

Mathis, David. *Workers for Your Joy: The Call of Christ on Christian Leaders*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2022. 260pp. + 80pp. (back matter).

Many books on pastoral shepherding emerge each calendar year. Puritan reprints are golden and timeless. Well-known pastors today contribute helpful options as well. But every once in a while an exceptional and refreshing volume is released that quickly presses down a deep footprint within the vast landscape of pastoral literature. It is my opinion that David Mathis' *Workers for Your Joy* is Exhibit A for 2022.¹ As a pastor himself, entering his fifth decade of life, he brings to this book a shepherd's DNA, a professor's burden, a fine-tuned pen, and the smell of sheep.² His close proximity to and relationship with Dr. John Piper for twenty years also reveals itself from cover to cover. In his own words, "John Piper . . . has been to me pastor, father, teacher, and friend. I quote John a lot in this book. His influence . . . is hidden, if not conspicuous, on just about every page" (263).

David grew up during the 80s and 90s in Spartanburg, SC, and graduated from Furman University. He continued his education at The Bethlehem Institute (now Bethlehem College and Seminary) and Reformed Theological Seminary. He moved to Minneapolis in 2003 to serve in the college ministry of Bethlehem Baptist Church, and he has remained in the Twin Cities since then as a professor at BCS, executive editor of *desiringGod.org*, and pastor at Cities Church. His burden for accessible theology, practical discipleship, and the health of the local church are demonstrated in his previous three books: *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines*, *The Christmas We Didn't Expect*, and *How to Stay Christian in Seminary*. His many articles at *desiringGod.org* and chapter contributions to other solid books reveal these passions as well.

Mathis states his goal for *Workers for Your Joy* on page 16: "Christian leadership exists for the joy of the church. Such a vision may turn some of our churches upside down, first for the pastors and then for the people. That's the vision I hope to impart, and linger in, in this book." While he faithfully takes aim at the NT office of elder/pastor/overseer as well as the local congregation, he is also careful to discuss the nuances of vocational and non-vocational occupants of the NT office (161n2). Throughout the book he graciously reiterates his conviction for a plurality of elders for each congregation (e.g., 25n2; 269–81). He is constantly aware that future/potential elders are reading this book as well, not just current elders.

I appreciate Mathis' organization of his book which, he observes, seems to correspond with the "mysterious power of three" (18). His focus is on the fifteen elder qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, arranged under three axes:

1. Humbled (chs. 1–4): The man before his God (i.e., his devotional life).
2. Whole (chs. 5–9): The man before those who know him best (i.e., his private life).

¹ It is interesting to note that The Gospel Coalition awarded *Workers for Your Joy* the Award of Distinction for Ministry Books in 2022. "The Gospel Coalition 2022 Book Awards," December 5, 2022; accessed 27 December 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/tgc-book-awards-2022>.

² Mathis explains on pages 35–36 that the terms *pastor*, *elder*, and *overseer* are interchangeable, referring to the same NT office. Although he seems to default to the term *elder*, I am taking the freedom in this review to employ all three terms as well as the word *shepherd* to refer to the same office.

3. Honorable (chs. 10–15): The man before the watching church and world (i.e., his public life).³ Before he launches into the three book sections, he writes an introduction which, in my view, can serve as a stand-alone introduction to the ministry of shepherding.

Section 1 focuses on the pastor's devotional life. Chapter 1 specifically addresses his call to the NT office. Mathis helpfully takes the reader through the internal desire, the external affirmation, and the reality of opportunity. He is firm that, until a local church extends the opportunity of a pastoral call, the individual is not yet fully called. Until that point in time, the author prefers the phrasing "sense of calling" (50). He concludes this chapter with a natural discussion of appointing and disciplining pastors. Chapter 2 focuses on the importance of a pastor's not being a new believer, due primarily to the pull of pride entering the NT office as well as the pride that can surface over time once in the office. Mathis offers two questions for the current and aspiring pastor: (1) Does he think with sober judgment? and (2) Does he count others more significant than himself? (69–70). In chapter 3, Mathis does a commendable job focusing on the qualification "able to teach." Not only does he explain why this qualification is highlighted for pastors (73), but he also demonstrates seven reasons why it is central in the local church (76–79). I also find his discussion regarding the nature of "able to teach" to be compelling as he differentiates it from mere "possibility." He calls the ability to preach a skill, not something marginal or negotiable (81). Helpful also are his discussions on 1 Timothy 5:17 as well as the debate about any distinction between teaching and ruling elders (85–89). Chapter 4 addresses the need for pastors to be clear-headed (i.e., sober-minded). I found his trajectory of this topic engaging as he takes much time to discuss generational challenges between older and younger pastors.

Section 2 focuses on the pastor's private life. Mathis rightly insists that a pastor's personal integrity and character never clock out. Elders "are whole, which means that for those with eyes to see, such men are even more impressive in everyday life than they are behind the pulpit" (110). As a biblical counselor, I was impressed with Mathis' discussion on self-control in chapter 5. He reaches for Dr. Ed Welch and the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* to frame his thoughts on progressive sanctification (e.g., "Turn from . . . turn to"; 115–18).⁴ Mathis also provides a positive discussion of how pastoral "power" is demonstrated in the local church context (119–25). Chapter 6 focuses on the elder's personal purity and marital fidelity. I especially appreciated the words of scriptural (Hebrews 3–4) and practical hope he shares with men engaged in the battle for purity in our internet age (131–36). Mathis lays out his personal understanding and pastoral guardrails regarding alcohol in chapter 7. The reader may not personally land where the author does in interpretation or practice, but Mathis provides, nonetheless, a helpful chapter to work through as this topic has gained saturation in the evangelical landscape. Chapter 8 addresses the danger of materialism. Especially noteworthy in this chapter is the succinct yet thorough discussion of pastoral compensation (159–62). Mathis argues wisely for his personal ratio recommendation of paid and non-paid elders (161n2). Chapter 9 is titled "The Tragedy of Distracted

³ He groups the fifteen pastoral qualifications under these three sections based on theme, not Pauline order. He explains his reasoning for this on page 18.

⁴ Including several of the key progressive sanctification passages (e.g., Eph 4:20–24, Col 3, Rom 6–8, Jas 1:21–25, etc.) at least parenthetically in this section would strengthen Mathis' "turn from . . . turn to" language in this chapter. He does, however, use many of these passages elsewhere.

Dads.” This chapter surveys the entire domestic footprint of the pastor—both as husband and father.⁵ Mathis graciously covers the issue of the salvation of the pastor’s children and concludes: “So, the issue at hand is not the eternal state of the child’s soul, but the nature of the elder’s fathering” (171). Next, he provides a helpful rubric for understanding the husband’s headship over his wife (172–78).

Section 3 focuses on the pastor’s public life. In chapter 10 Mathis deals with the umbrella qualification of “above reproach.” He observes, “There is no requirement for particular achievements in formal education, world-class intellect or oratory, or manifest giftedness above the common man. Rather, these qualifications are the sort of traits we want in every Christian in time. What we’re looking for in our pastor-elders, in essence, is normal, healthy, model Christianity” (187). Chapter 11 focuses on being respectable. While I expected Mathis to emphasize the pastor’s actions and words (which he does), I was surprised and refreshed with his third focus—what a pastor wears (202–3). Mathis approaches the qualification of hospitality in chapter 12, arguing the necessity of being strategic toward both believers and unbelievers. He also explains hospitality’s vital contribution to church planting and discipleship. Chapter 13 presents Jesus as the perfect example of gentleness—the ultimate model for every pastor. “When we admire his gentleness—and he is its paragon—we do not celebrate that he is weak. Rather, as feeble sheep, we enjoy that not only is our Shepherd infinitely strong, but he is all the more admirable because he knows how to wield his power in ways that give life to, rather than suffocate, his beloved” (227). Chapter 14—“How Do Pastors Pick Their Fights?”—rightfully lands on James 3:13–18 as well as 2 Timothy 2:24–26. Mathis’ four-question process on whether or not to engage in conflict is gold (235–36). Chapter 15 reminds pastors that we must have strategic and tactical engagement with unbelievers. Mathis concludes this chapter with this challenge: “Outsiders matter to us because such were all of us. But we have been brought in. And good pastors know, firsthand, that Christ loves to make us frail, former outsiders his means for bringing in more, and for leading his church with such hearts and dreams and prayers” (248).

Just when the reader thinks the book is over with the pastoral qualifications, Mathis continues to provide outstanding material. He issues a “Commission” (249–64) which lists five ways that true Christian leaders are different from today’s mere celebrities. He provides five helpful appendices: Appendix 1—“Who Are the Deacons?”; Appendix 2—“A Word for Leaders” (regarding plurality and team dynamics); Appendix 3—“What Is Anointing Oil?” (regarding James 5:14–15); Appendix 4—“What Is the Laying on of Hands?” (regarding commission to ministry); and Appendix 5—“How Old Should Elders Be?” The reader may not agree with all his conclusions, but I believe that most will appreciate Mathis’ labor in the Word and the resulting recommendations. Finally, he provides a study guide covering every chapter (over twenty pages long). The questions are robust, not simplistic. Used privately or in small groups, it would yield vulnerable accountability and concrete application. It is one of the best study guides in this regard that I have found in a pastoral-theology resource.

As a pastor for nearly thirty years, my personal preference is to read the writings of men who have put more decades into pastoral ministry than I have. I have benefited much from the writings of

⁵ I think it would have served Mathis well to reference key authors from the biblical counseling world in this chapter on the family as he did with Ed Welch and Dave Harvey in chapter 5. Admittedly, this is a preference of mine, but I believe it would have further endeared this excellent book even more to that reading audience.

Charles Spurgeon, R. Kent Hughes, John MacArthur, and others. But I am gladly shelving *Workers for Your Joy* next to these other writers in my library's pastoral-theology section. David Mathis has been shepherding for fifteen years at the time of this writing, but any pastor knows that fifteen years of pastoral ministry should yield much practical wisdom and prudence. It has for Mathis. His book is worthy of attention and praise. He is careful with the text of Scripture, constantly referencing excellent scholars throughout (e.g., Don Carson, Gregg Allison, G. K. Beale, Jim Hamilton, George Knight, Bill Mounce, Douglas Moo).

I recommend this book as a reference for teaching through Paul's pastoral qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. I recommend it as a refresher for any pastor, paid or unpaid. I recommend it as a relay, a curriculum to help seasoned pastors point young and/or potential pastors toward ministry expectations. I recommend it for rejoicing—Mathis' stated goal of joy for this book.

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