



Volume 60 | Issue 1

Article 29

4-28-2017

Leeman's "Don't fire your church members: The case for congregationalism" (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Tubbs, Mark (2017) "Leeman's "Don't fire your church members: The case for congregationalism" (Book Review)," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 60 : Iss. 1 , Article 29.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol60/iss1/29>

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Leeman, J. (2016). *Don't fire your church members: The case for congregationalism*. Nashville, TN: B & H Academic. 240 pages. \$24.99. ISBN 9781433686238.

The past thirty years have seen a handful of publications titled via negative imperative, including “Don’t Waste Your Life” and “Don’t Waste Your Cancer,” both by John Piper, and “Don’t Waste Your Sports” by C.J. Mahaney. A decade before Piper’s first volume, Paul Bilheimer wrote “Don’t Waste Your Sorrows,” a guide to growing closer to God in the midst of adversity. Secular publishing has contributed titles such as 2001’s “Don’t Waste Your Talent,” 2014’s “Don’t Waste Your Pretty,” and there is even a series of self-described “opinionated” hiking guides leading with the negative imperative “Don’t Waste Your Time.”

I mention these titles at length because titles are important; they clue in prospective readers to a book’s audience, tone, and reading level (I did note that the publisher has “Academic” in its imprint name). As clever as the negative imperative of Jonathan Leeman’s title “Don’t Fire Your Church Members” is, the more that I read the book the more I felt the book is mistitled. Its subtitle is “the Case for Congregationalism,” and it makes this case for this type of polity quite well (take it from a former Baptist). This is not Leeman’s first congregationalism rodeo; he has also written or contributed to 2010’s *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love* (Crossway), 2015’s *Baptist Foundations* (B & H), and 2016’s *Political Church* (IVP). Leeman is an analytical and penetrating thinker who approaches congregationalism as one would a diamond, examining this model of church governance in a prismatic and compelling way. But it’s a shame about the central, titular conceit, what with its adamant argument that any polity other than congregationalism effectively “fires” its church members from doing their God-given jobs as priest-kings covenantally from Adam. I attend a non-congregational church, and no one has fired anybody. There is more lay participation there than any congregational church I have ever attended.

If there is any other weakness to this book despite its punchy and non-academic titling, it is in the machine-gun deployment of footnote superscript in the chapter grounding the biblical basis for congregationalism in the creation mandate. The chapter would have been tidier had Leeman acknowledged his intellectual debts up front by author and title, sparing the reader the proliferation of superscript and footnoting. At the same time, I’m encouraged that thematic, typological, and covenantal readings of Scripture are becoming common currency in evangelical theology.

Reviewer

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