4:4–6; Rom. 10:14–17; Eph. 1:11–14; Tit. 3:4–7). These missions accomplish the triune God’s decree of salvation and bring redemption to the elect.

The pastoral encouragement from this doctrine is to realize the eternal nature of God’s love for every believer. He did not wait until you had faith to cherish you. He decreed his love for you before he even created time. God cannot cease to love his elect because he never began to love his elect. This love has eternally been in God’s heart, coming forth into our experience as the covenant of redemption.

GOD’S CONDESCENSION TO SINNERS IN CHRIST

Because of Adam’s fall into sin, the condition we all inherit is guilty, lacking the original righteousness with which God created us, and corrupt (WSC 18). God’s voluntary condescension to meet us in this condition to offer himself to us as our blessedness and reward is *the covenant of grace*. Throughout every period of redemptive history, believers have trusted in Christ alone for salvation, even before he came in his earthly ministry. WCF 8.6 explains,

Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after his incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof were communicated unto the elect, in all ages successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices . . . (emphasis added)

This explanation pinpoints Reformed covenant theology’s commitment that *Christ and his benefits* are the substance of the covenant of grace, delivered to believers under every historical covenant.

Under every covenant since Adam’s fall, true faith received Christ and his saving benefits. When Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6), he meant it absolutely, not just since his incarnation. Even Old Testament saints came to the Father through Christ. Hence, Jude 5 says that it was *Jesus* “who saved a people out of the land of Egypt” since Christ is the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Tim. 2:5). In the wilderness, “the spiritual Rock that followed them . . . was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4). God the Son has been active as Savior through the

means of grace given under every administration of the covenant of grace, applying his work to believers even in advance of his coming.

In our day, the proliferation of digital devices makes it possible to view programs in numerous ways. You can watch the same documentary about your favorite theologian on a traditional television, on a tablet, or even on your phone. Whatever device you use, you still view the same content.

This observation illustrates how the various historical covenants were all administrations of the same substance within the covenant of grace. The promise in Genesis 3:15, the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and the new covenant were different “devices” still displaying the same content. Each delivered the same substance of Christ and his benefits received by faith alone.

SO GREAT AN ASSURANCE

God meets his people to offer himself to us as our blessedness and reward. We have confidence about how he meets us because he confirms this relationship by covenant. In Genesis 15, when Abraham needed reassurance of God’s promises, God made a covenant with him. In Genesis 17, when Abraham needed further reassurance, God gave him the outward sign of the covenant. God intends his covenants to give us confidence as we walk with him.

God meets his people in covenant that we might know him in everlasting, glorified communion. He met Adam by covenant in the garden. He meets sinners in the covenant of grace with Christ as our surety. Let us rejoice at the sure confidence God provides for how we relate to him and know him for blessing. **NH**

The author is pastor of Oakland Hills Community Church in Farmington Hills, Michigan.

THE BIBLICAL IMPORTANCE OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

JONATHAN LANDRY CRUSE



The current moment has been dubbed by some as “The Great Dechurching” because about forty million Americans who at one time belonged to a church no longer do (see Davis and Graham’s 2023 book of that title). It would appear that formal and faithful commitment to a congregation just isn’t something we as a culture care about anymore. Many Christians balk at the notion of joining a church because they do not find biblical warrant for membership. Absent a simple chapter-and-verse proof text, or a “thou shalt join a church” command, some believers look with suspicion on the emphasis that Reformed congregations have historically placed on membership.

Another perhaps more pressing problem for church membership today is the headwinds of expressive individualism, which have proven so strong that a whole host of communal activities, church included, have fallen by the

wayside. However, the liberty that self-rule promised has instead left people empty. In May 2023, the Surgeon General of the United States warned of an epidemic of loneliness and isolation that is harming mental and physical health.

In this article, I will address this important but overlooked issue of church membership. First, I will lay out the case for formal church membership as a biblical necessity. Second, I will show from Scripture what faithful membership looks like. *Mere* membership is not the goal; *meaningful* membership is. In both, I will be arguing for the inherent spiritual good of church membership and how it answers the loneliness and longing of many today. I hope it comes as no surprise that what God calls us to is always good for us, for “his commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3)—and this includes the command to join his church.

THE CASE FOR FORMAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

To defend the practice of formal membership in a local congregation, many would instinctively first turn to the book of Acts, but we will start further back. The entire Bible unfolds the story of God’s special dealing with his people, and note that there is never a doubt as to who those people are.

Beginning with Abraham, God gave his people a marker by which they were distinguished from the rest of the world, namely, circumcision. This was a physical, unmistakable sign of separation from the world unto God. This official rite was an absolute prerequisite for participating with the Israelites in their worship of God: “If a stranger . . . would keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land” (Ex. 12:48). Formal membership *into* the nation was a requirement for worshiping *with* the nation. In the Old Testament, there was never a question of who was an Israelite, of who belonged to the people of God. From that fact we could establish this essential principle: God’s people are known by him, by one another, and by the world.

This principle continues into the New Testament. Looking to Acts and the days of the early church, we see this principle play out in that when people put their faith in Christ, they then attach themselves to the church through a formal and public means. Acts 2:41 says, “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” How did the church know that those who were added that day were “about three thousand”? We are not told the logistical details, but we can gather that entrance into the church was both public enough and organized enough that even

some statistics could be gathered! (See also Acts 4:4.) The New Testament knows nothing of a privatized Christianity—rather, it presupposes a public faith involving official membership into the people of God through baptism. When the Bible describes the growth of God's kingdom, it generally does not merely record *conversions*, but also *connections*. In other words, those who believe get baptized in order to belong to the community of God's people (see also Acts 6:7, 8:12, 10:48, 16:5, 18:8). Speaking of those early converts in the Book of Acts, John Stott insightfully comments, “[God] did not . . . save them without adding them to the church. . . . Salvation and church membership belonged together; they still do” (*The Message of Acts*, 87). Church membership is part and parcel of Christian discipleship.

Beyond this pattern we see in Acts, a case for formal church membership is strengthened if we take seriously the New Testament's many commands for how the church is to function. Peter's exhortation to elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2) assumes that congregations had clear-cut boundaries. Elders knew who belonged to them and to whom they must exercise oversight. Likewise, Hebrews instructs believers to “obey your leaders and submit to them” (Heb. 13:17). They are not to obey *any* leaders, but to obey *their* specific leaders. Paul says something similar: “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you” (1 Thess. 5:12). How did these believers know which leaders those were, if they were not part of a local body? Likewise, the steps of church discipline, which culminate in excommunication (Matt. 18:17), presuppose church membership. You cannot formally dismiss someone from a fellowship that they are not formally a part of.

Finally, it should be noted that the Bible necessitates membership by the picture it gives of the church. Of the dozens of metaphors used to describe the church, the most frequently employed is that of a body (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 1:23; 3:6; 4:4; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 3:15). This is where we get the term “membership,” after all! Christ is the head, and we are the various members of the body: “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom. 12:4–5). Simply put, church membership is how we properly conceive of our relationship not only to Christ but to our fellow believers.

THE CASE FOR FAITHFUL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

But the goal of churches (or this article) isn't simply to get more names on the rolls. Membership is not an end unto

itself. Rather, it is a mechanism for spiritual growth. That's why, once a Christian has formally joined the church, the Lord expects them to participate in the church in faithful, committed ways. Acts 2 shows what this looks like.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47)

So, what do faithful church members do? At least four things could be gleaned from this passage: they submit, worship, serve, and witness.

Church members *submit* to God's Word as it is given through God's appointed leaders. “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.” This is not just a commitment to learn, it's a commitment to be corrected, redirected, changed, transformed, and sanctified. God's primary means of accomplishing his purposes *for us* is by getting his Word *in us*. Paul has a remarkable statement in Thessalonians when he commends them for receiving his and the other apostles' preaching not as the words of men but as what it truly is, “the word of God, *which is at work in you believers*” (1 Thess. 2:13, emphasis added). God's Word does work! And the faithful church member comes week in and week out to sit under that Word and to be worked upon by God's Spirit. The faithful church member is willing to be disciplined and challenged and exhorted by God's leaders as long as they speak in accordance with the Word of God, for it is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Church members also *worship*. It's very clear that the context of Acts 2 in which the early church submits to God's Word is particularly that of corporate worship. It doesn't come out in the English translation, but in verse 42, there is a definite article in front of “bread,” which is to suggest the bread they are breaking is the Lord's Supper, in distinction to a simple shared meal (as in verse 46, where the article is lacking), and the prayers they are praying are something more than “grace,” but known liturgical prayers for corporate worship. To this worship the early

church members were “devoted.” One dictionary defines the verb like this: “to continue to do something with intense effort, with the possible implication of despite difficulty.” They persevered in the worship of God, regardless of the effort it took. Is this how you would describe your relationship to worship? Are you glued to the means of grace?

The church members in Jerusalem also shared their lives together, *giving time and service* gladly to one another. Many other New Testament exhortations back up this example. Paul says we are to “live in harmony with one another” (Rom. 12:16), but we can only live in harmony together if we are first living together. This means that the fellowship that is established in corporate worship must burst beyond the walls of the sanctuary. Does it for you? Is Sunday the only day you see the members of your church? Is it the only day you are with fellow believers? That’s *formal* membership; we’re after *faithful* membership. Formal membership is not going to cut it for your spiritual stability in this world. Surround yourself with the company of Christians who are committed to serving you, and be likewise committed to serve them. When was the last time you had someone from church into your home? Or offered to take them to coffee? Or gave them a call on the phone? We need God *and* we need each other—the church is where we get both. Even more to the point, we could say that in the church we receive God’s ministry *through* others. Consider how Paul’s exhortation to the Colossian church amounts to calling them to live out Christlikeness to one another. They are to “put on” the virtues of Christ: compassion, kindness, meekness, and patience. They are to display the same forgiveness to one another that they have received through Christ. The peace in their hearts is to be nothing other than the peace of Christ. And the words of wisdom that they are to speak to each other are nothing other than the “word of Christ” dwelling in their hearts (see Col. 3:12–16). God mediates his presence to us through the words, actions, and love of our fellow church members.

A faithful church member never wants to be the final member. The church in Jerusalem is established in verse 41, but by verse 47 it’s already an entirely different church. It has proven itself a living thing that is not stagnant but ever growing, because what the people are doing there is attractive and draws others in. *Witness* and evangelism are critical aspects of belonging to a church. The church and its members are meant to be magnetic. It certainly was back then: Verse 47 simply states that the church was finding “favor with all the people.” Why? Because the world could see a genuine care that the Christians had for

themselves and for others, which was borne out of an understanding of the immense care and compassion God had for them in Christ. And on account of this, “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

MADE TO BELONG

There are people in all of our lives who are desperate for the meaning, purpose, and belonging that only the church offers. The picture found in Acts 2 is thrilling to all of us because we are all made to belong. But no other club, institution, or human organization will do. The church offers a sense of belonging that is more powerful than anything else because the belief that brings us into the church is more powerful than anything else. It’s a belief about nothing less than the purpose of life. The bonds of the church, as they are anchored in God himself, provide a stability and security that nothing else in this life can give. If we take seriously our responsibility as church members, living in the sort of ways Acts 2 describes, we will find others will be drawn in as well. Church membership should not be an embarrassment to us, nor seen as a hurdle to discipleship. Membership in the church is embedded into God’s answer, not only to our loneliness problem, but to our sin problem, reconciling us to God and to one another. Church membership is a means to live as we were created. As the world suffers under brokenness and isolation, we need, more than ever, to heed God’s call to join his church. We will all be the better for it. **NH**

The author is pastor of Community OPC in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

MEET THE JORDANS, MISSIONARIES TO URUGUAY

Editor's note: Jim and Lydia Jordan are the OPC's newest foreign missionaries. They will begin serving in Montevideo, Uruguay, this month, working alongside Stephen and Catalina Payson. Here they introduce themselves.

A SURPRISING JOY IN CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONS

James J. Jordan

I grew up in a loving family in Baltimore County, Maryland. My mother came to saving faith after marrying my father, and she raised my two brothers and me in the faith at Liberty Church (PCA). Though my father is not a believer, he has always been a devoted and supportive parent. Once when I was afraid as a young child, my mother shared the gospel with me and led me in a simple prayer of repentance and faith. God planted the seed of faith in my heart, which he nurtured through the ordinary means of grace.

My faith deepened in high school as I made a public profession of faith, joined youth group, and built friendships with other believers. My youth pastor became a mentor, providing counsel and encouragement. In this season, I began reading Scripture for myself, praying regularly, reading Christian books, and journaling.

While studying mathematics at the University of Maryland, I joined a campus ministry and attended a PCA church plant. The campus ministry staff discipled me throughout college, meeting weekly for Bible study and prayer. It was through working with this campus ministry—discipling younger students and stepping into leadership—that I discovered a deeper passion for discipleship and Bible study, although my studies were in mathematics. By graduation, I was contemplating gospel ministry, though still uncertain.

After college, I served on a summer missions trip to Mexico City—expecting it would confirm that mission work wasn't for me. To my surprise, I loved learning an-



The Jordans with children Jameson (6), Miles (3), and Scarlett (1)

other language and found joy in cross-cultural ministry. I decided to stay in Mexico for a full year, serving in youth ministry at a church which was part of the organization I was serving with. The organization then invited me to work in Miami, Florida, as a coordinator for short-term missions, and during my two years there, my sense of calling to gospel ministry grew stronger.

In 2011, I began the MDiv program at Westminster Theological Seminary while becoming involved at Calvary OPC in Glenside, Pennsylvania. Seminary deepened my understanding of God's Word and humbled me, revealing how much more I had to learn of him.

After graduating, I served an internship at Church of the Covenant OPC in Hackettstown, New Jersey, which led to a call as a pastor. I was ordained and installed on January 30, 2016. Two years later, the congregation asked me to succeed their founding pastor, Ron Pearce, upon his retirement. After several years of mentoring under Ron's guidance, the transition was completed in April 2022.

Shortly before I was ordained, an elder at Church of the

Covenant introduced me to his niece, Lydia Lipsy. We were married on August 5, 2017, and we've now been blessed with three children: Jameson, Miles, and Scarlett.

After seminary, I explored missions with the OPC but was wisely counseled by Mark Bube and Douglas Clawson to gain pastoral experience in the States first. As I settled into a fruitful ministry in Hackettstown and our family grew, missions receded from view—until April 2024, when we heard of the Richlines' departure from Uruguay. Lydia and I began praying about whether the Lord might call us to serve there. When the 2024 General Assembly called the church to prayer and fasting to raise up missionary evangelists, our hearts were stirred. We reached out to the Committee on Foreign Missions, doors opened, and by God's grace, I received a call to serve in September 2025. We are deeply grateful for the church's prayers and look forward, Lord willing, to arriving in Uruguay this month.

THE STEADFAST LOVE OF THE LORD

Lydia Jordan

I was blessed to grow up in a close, loving, and large family with parents who raised us to know and worship God and to study and follow his Word. I grew up in a conservative home and church culture, but thankfully not a legalistic one.

I can recall becoming sensitive to spiritual realities at a young age. I was struck by my older sister's experience of conviction of sin, which prompted my own awareness of my sin and need for a personal relationship with God. I experienced God's work in my heart, listened to sermons, and prayed for forgiveness and salvation, though I struggled with fear of judgment and questions of assurance of faith. In high school, I went through a period of distance from God in which I outwardly still presented as saying and doing the right things but inwardly felt rebellious and detached. God worked through a Christian conference the summer before I went to college, as well as a campus ministry while I was in college, to break through to my heart and draw me back to a committed, personal walk with God. I remained involved in the campus ministry in college and served in leadership there, forming close friendships while also professing faith at my own home church.

I completed my bachelor's and master's degrees in social work. I was interested in international ministry, so I

Visiting
Montevideo in
June 2025



took several short-term volunteer trips to Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and South Africa. Ultimately, however, I decided to stay in the States. Upon graduation I worked as a licensed clinician at drug and alcohol treatment facilities.

In the fall of 2015, I met Jim through my uncle playing matchmaker—successfully, it turns out! Jim was a pastoral intern at Church of the Covenant in Hackettstown, New Jersey, when we met, and was ordained soon after we began our relationship. As a pastor's daughter, I knew something of what being a pastor's wife would entail. I was nervous to be in that role, but by God's grace, I did not have a negative view of ministry despite its challenges. We were married in August 2017. The community at Church of the Covenant was warm and welcoming. I formed friendships and have enjoyed serving and being served there over the past eight years. God then gave us three dear children, so my time has been primarily filled with the responsibilities of motherhood.

When Jim introduced the possibility of overseas missions, I was apprehensive about such a major change. However, God has clearly answered many prayers, and I have felt the assurance of his presence. Psalm 89:1 reminds me of my faithful Savior, his steadfast love, and my response of joy and gratitude, whatever lies ahead: "I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations."



TELLING THE NEXT GENERATION

KRISTY MITCHELL

One of the greatest joys of ministry is hearing how God is working in the lives of those we serve. A favorite story of mine is from one of the elders at the church where I am a member and children's director. This elder pulled me aside when he picked up his sweet three-year-old son from Sunday school to share some of the fruit he had seen in his son that week. A few days earlier, his son had bumped his head on the playground. It was a pretty bad bump. The son was crying and trying to pull himself together. Dad, while trying to comfort him, asked, "Why did God make you so tough?" Without missing a beat, the son replied, "For his own glory." Even in a crisis, that truth he had learned in Sunday School through GCP's Show Me Jesus toddler curriculum had sunk so deeply into his little heart that it was his very first thought. His parents, along with our team at the church, were faithfully telling him of the Lord's might and the wonders the Lord has done! (Ps. 78:4)

SERVING THE CHURCH THROUGH TEACHING

Growing up as a pastor's daughter, I was always involved in ministry with my family. My parents faithfully impressed upon us the importance of serving the church as a part of our own spiritual growth. I began helping in the nursery at a young age and teaching children at around twelve. I loved seeing the children's faces each time some new truth about Jesus clicked for them.

In college, I spent my summers serving at a PCA camp in the mountains near Asheville, North Carolina. While working as a camp counselor and director, I

learned about the Lord's grace and deep love for me in a way I hadn't experienced before. The Holy Spirit took my intellectual understanding of the gospel and used the challenges of camp ministry to work it into my heart. When campers returned year after year, I got to hear how the Lord had been working in their lives. I felt that the Lord wanted me to serve children in a vocational capacity.



The author at a GCP booth

After pursuing a degree in educational ministries from Covenant Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, I taught preschool and ran a crisis pregnancy center for a few years. From 2014 to 2024, I served in local churches, leading children's ministries. Along the way, my desire to see children and students know Jesus only deepened. In these churches, we used Show Me Jesus and G2R (Genesis to Revelation) as our Sunday morning curriculum. We used So What? for our youth Bible studies. I saw the lasting impact the material had, not only on the children, but on the families and volunteers. I saw how the curriculum built upon the foundations laid in the toddler class. In our fourth and fifth grade class, students were able to understand the timeline of biblical history, and our teens learned how to

study the Bible themselves and apply it to life.

Through the children's ministry conferences I attended as a director, I got to know B.A. Snider. She

was at every children's ministry event, representing GCP and offering training and encouragement to those of us in the trenches. B.A. asked me to help run the booth at a few conferences. I learned more about the rich history of GCP and the curriculum that I had loved for so many years.

My first time at a booth, I asked B.A. what key points I should communicate to potential customers. I was

shocked when the first one she listed was that GCP is a Bible-based curriculum! I quickly discovered—sadly—in our current age, a Sunday school curriculum based on Scripture is a rarity and something that makes ours beautifully distinct.

WHAT'S NEW AT GCP

In 2024, B.A. asked me to start praying about the possibility of joining the team at GCP. The Lord was providing means for growth that the staff and the board had been prayerfully preparing for. In May 2025, I moved to Suwanee, Georgia, to work full time as the discipleship engagement coordinator, taking on many of B.A.'s marketing responsibilities to free her up to shift her focus and launch a new regional trainer program.

The regional training program allows us to reach more churches with in-person, high-quality training about GCP's curriculum. B.A. and our new trainers will provide in-person workshops on how to teach, what makes Show Me Jesus unique, and how to reach children with the gospel in an age-appropriate way. These training events can be tailored to the needs of the churches involved and reach multiple churches in a geographic area.

Since the training and marketing roles are now split, I have more time to invest in digital marketing than previously possible. We increased our presence on social media and expanded to new platforms. Moving to a new website in January extended our online reach. New customers are finding us through searches and even AI. Another exciting development is our new logo and a new look. Our team worked hard to choose something that looks updated and connects with new customers while reflecting our values and honoring our long tradition and history.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share with churches and families the curriculum and resources that I have loved for years. More than that, I am grateful to know that every Show Me Jesus and G2R lesson, every So What? Bible study for youth, every First Catechism—all point children and their teachers to Christ. The men and women who built and grew Great Commission Publications over the years have labored diligently so that we might, through the Lord's faithfulness, tell the next generation of the glorious deeds of the Lord. I am blessed to play a small role in carrying on their legacy of faith, by God's grace.

The author is discipleship engagement coordinator for Great Commission Publications.

SUFFERING UNTO GLORY

Excerpt from *New Horizons* vol. 2, no. 5 (May-June 1981) on hospitality

by Jack Smith, OP elder

One of our special ministries is the ministry to aged widows who so often seem to be left alone by their friends. One group of widows who had come for a 6:00 p.m. dinner talked among themselves until 11:45 p.m. without giving thought as to the time. They were just hungry for fellowship and recognition.

Perhaps most thrilling to us was the evening we had thirteen teenage girls for an indoor conference. We heard them pray voluntarily for over twenty-five minutes before they were interrupted by a local pastor who had been invited to come at that time. He delivered a five-minute devotional on Matt. 6:33, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." They resumed prayer after he left.

Recently, I asked the father of one of our young college graduates who had been our guest, "Give her a big hug for me." He replied that were he to do so she would think he was crazy. We do encourage both children and parents to show their love outwardly as well as inwardly. By God's grace there are three little words in a Christian vocabulary which should be used more often—"I love you."

We have been working at a planned program of Christian hospitality. Why? Because we wish to glorify God by letting our light shine before men (Matt. 5:16), to fulfill the law of Christ, to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2), to express Christian love and unity (Jn. 17:22, 23), to encourage others in the faith by sharing it (2 Pet. 3:18) and to educate each other as to what we are to be and do (Phil. 4:8, 9). To date we have hosted nearly 1600 guests.



*Jack Smith with his wife, Getty (seated), and some of their guests (from *New Horizons* vol. 2, no. 5)*

REVITALIZATION IN PITTSBURG, CA

C. STEVE MCDANIEL JR.



Delta Oaks Presbyterian is the first church to enroll in the OPC's new revitalization program.

Delta Oaks is an Orthodox Presbyterian congregation in Pittsburg, California, nestled between the hills of Mount Diablo and the Sacramento Delta. She is also the first church to participate in the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension's (CHMCE's) new revitalization program, which I direct. Delta Oaks entered the program in early 2025, and anticipates completion by mid-2026.

Church revitalization is the prayerful work of pursuing greater church health. It involves reflecting on how the Lord has worked in a church's history, recommitting to the means for growth and life that Christ has given to his body, and resolving to honor the Lord as a church presses

forward for his glory.

In Acts 15, we're told that the Apostle Paul took Silas and traveled "through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches" (Acts 15:41). He also sent trusted and faithful

leaders to strengthen churches and build them up (1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:19, 25; Col. 4:8; 1 Thess. 3:2). This is the heart of CHMCE's revitalization program. Two experienced Orthodox Presbyterian officers, usually a pastor and an elder, visit a congregation over the course of a year to a year and a half to observe, ask questions, and give the session encouragement and counsel. Our hope is the Lord will use these visits to help the churches grow in their love for Christ, their faithfulness to him, and their fruitfulness in ministry.

Delta Oaks is being visited by the team of Chris Hartshorn (regional home missionary for Southern California and Nevada) and Keith LeMahieu (ruling elder from Oostburg, Wisconsin). In the article below, Ben Ciavarella, pastor of Delta Oaks, shares more.

If you are interested in learning more about CHMCE's revitalization program, or if you are wondering if your congregation might be a good fit, please visit <https://www.chmce.org/revitalization>.



Revitalization mentors Chris Hartshorn and Keith LeMahieu

The author, associate pastor of Calvary OPC in Glenside, PA, is a member of the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension and serves as its revitalization director.

OUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE OPC'S REVITALIZATION PROGRAM

Benedict Ciavolella

For some time, our session considered whether Delta Oaks might benefit from revitalization counsel. We wanted the church to continue to grow together in Christ-likeness, “build[ing] itself up in love” (Eph. 4:16). Elders John Davis, Tony Supnet, and I were discussing a variety of approaches when we providentially heard about CHMCE’s new program through our presbytery’s home missions committee. Following some prayerful discussion, we applied through that committee.

After meeting with CHMCE’s revitalization subcommittee, we were approved for the program—much to our joy! The subcommittee then presented Keith and Chris as potential mentors, whom we wholeheartedly approved. Wasting no time, our mentors met with us remotely to learn more about the church, share some of their own experiences, and encourage us.

Our first in-person visit occurred at the end of March 2025. This included a Saturday meeting with the session over breakfast, allowing the mentors to learn more about the story of Delta Oaks—and our stories as well. Following this meeting, I took Keith and Chris on a driving tour of Pittsburg, followed by dinner at John Davis’s home with our families.

That Sunday, our mentors arrived at the church without any special introduction. We had informed the congregation that they would be coming, but we intentionally did not plan much fanfare. As best as we could, we wanted to provide an honest visitors’ experience at Delta Oaks. In the evening, Keith and Chris joined us for our weekly prayer meeting—but first, they met with our session to share their initial thoughts and encourage us. They also provided more reflection in a memo the following week.

To date, we have had one additional in-person visit in late July. This provided an opportunity for the mentors to see us in a different season and follow up from the previous visit. The July visit also included a meeting with our deacons, who shared their own insights into the life and ministry of the church. We then had a virtual meeting in November to discuss our session’s outreach ideas leading up to the end of the year. Our next in-person meeting will likely occur in late winter or early spring.

THREE REFLECTIONS

How has our experience been so far? Here are three brief reflections:

1. These visits have been deeply encouraging. We have had fresh eyes to see different aspects of the church that are working well, emboldening us to press on and not “grow weary of doing good” (Gal. 6:9). We have also received several helpful observations and suggestions that we are implementing. One could imagine a session becoming defensive or divided in a program like this, but our session has actually grown closer together. May Jesus Christ be praised!

2. Our mentors have a wealth of knowledge for us to draw upon, but they have also been kind and quick to listen. Revitalization opens a church to a season of vulnerability. It would be easy for mentors to come down from on high and dictate what a church must change. But that has not at all been our experience. Our mentors and the CHMCE have shown great deference to us. They want to help us be what God has created us to be in the time and place in which he has placed us.

3. I am grateful for the ways, formally and informally, that the Presbytery of Northern California and Nevada has supported us through this process. Much like church planting, revitalization affects more than just the local church. This has an impact on the regional church, and so it seems good for presbyteries to take an active interest in this work within their bounds.

This is an exciting season in the life of Delta Oaks Presbyterian! In pursuing revitalization, we are not looking for a simple set of strategies, nor are we interested simply in growing numbers; we are asking for God’s Spirit to work among us, renewing us through biblical means that we might become even more fit to love, serve, and share Christ.



Benedict Ciavolella, pastor of Delta Oaks

The author is pastor of Delta Oaks Presbyterian in Pittsburg, California.

THE NATIONAL DIACONAL SUMMIT

LANETTE HARRIS

Early twenty years ago, Rev. Lendall Smith and the rest of the OPC's Committee on Diaconal Ministries envisioned something the denomination had never attempted: a nationwide, in-person gathering of deacons for fellowship, mutual learning, and encouragement. Their idea was to create a place where men engaged in the complexities of diaconal work could come together, refresh one another, and grow in wisdom and strength. The first gathering, named the National Diaconal Summit, was held in 2010. Since then, three subsequent summits have deepened the bonds of unity among the OPC's diaconate.

During the last summit, held in Chicago in 2022 with nearly two hundred deacons in attendance, Rev. Bill Shishko reminded the group, "The grand, overarching, fundamental principle for diaconal leadership is that you represent the great deacon servant, Jesus Christ." This truth shapes the summit's core.

WHAT MAKES THE SUMMIT INVALUABLE

A deacon's service is a hands-on and heart-engaged calling in the church. Deacons walk with people through crises, navigate fragile family situations, and bear emotional and spiritual burdens typically unseen by the broader congregation. Most deacons serve without the opportunity to meet others in the same role beyond their local church or presbytery. The summit changes that. It brings together men who share the same joys, struggles, questions, and hopes. Summit attendee Zachary Hillegas, a deacon at Reformation OPC in Morgantown, West Virginia, reflected: "The summit opened my eyes to the blessing of being connected beyond the local church."

Deacons also come to the summit to learn. Past summits have offered a thoughtful blend of theological grounding, practical case studies, and real-life ministry challenges taught by pastors, elders, and fellow deacons. Scott Cormier, who attended the last summit and serves as a deacon at Covenant Presbyterian in New Bern, North Carolina, appreciated the "open nature of each speaker to share past difficulties and ways they found to improve." The upcoming summit will address addiction, church safety, ministry to the elderly and infirm, hospital visitation,



At the 2022 National Diaconal Summit

disability care, prison outreach, diaconal evangelism, and the integration of Word and deed.

No online format can replicate the experience of hundreds of deacons gathered in one room—singing boldly, learning intently, praying fervently, and sharing life together. A quiet warmth grows as new friendships are formed, and old ones renewed. Even the solo deacon, who may often feel isolated in his congregation, leaves with a renewed sense of strength, knowing he stands alongside more than a thousand fellow servants across the OPC.

REGISTER NOW FOR 2026

Registration is now open at opccdm.org for the next National Diaconal Summit (NDS), which will be held June 25–27 in Wheaton, Illinois. Early registrants receive lodging, meals, and materials at no cost, and we have found that many congregations joyfully assist with travel. Encouraging your deacons—whether through prayer, conversation, or practical support—may allow them to attend.

As the church prepares for NDS 2026, may we continue to strengthen the hands of those who labor in mercy, remembering that their work is a reflection of Christ's own compassionate care for his people.

The author is a contributor for the Committee on Diaconal Ministries.

PRAYER CALENDAR

FEB 2026

This prayer calendar has two entries per day of those individuals and families supported by the OPC's Worldwide Outreach, to the end that we might support them not only financially but also in prayer.

1 Pray for God's grace to shine brightly through **Travis & Bonnie Emmett**, Nakaale, Uganda, and their children as they endure sicknesses. / Home Missions general secretary **Jeremiah (Beth) Montgomery**.

2 **Matthew & Hyojung Walker**, Yorktown, VA. Pray that God would raise up officers for Peninsula Reformed Presbyterian Church. / Stated Clerk **Hank Belfield** as he begins administrative work for the next General Assembly.

3 Pray for associate missionary **Leah Hopp**, Nakaale, Uganda, and the team as they evaluate applicants for the school sponsorship program. / Pray that the Lord would raise up team members to serve on the many upcoming **OPC Short-Term Missions** trips.

4 Pray for **Bruce (Sue) Hollister**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of the Midwest. / Foreign Missions general secretary **Douglas Clawson** as he visits and encourages the Mission team in Uganda.

5 Pray for **Nate & Amy Jeffries**, West Norriton, PA. Pray for God to provide a new meeting place for Good News OPC. / US Army active military chaplains **David (Jenna) DeRienzo** and **Joshua (Stephanie) Jackson**.

6 Associate missionaries **Christopher & Chloe Verdick**, Nakaale, Uganda. Pray for Pastor Julius and his wife, Doreen, to serve with love and zeal. / Pray for **Danny Olinger**, intern director, as he visits seminaries.

7 Tentmaking missionary **Tina DeJong**, Nakaale, Uganda. Pray for the Karimojong women to grow in love for the Lord as they study the Bible. / **Andrew (Rebekah) Miller**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Central Pennsylvania.

8 Pray for **Eric (Heather) Watkins**, evangelist for Chicago, IL, and Daytona, FL. / Committee on Christian Education administrative coordinator **Judy Alexander**.

9 **Fred & Kaling Lo**, Mbale, Uganda. Pray for Fred as he prepares for spring semester lectures at Knox School of Theology. / Pray that those preparing to speak at the **National Diaconal Summit** would be equipped to present the Lord's encouragement to OPC deacons.

10 Pray for **Jim (Bonnie) Hoekstra**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Wisconsin & Minnesota. / **Mike & Jenn Kearney**, Mbale, Uganda. Pray for wisdom to strengthen current Knox School of Theology programs while exploring appropriate expansion.

11 Pray for **Brad (Cinnamon) Peppo**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Ohio. / Pray for yearlong intern **Sangwoo Kim** at Theophilus OPC in Anaheim, CA.

12 Pray for a recent graduate of **Knox School of Theology** in Mbale, Uganda, Augustino Okeny, who is now pastoring and teaching in South Sudan. / Pray for brothers and sisters suffering **persecution in Nigeria** and elsewhere, and for the Committee on Diaconal Ministries' efforts to assess and offer assistance.

13 Pray for Foreign Missions administrative coordinators **Tin Ling Lee and Joanna Grove**. / Pray for **Mike (Elizabeth) Diercks**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Ohio.



The Jeffries (day 5)



Tina DeJong (day 7)

14 **Corey & Andrea Paige**, Buda, TX. Pray for the men currently undergoing officer training at Hays County OPC. / Pray for yearlong intern **Jeremy (Hannah) Chong** at Covenant OPC in Orland Park, IL.

15 Associate missionaries **Octavius & Marie Delfils**, Haiti. Thank the Lord for six new members who recently joined the church. / Pray for yearlong intern **Drew (Monica) Tilley** at Providence OPC in Bradenton, FL.

16 Pray for **Brian (Nicole) Tsui**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Northern California & Nevada. / Pray for joyful endurance for retired missionaries **Cal & Edie Cummings, Mary Lou Son, and Brian & Dorothy Wingard**.

17 **David & Leah Vogel**, Kannapolis, NC. Pray for the members of St. John's Reformed Church to grow in love and grace. / Pray for yearlong intern **Elisha (Kara) Walker** at Reformation OPC in Grand Rapids, MI.

18 **Mr. & Mrs. M.**, Asia. Pray for peace and unity among the growing churches in Asia. / Pray for yearlong intern **Jeffrey Shirley** at South Austin Presbyterian in Austin, TX.

19 **Mr. & Mrs. F.**, Asia. Pray that the Lord opens a way for them to continue serving in their field in Asia. / Pray for Home Missions associate general secretary **Al (Laurie) Tricarico**.

20 Pray for **Mark (Peggy) Sumpter**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of the Northwest. / Pray for yearlong intern **Michael (Jessica) Xu** at Grace OPC in Columbus, OH.

21 Pray that the work of the Mobile Theological Mentoring Corps will help the **Presbyterian Church of the Reformation in Colombia** to grow in maturity. / **Mark Stumpff**, executive director of the OPC Loan Fund.

22 Pray for **Chris (Megan) Hartshorn**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Southern California. / Pray for **Heero & Anya Hacquebord**, Ukraine, as they arrange for the expansion of the church building to accommodate growing numbers.

23 **Andrew & Abby Wann**, Bluffton, SC. Pray for the Lord's blessing on the evangelism efforts of Covenant Presbyterian. / Pray for ruling elders and congregations to be uplifted by *The Ruling Elder Podcast*.

24 **Ben & Heather Hopp**, Africa and Haiti. Pray for their daughter Esther's homeschooling during the family transition from Uganda to the United States. / Office manager **Esther Parks**.

25 Pray for believers in **East Africa** to worship the Lord with joy in the midst of severe persecution. / Pray for Home Missions administrative coordinator **Lauren LaRocca**.



Jeffrey Shirley (day 18)

26 Pray for **Chris Byrd**, regional evangelist for New Jersey. / *New Horizons* editorial assistant **Diane Olinger**.

27 **Stephen & Catalina Payson**, Uruguay. Pray for Matías Blanco, who is training to be a pastor, as he exercises pastoral gifts and exhorts. / **John Fikkert**, director for the Committee on Ministerial Care.

28 Pray for **Charles (Margaret) Biggs**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic. / Pray that **Jim & Lydia Jordan**, Uruguay, and their children would have safe travels and smooth acclimation to Uruguay this month.



The Wanns (day 23)

At Redemption OPC's Women's Retreat



NEWS

WOMEN'S RETREAT IN FL

Nancy Montgomery

Redemption OPC in Gainesville, Florida, held its ninth annual women's retreat on Nov. 13–15 at Camp Weed in Live Oak, Florida. Our speaker was Emily Van Dixhoorn, and her topic was the Westminster Confession of Faith. It was a wonderful opportunity for the women to grow in their faith and deepen relationships with their sisters.

SILLA ORDAINED AT HAMDEN, CT

Richard Gerber

On December 6, 2025, Westminster OPC in Hamden, Connecticut, received her new pastor: Dominic Silla. The service of ordination and installation was led by Rev. Charles Oliveira, moderator of the Presbytery of Connecticut and Southern New York. The sermon was preached by Rev. William Snodgrass; the prayer of ordination was given by Rev. James Campbell (retired teacher at Westminster). Rev. Anthony Phelps, former pastor of Living Hope OPC in Allentown, Pennsylvania, gave the charge to the pastor. Rev. Richard Gerber, who serves on the session of Westminster, gave the charge to the congregation.

UPDATE

CHURCHES

- On November 15, **Providence OPC** in Mifflinburg, PA, withdrew from the OPC.

MINISTERS

- On November 1, **Nathan J. Marquardt**

was ordained and installed as a pastor of Jaffrey Presbyterian in Jaffrey, NH.

- On December 4, **Mark E. Richline** was installed as a pastor at Grace Fellowship OPC in Zeeland, MI.
- On December 4, **Thomas B. Brown** was installed as the pastor of Bethlehem Reformed Church in Freeman, SD.
- On December 6, **Dominic V. A. Silla** was ordained and installed as pastor of Westminster OPC in Hamden, CT.
- On December 14, the pastoral relationship between **David G. Graves** and Living Stone Fellowship in Wichita Falls, TX, was dissolved upon his resignation.

MILESTONES

- Retired OP minister **James Bosgraf**, 84, died December 23.

LETTERS

FOR ADULTS ONLY?

Editor:

Perhaps there would be fewer “partisans of paedocommunion” if the requirements in Reformed churches for the admission of covenant children to the Lord’s Supper were no more than what Dr. Strange refers to as a “testimony to their taking up in their lives that which was earlier placed upon them in baptism” (“Paedocommunion and Proper Sacramental Distinction,” Jan.). But many children encounter an additional requirement: that of adult-like maturity. Coming to the Table becomes, in effect, a coming of age transition into adult church membership. This implies that



At Silla's ordination and installation

children are incapable of making a credible profession of faith, or of active participation in the means of grace: something that thoughtful Christian parents know very well is not the case.

Nathan Trice
Matthews, NC

HOW TO RESPOND TO DOUBT

Editor:

In her review of Reeves and Wallace (Jan.), Emily Van Dixhoorn minimizes the sin of unbelief. She urges readers to see doubt—even when defined by Reeves as a firm decision or a drift towards unbelief—“not as sin needing rebuke”; “empathy” is her emphasis; “a balanced faith” is the model; “I don’t know” is the example of a powerful opener; and “judgmental” questions about personal holiness are seen as unhelpful, for “the goal is to show care, not criticism.” These broad statements are at best unclear.

While we should model Christ’s compassion, we find little evidence that Van Dixhoorn has a prominent place for the proclamation of God’s law in her framework. Making the strategic decision to avoid directly addressing sin puts one in danger of conspiring in unbelief. Is Christ’s example in rebuking Thomas (John 20:27–29) and Peter (Matt. 14:31) not to be imitated? Does Jude not tell us to snatch some out of the fire (v. 23)? In a flood of temptations to put individual feelings and self first, the comfort for doubting believers is not only that the Suffering Servant “will not break a bruised reed” (Isa. 42:3 NKJV) but also that “He will not fail nor be discouraged” (v. 4). As Calvin comments, “Christ will indeed be mild and gentle towards the weak, but he will have no softness or effeminacy; for he will manfully execute the commission which he has received from the Father.” We must call sin out for what it is as we encourage others with a single-minded, stable faith (James 1:6–8).

Eduardo Barbi
Taylors, SC

Emily Van Dixhoorn responds:

I am thankful for this further discussion

on Reeves’s brief book. Mr. Barbi and I share an appreciation for Machen and Calvin and a confidence that Christ “will not fail nor be discouraged.” But Mr. Barbi wants a more prominent place for the law and more direct discussion of sin when helping those with doubts. He sees this in Christ’s interactions with Thomas and Peter, and hears this in Jude 23, in Machen’s claim, and in Calvin’s comments. I treasure these texts and love these authors, but do they all advocate rebuke as the only safe response to doubt?

I doubt it. There is an unbelief that calls for rebuke. But (without effeminacy) Jesus is gentle with doubters, arguably even in the passages Mr. Barbi cites, and especially when dealing with the doubting father in Mark 9:23–27. What is more, while Mr. Barbi cites Jude 23, the sentence begins in verse 22 with the words, “have mercy on those who doubt.” This is what Reeves commends, and I look forward to her full-length book soon to be published by P&R.

SUFFERING IN FAITH

Editor:

I greatly appreciated Judith Dinsmore’s article “Learning from the Saints” (Jan.) and the encouragement to bless others out of our own sufferings and to bless others in their sufferings. The jewel of the article shines in the quotes from Richard Gaffin’s article, “The Usefulness of the Cross,” in which it was made gloriously clear that the sufferings of believers in this present world become a blessed “participation in the life and power of [our] Savior.”

Mary Brown
Nunn, CO

REVIEWS

Lamentations: How Christ Lifts the Burden of Sin and Sorrow, by Jonathan Gibson. New Growth, 2025. Paperback, 80 pages, \$16.99. Reviewed by OP pastor Zachary R. Keele.

Unpleasant but necessary, like medicine or a dentist visit, so is lamenting. Mourning

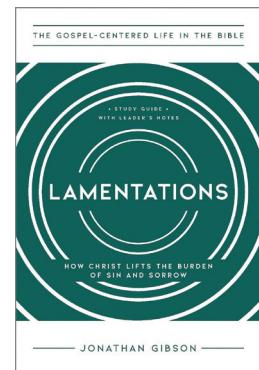
tragedies and evils fall under a spiritual discipline, and the new book by Jonathan Gibson aims to provide growth in this arena. *Lamentations: How Christ Lifts the Burden of Sin and Sorrow* is a Bible study through the book of Lamentations. In this terse and handy volume, Dr. Gibson leads us through Lamentations by six lessons. In the introduction, he sets forth the historical context for the book. Lesson 1 aptly shows the purpose and reason for the book by linking in 2 Kings and Deuteronomy. Lessons 2–6 walk through the five chapters of Lamentations. Each lesson follows the same sixfold

pattern (4–5).

The lessons are designed to take about an hour, and each segment has a minute guide. The study group is to read the Scripture passage aloud

and then discuss its ideas and their reaction to the text. In the exercises, Dr. Gibson encourages individuals in the group to write out personal laments, prayers, and self-assessments. In a final chapter, he supplies advice for the leader to help them with the study. Thus, this book is a ready-made small-group Bible study that is easy to use.

In addition to its excellent accessibility, the refined gold of this volume is that Dr. Gibson gets the main message of Lamentations correct. He reiterates that Jerusalem’s suffering was not the unknown troubles of Job, but they were punished for their sin, for breaking God’s covenant. The terrors of the Lord’s wrath on Jerusalem signaled the ultimate curse for sin, which chiefly points us to Christ and his death upon the cross. As he writes, “Jerusalem’s hellish experience ... was Jesus’s hell experience” (34). In every lesson, the author points us to how Jesus suffered and lamented for our



sin. He teaches us to lament by showing Christ's lamentation for us and with us. This superb truth makes the whole study gospel-centered with a gospel tone.

The other stand out strength of this study is that the author instructs us on how to lament. Since lamenting is not a widespread virtue, he helps us to grow in the wisdom of lamentation. Dr. Gibson does this by teaching us about biblical lamentation and encouraging us to practice lamenting (even by writing them out). Dr. Gibson naturally and capably demonstrates how the gospel foundation shapes our lived-out faith.

Two quibbles, though, are worth mentioning. One, the writing style suffers a bit from the hyperbolic style of the internet; he uses *always*, *all*, and *never* too frequently and often in places that are far from convincing. The second is more of an unintended consequence. In each lesson, you read the chapter of Lamentations and are told to discuss your response to it. Yet, the author provides little to no commentary on the text. This comes across as a reader-response technique. Surely the author did not intend this, but it seems unavoidable at some point. Gibson admits that Lamentations is a challenging book, but the group is told to respond to its difficulties, without exegetical help. A few more textual notes would strengthen this study. Notwithstanding these quibbles, this book would make a fine Bible study, and it would be easy to implement in your congregation.

Faith in Exile: Psalm 119 and the Christian Life, by David VanDrunen. Christian Focus, 2025. Paperback, 160 pages, \$12.99. Reviewed by OP pastor Andrew J. Miller.

If your enthusiasm for God's Word wanes, read Psalm 119. This was Hywel Jones's advice to me and other students in his pastoral ministry class at seminary. At that time, I found reading Psalm 119 discouraging: Even as a seminary student who loved God's Word and wanted to preach it,

I knew I fell short of the zeal and lifestyle expressed there. Thankfully, I grew to see that Psalm 119 reveals a love for God and his Word that acknowledges personal shortcomings. It expresses faith seeking understanding, like the cry of Mark 9:24, "I believe; help my unbelief." Psalm 119 ends this way: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant" (Ps. 119:176).

David VanDrunen's new work, *Faith in Exile: Psalm 119 and the Christian Life*, hits these same notes, explaining "the Great Psalm" as "a coherent, logically organized, Christ-centered poem written by a godly and brilliant poet" (9). Although VanDrunen's professorial field is systematic theology rather than biblical studies, a pastor's heart shines through this collection of sermons going through Psalm 119 two stanzas at a time. I would venture to say that this work showcases what draws so many to OPC pews: rigorous study put in a simple and winsome format, pointing to Christ and applied to the hearts and situations of God's people.

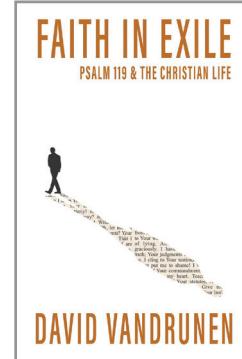
The title *Faith in Exile* gives away that VanDrunen sees the author of Psalm 119 as a sojourner, possibly one of the Babylonian exiles (93–94). This provides a clear bridge to our situation as exiles (1 Pet. 1:1; Phil. 3; Heb. 13). While older commentators like Calvin attribute the psalm to David, the Bible does not identify its author, making all such identifications speculative. However,

VanDrunen notes "some features of Psalm 119 suggest that a king of Israel, someone in the line of David, may have written it" (18). The fact that Psalm 119 does not reference "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" or

"the exodus from Egypt, the covenants, the temple in Jerusalem, or the throne of David" (14) lends further credence to an exilic setting and non-David authorship. Of course, David himself experienced a kind of exile too, first on the run from Saul and later from Absalom. So even if one prefers a Davidic, pre-exilic background for Psalm 119, there is much here to appreciate. For example, here VanDrunen offers warm pastoral counsel: "Take heart that you will not be sojourners forever. You are citizens of heaven now and one day you will be residents too. You walk by faith now but soon you will walk by sight" (36).

Perhaps the most striking difficulty in explaining Psalm 119 is its structure: It is challenging to perceive a coherent flow. Part of this may be the nature of acrostic poems, and VanDrunen suggests that the psalmist "repeatedly circles back to many of the same themes ... to mirror the spiritual life of a sojourner" (51). Our lives feature the interpenetration of joy and pain, just as this Psalm is viewed as a lament even though at points it erupts in effusive praise for God's Word (see 74).

Faith in Exile is not a commentary on Psalm 119 and so does not touch on every question raised by it. One can only cover so much in a sermon. However, the book lives up to its subtitle: It well applies Psalm 119 to the Christian life. It should be a welcome addition to your bookshelves.



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