

Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism. By Jonathan Leeman. Nashville, TN: B&H, 2016, 200 pp., \$24.99, softcover. ISBN 9781433686238.

Review by Jeremy S. Darden, Ph.D.

[Editor's note: For clarification, it appears that Leeman uses the term *elder* as synonymous with *pastor*.]

Jonathan Leeman earned his M. Div. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. from the University of Wales. He currently serves as the editorial director at 9Marks, as one of the elders at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, and as a periodic lecturer at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as well as at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Leeman discusses the book's purposes in the introduction. He remarks, "[d]escribing the balance between congregational rule and elder leadership all under the Lordship of Christ is one of the goals of this book" (12). He also states that he wants "to offer practical guidance for healthy congregationalism in the life of a local church" (5). In addition to stating the aims of the work, he comments on the tone of the text as well. He observes, "[t]o accomplish the first purpose I have written what might be called an academic book. There are a few places where the prose is dense. . . . But the second purpose means that I will occasionally use illustrations that may feel more pastoral than academic, particularly in the latter chapters" (5-6). The reviewer definitely finds Leeman's statements about the book's nature to be accurate.

In chapter one, the author describes "how an institutional hermeneutic works so that we might better ascertain what's normative and what's not for polity from the pages of Scripture" (17). After defining an institution, he provides "five rules for an institutional hermeneutic" (19). These discussions are complex but helpful (19).

Leeman explains the relationship between Adam's duties and a church member's duties in chapter two. He asserts, "[t]he office of priest-king given to the federal head or Everyman Adam, which involved *working* and *watching over* the place where God dwelled, was further specified in the life of Israel, fulfilled in Christ, and has now been re-conferred on every member of the church" (36). While the author's premise is intriguing, some of his supporting evidence proves questionable, particularly his claim that Adam was responsible for protecting the Garden from Satan (38).

Leeman elucidates how Christians are to perform the aforementioned tasks in chapter three. He says, "[h]aving recommissioned members of the new covenant as priest-kings, Jesus gives all believers, when gathered as congregations, the authority to administer their priestly and kingly duties with the keys of the kingdom" (67). Through the keys, congregations control their membership and their statement of faith (78).

The author asserts "that Jesus places the keys into the hands of a gathered congregation" in chapter four (86). Matthew 18:17-18 are crucial verses in this argument. Leeman claims, "[w]ith these two verses, Jesus authorizes the entire assembly to wield the keys of the kingdom" (100). Because the entire assembly is involved, he contends that multi-service and multi-site churches really do not exist (100, 118).

In chapter five, Leeman outlines "the relationship between elder authority and congregational authority and their respective jurisdictions" (124). He provides excellent

practical information regarding the areas of responsibility for each group. He notes, “[t]he elders *lead* in the day-to-day life of the church, while the congregation possesses the final *rule* over its decisions and activities” (124-25). This chapter is perhaps the most beneficial section of the book.

Leeman states that he has two purposes for chapter six. He wants “to offer a brief critique of the connectionalist reading of Acts 15 and to offer a congregationalist vision of the interdependence of congregations” (153). He supplies additional valuable tips in this chapter, such as how churches should pray for other churches (165).

Leeman closes the book by presenting “a fuller picture of a congregational church getting to work, and what it might do both to cultivate the right culture and to implement the right structures” (172). He discusses the importance of items such as “expositional preaching” (175), “a biblical understanding of conversion” (177), and “a biblical understanding of discipleship and growth” (180). Once again, he provides excellent practical information for the reader.

Don't Fire Your Church Members is a good book on congregationalism for pastors and seminary students. Although the reviewer questions the validity of Leeman's key hypothesis regarding the connection between Adam and Christians, the work provides the reader with much helpful information. Leeman's explanations of jurisdiction and disposition in chapter five are outstanding, and every pastor could profit from teaching these principles to his congregation. Because of the practical aspects of the text, the reviewer recommends this book to ministers interested in learning more about congregationalism.