

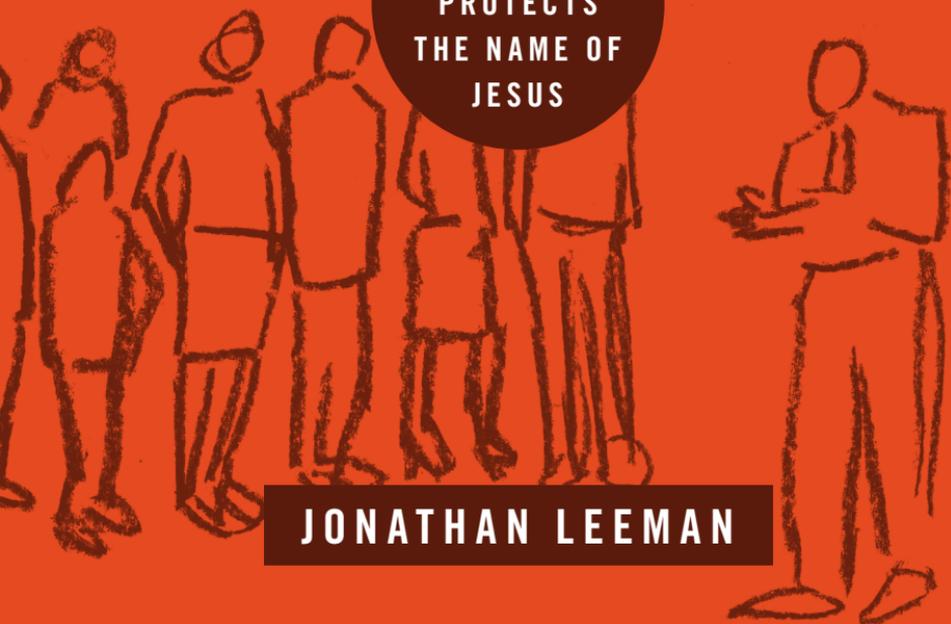
**IX** 9Marks

BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

# CHURCH DISCIPLINE

HOW  
THE CHURCH  
PROTECTS  
THE NAME OF  
JESUS

JONATHAN LEEMAN



“Leeman airs the dirty laundry of our lives and talks about how to clean it up. He ventures into the tough area of pastoral application, which is sure to rouse good discussions, but again and again I found myself convinced. You will not fail to be helped by this book. Brief and biblical, wise and practical—this is the book on church discipline we’ve been looking for.”

**Mark Dever**, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,  
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“Far too few biblically grounded, pastorally sensitive books on church discipline remain in print today. I know of none that is exegetically accurate, practically relevant, and filled with real-life case studies of how churches should deal with a wide variety of common situations. On top of all this, Leeman is helpfully succinct and remarkably clear. Highly recommended!”

**Craig Blomberg**, Distinguished Professor of New Testament,  
Denver Seminary

“This book is an outstanding, one-of-a-kind theological work. Leeman has shown that church discipline is an essential dimension of the disciple-making process, and thus an extension of the preaching of the gospel itself. He shows that our overly-narrow focus on the ‘number of decisions’ might actually be hindering us from guiding people in the repentance that leads to life. I believe this will be the definitive work on church discipline, and our elders plan to use this work as our guide.”

**J. D. Greear**, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham,  
North Carolina

“One of the most neglected activities in the church today is the ministry of loving, courageous, and redemptive church discipline. This book provides a clear vision and practical guidelines for this vital aspect of life together in the body of Christ. I have seen many people freed from entangling sin by churches that lived out these principles, and I pray that more and more churches will recommit themselves to this restorative ministry.”

**Ken Sande**, President, Peacemaker Ministries

“Jonathan Leeman has become a discerning reader of the contemporary church. He combines biblical truth with sage counsel in this much-needed book on church discipline. If you’ve been afraid of that subject in your church, or unsure of how to lovingly correct sinning saints, this book provides the biblical argument and practical advice you need to get started well. This book will fire your imagination, stir your soul, and light your path.”

**Thabiti Anyabwile**, Pastor, Anacostia River Church, Washington, DC;  
author, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*

“Many different ideas enter the minds of Christians when they hear the words ‘church discipline’—punishment, judgment, critical, unloving, excommunication. Jonathan Leeman sets the record straight by explaining what Jesus meant when he first introduced this concept of spiritual accountability. Leeman explains the purpose of church discipline and why it is necessary. The case studies illustrating situations requiring church discipline are worth the price of the book!”

**J. Carl Laney**, Professor of Biblical Literature, Western Seminary;  
author, *A Guide to Church Discipline*

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BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

# CHURCH DISCIPLINE

HOW  
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THE NAME OF  
JESUS

JONATHAN LEEMAN

 **CROSSWAY**

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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# SERIES PREFACE

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church like Jesus loves your church.

9Marks plans to produce a short, readable book on each of what we call the nine marks of a healthy church, plus one more on sound doctrine. Watch for books on expositional preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, and church leadership.

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations. We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with

*Series Preface*

God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,  
Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman  
Series editors

# PREFACE

## *A Tale of Two Gospels*

Which “gospel” do you believe in?

Your answer to that question will have a direct bearing on what you think about church discipline. Therefore, it’s worth making sure we are talking about the same gospel before we talk about anything else.

Here are two subtly different versions of the gospel. The first one will probably shut down any talk about church discipline. The second one will start the conversation.

**Gospel 1:** God is holy. We have all sinned, separating us from God. But God sent his Son to die on the cross and rise again so that we might be forgiven. Everyone who believes in Jesus can have eternal life. We’re not justified by works. We’re justified by faith alone. The gospel therefore calls all people to “just believe!” An unconditionally loving God will take you as you are.

**Gospel 2:** God is holy. We have all sinned, separating us from God. But God sent his Son to die on the cross and rise again so that we might be forgiven and begin to follow the Son as King and Lord. Anyone who repents and believes can have eternal life, a life which begins today and stretches into eternity. We’re not justified by works. We’re justified by faith alone, but the

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faith which works is never alone. The gospel therefore calls all people to “repent and believe.” A contraconditionally loving God will take you contrary to what you deserve, and then enable you by the power of the Spirit to become holy and obedient like his Son. By reconciling you to himself, God also reconciles you to his family, the church, and enables you as his people to represent together his own holy character and triune glory.

So what do you think? Which of these two gospels better characterizes what you believe the Bible teaches?

The first version emphasizes Christ as Savior. The second version emphasizes Christ as Savior and Lord.

The first version points to Christ’s new covenant work of forgiveness. The second version includes both this and the Spirit’s new covenant work of regeneration.

The first version points to the new status that Christians have as children of God. The second version includes both the new status and the new job description that Christians are given as citizens of Christ’s kingdom.

The first version points to a Christian’s reconciliation with Christ. The second version points to a Christian’s reconciliation with Christ and Christ’s people.

If your understanding of the gospel stops with the first version, you will not have much use for the topic of church discipline, or for this book. But if you embrace the second one, then there is a longer conversation to have. Aside from being an explicit biblical mandate, church discipline is an implication of the second version.

Everything affirmed in the first version is true, but there’s more to say. Left to itself it tends to yield a belief in cheap

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grace. The second version, I believe, is a more robust account of the biblical gospel, and is more likely to lead to an understanding of the kind of grace that calls Christians to take up their crosses and follow Jesus in holy mission.

### **TWO RESPONSES TO CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

My guess is that many church leaders over the last century would have affirmed the additional elements of gospel 2, at least if they were filling in test answer-sheet bubbles with a no. 2 pencil. But that's not what they have preached from the pulpit. It's not what they have said to Mr. and Mrs. Jones when they've brought six-year-old Johnny to their office and asked for him to be baptized.

Church leaders want to reach outsiders, but this good desire produces a bad temptation—to slim down the gospel to something skinnier. It's comparatively easy to talk about God's grace, unconditional love, and faith. It's harder to talk about God's holiness, Christ's lordship, a Spirit-given repentance, and the new covenant reality of the church. All of these things make demands on a person. They produce the need for accountability. And when you build a church on a gospel that makes few demands and offers little accountability, church discipline just doesn't make sense.

Picture a congregation that has been weaned on the spiritual milk of "just believe" and "unconditional love." Suppose you tell this congregation that it should consider excommunicating little Johnny because he is no longer six but twenty, and has not darkened the door of a church building since graduating from high school two years ago. Not only will you

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confuse that congregation, you will be running smack dab against its understanding of Christianity, like veering a car into oncoming traffic.

“You’re judgmental.”

“Why would an unconditionally loving God discipline anyone?”

“That sounds like legalism. We’re saved by faith, not by works!”

“Once saved, always saved.”

In other words, you will get run over.

But now picture a different congregation, one whose leaders have taught the members the gospel using the whole counsel of God. These members have been asked to count the cost of following Jesus from before they made professions of faith. They have heard that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in Spirit, the pure in heart, the peacemakers (Matt. 5:4–9). They have heard that the heavenly Father will cut off every branch of Christ’s vine that bears no fruit because the real gospel actually changes people (John 15:2). They have heard about the difference between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow: One looks like feeling sorry for yourself. The other looks like eagerness, indignation, fear, longing, and zeal (2 Cor. 7:10–11).

The second congregation is more likely to understand that God the Son really unites people to himself and to his family for life and growth. It will understand that God the Spirit really creates a whole new existence inside of people—that true Christians change. Tell these members that twenty-year-old Johnny has been absent for two years. They won’t

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shrug their shoulders and sigh, “Once saved always saved,” and get on with their work of singing praise songs. They will get on the phone and try to find Johnny, ask him for lunch plans, see how he’s doing. They will call him to account for his claim to be a Christian. They might even, as a last-ditch effort to help him, excommunicate him. They love him too much not to. They love his non-Christian friends and colleagues too much not to.

### **SALT AND LIGHT**

It is God’s Word that gives life to the spiritually dead, but God means for his Word to be set against the backdrop of transformed lives. Transformed lives make a church’s witness vivid and provocative. The world doesn’t need a Christianized shadow of itself. It needs something full of light and flavor, something distinct.

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:13–16)

Salt is useful because it’s distinct. Light is attractive to those standing in the dark because it’s . . . not the dark.



# INTRODUCTION

## *A Framework for Discipline*

The main purpose of this book is not to persuade you about church discipline. It's to help the already-persuaded know how and when to practice it. Along these lines, it's important to see how the gospel of Jesus Christ gives us a theological framework for approaching church discipline. Church discipline, both formative and corrective, is an implication of the gospel. We will better understand how to approach it practically if we move *through the gospel* to get there.

That means my approach to the topic of church discipline is a little different than others have taken. Writers on church discipline from past centuries sometimes made lists from the Bible of which sins warrant church discipline. The idea was to give church leaders a basic guide for checking their own pastoral crises against.

Works on discipline from writers in our own day typically walk readers through the steps Jesus laid out in Matthew 18:15–20. They explain how to approach the sinner in private, then with two or three, then with the church. They pay less attention to different kinds of sin, and the widening-circle approach of Matthew 18 is treated as the catch-all.

There's much to commend both of these approaches, but

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my method is a little different. I hope to establish a theological framework that accounts for the variety of approaches that the scriptural authors themselves take. For instance, Paul has a different approach in 1 Corinthians 5 than Jesus does in Matthew 18. Paul simply tells the church to exclude the sinner with no mention of first giving a warning. Why? Some writers have said that it's because the sin is "publicly scandalous." But that would seem to make the church's decision about who belongs to the kingdom of heaven depend on the evolving moral standards of society, which strikes me as strange. Is there not a theological connection between Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5? I believe that there is, and we find it by considering church discipline in light of the gospel.

A theological-framework approach also helps leaders face up to the endless variety of circumstances and sins for which no exact scriptural case study exists—sins that don't show up on any list. If you have spent any amount of time as a pastor (or as a human), you know that sinners (like you and me) are endlessly creative. People don't always follow recipes when they cook up their sin; each pot of yuck is homemade and tastes a little different. My goal in part 1, therefore, is to establish a theological framework that helps church leaders approach the many different situations they find themselves facing.

### **TOUGH QUESTIONS**

We at 9Marks receive a variety of church discipline questions from pastors seeking counsel. Here are a few that have recently rolled through my e-mail inbox:

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- Can you discipline a nonmember?
- What should we do if one of our members completely abandons the faith and stops calling himself a Christian?
- Should a church accept the resignation of someone who is in unrepentant sin?
- After the church excommunicates someone, what should we do if another member refuses to disassociate from the excommunicated individual?
- Should we eat Thanksgiving dinner with a family member who has been disciplined?
- Does allowing a disciplined individual to continue attending church services eviscerate the act of discipline?
- What should we do about a longtime attending nonmember who's being divisive?
- What about a long-standing member who never attends and who's being divisive?
- Is pursuing marriage with a non-Christian a disciplinable offense?
- Is gluttony a disciplinable offense?
- Is anorexia or bulimia a disciplinable offense?
- Is believing the New Perspective on Paul a disciplinable offense?
- Are there different "levels" of discipline? Should a church respond to unrepentant adultery the same way it responds to habitual nonattendance?
- Should the church discipline teenage members who commit serious sin?
- At what point is it necessary to discipline a pastor? And who should lead that process?
- What are some specific guidelines for how church members should interact with a person who's been disciplined?
- With more serious and public sins, is it appropriate to

## *Introduction*

require someone to confess their sin before the whole church as proof of their repentance?

- When do we welcome an excommunicated individual back into fellowship? And how?

Getting a good theological framework in place helps to answer these questions, and more.

Admittedly, these questions are straightforward and limited in their scope. Real life often gets more difficult when you begin to peel back the multiple layers of sin and circumstance. What about the man who effectively cheats his clients out of their money without breaking any laws, goes bankrupt, gets sued by those clients, says he's repentant, but shows little interest in doing the difficult work of paying back those clients, since the money is gone and he doesn't want to spend the next ten years of his life making sacrifices?

What about the single mother of three children from three different men, all born out of wedlock, who is now pregnant with a fourth child from another man, and who breaks down in tears in the pastor's office? Does how hard she's crying tell you if she's really repentant?

What about the alcoholic who has several bad months, several good months, and then gets arrested on charges of public drunkenness? How much worse is the sin if there was an altercation with a police officer? Then again, what if this most recent incident was prompted by losing his job, or his wife separating from him? Should we be more lenient?

Here's a situation a church elder whom I've never met

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asked me about on the telephone: a man's wife was unfaithful with another woman; he proceeded to divorce her even though she wanted the marriage to work; he then had several affairs of his own both before the divorce and after; and all of this was coming to light now, two years later, in the midst of the man's engagement to the senior pastor's daughter. What would you have said?

My best answer is often, "I have no idea, but I'll pray for you."

Beyond that, I use a theological framework for assessing a situation. My goal in part 1 of this book is to explain that framework to help you approach the variety of situations that arise in your church.

### **FUNDAMENTALIST RELIGION VS. GOSPEL WISDOM**

So often in life it would be nice to have a rule book that made everything black and white: "When faced with *this*, do *that*." If you are a parent or a pastor, I expect you know exactly what I mean.

Knowing when and how to respond to the sin of fellow believers is the same way: "Can anyone tell me for certain whether now is the time to say something to Bob, or should I continue biting my tongue?"

Fundamentalist religion, in its more abrasive forms, seems to be motivated by this desire for clarity. It wants black-and-whites in places where the Bible is silent. It demands certainty where none is offered.

Why would God ever leave things unclear? My guess is that, among other things, he means for us to cry out for wisdom, because crying out for wisdom requires naturally

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self-sufficient people like us to lean on him. All those gray areas in life function as training grounds for trust.

That said, God's Word does provide us with the broad guidelines, or framework. Our task is to understand that framework and then sensitively apply it from one situation to another, always walking in trust, always asking for wisdom. That's what part 2 of this book represents. It's not a fundamentalist's book of case law: "When faced with *this*, do *that*." Rather, it's my attempt to demonstrate how the basic framework might apply in various kinds of scenarios so that you get a better idea of what the process looks like. The decisions made do not represent the "final word." They represent my or other pastors' best attempts at applying gospel wisdom. They also allow me to use more situational nuance than the principle-establishing chapters in part 1 allow for.

As with several of the illustrations above, I have created these "case studies" using elements out of real life situations I have been involved with or at least heard about. In all of them, I have altered the details in various ways.

Part 3 rounds out the book by offering advice on leading your church toward practicing formal church discipline: what do you need to teach your congregation and what structures do you need to get in place.

### **SHOULD WE PRACTICE DISCIPLINE?**

Should your church practice church discipline? Yes. First of all, church discipline is loving. It shows

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- love for the individual, that he or she might be warned and brought to repentance;
- love for the church, that weaker sheep might be protected;
- love for the watching world, that it might see Christ's transforming power;
- love for Christ, that churches might uphold his holy name and obey him.

By abstaining from discipline, on the other hand, we claim that we love better than God loves. God, after all, “disciplines those he loves,” and “he punishes everyone he accepts as a son” (Heb. 12:6, NIV).

He knows that discipline yields life, growth, and health: “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness” (Heb. 12:10, NIV).

Yes, it's painful, but it pays off: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:11, NIV). Can you see the rolling fields of righteousness and peace? That's the promise God gives us.

So love should motivate all of a church's discipline. Do you love? Then discipline. Discipline is not a word the culture understands, and the movement from love to discipline is certainly not something the culture understands. But this is what the Bible teaches. Do you think it's true?

More concretely, churches should practice discipline because

- it's biblical;
- it's an implication of the gospel;
- it promotes the health of the church;

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- it clarifies and burnishes the church's witness before the nations;
- it warns sinners of an even greater judgment to come;
- (most importantly) it protects the name and reputation of Jesus Christ on earth.

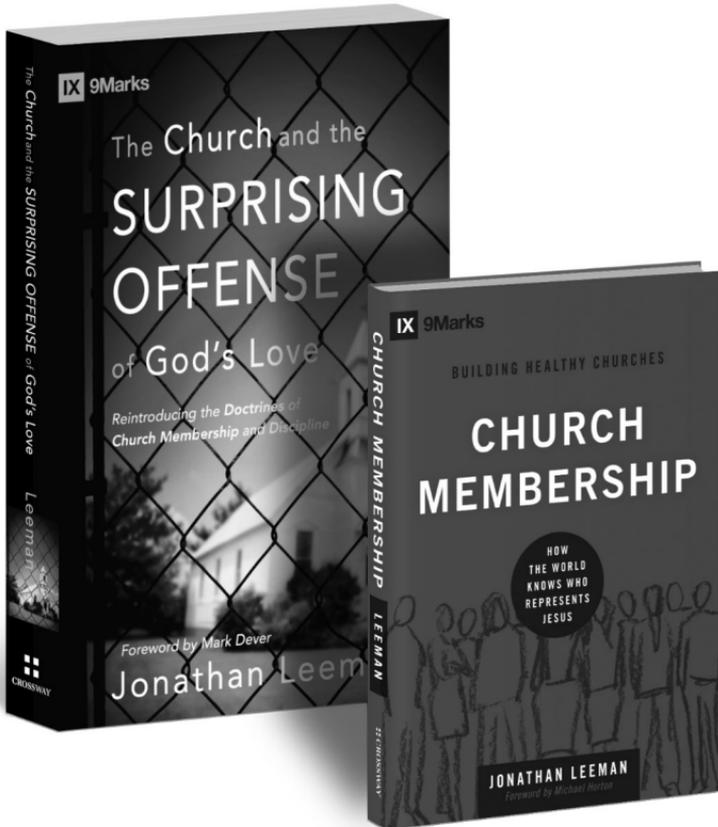
Jesus has attached his name to the church. He has staked his reputation on us. Strange, isn't it? Now, the whole matter does not finally rest on our shoulders. He has proven through the life of Old Testament Israel that he will do whatever it takes to protect his name. Still, he gives our churches a job to do: to care for his name and reputation before the nations. Like it or not, the world will draw its conclusions about him based on us.

Church discipline, fundamentally, is about making sure that Jesus's representatives on earth represent Jesus and not someone else.

If you need more persuasion to practice discipline in your church, I recommend chapter 7 of Mark Dever's *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. Other good books on the topic include *The Transforming Community* by Mark Lauderbach, *Walking Together* by Wyman Richardson, *Love that Rescues* by Eric Bargerhuff, and Jay Adam's now classic *Handbook of Church Discipline*. You'll also find a number of shorter articles at [www.9Marks.org](http://www.9Marks.org).

I also hope the overall framework of the following few chapters is persuasive. It should point to a picture of Jesus's people learning to look like Jesus, precisely so that the nations would marvel.

BE SURE TO CHECK OUT THESE OTHER  
BOOKS BY **JONATHAN LEEMAN**



## CHURCH DISCIPLINE IS ESSENTIAL TO BUILDING A HEALTHY CHURCH.

So how exactly do we practice church discipline?

Jonathan Leeman helps us face the endless variety of circumstances and sins for which no scriptural case study exists, sins that don't show up on any list and need a biblical framework to be corrected appropriately in love.

Here is a contemporary and concise how-to guide that provides a theological framework for understanding and implementing disciplinary measures in the local church, along with several examples of real-life situations and the corresponding responses.

“Leeman combines biblical truth with sage counsel in this much-needed book on church discipline. If you've been afraid of that subject in your church, or unsure of how to lovingly correct sinning saints, this book provides the biblical argument and practical advice you need to get started well.”

**THABITI ANYABWILE**, Pastor, Anacostia River Church, Washington, DC; author, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*

“Exegetically accurate, practically relevant, and filled with real-life case studies of how churches should deal with a wide variety of situations. Highly recommended!”

**CRAIG BLOMBERG**, Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary

“This book is an outstanding, one-of-a-kind theological work. I believe this will be the definitive work on church discipline, and our elders plan to use this work as our guide.”

**J. D. GREAR**, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina

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