

# RULE THE OF LOVE

How the Local Church Should Reflect  
God's Love and Authority



Jonathan Leeman

“Love is one of the most popular themes and most commonly invoked ideals in the world. It is also one of the most misunderstood. *The Rule of Love* is a brave and bracing critique of the picture of a watered-down, self-centered, and all-inclusive (i.e., unholy) love that prevails in contemporary culture—and in too many churches. It is also a recovery of a God-centered picture of love in which God’s love for the world is tied to God’s holy love for his own glory. Only the latter makes sense of the gospel, and of church discipline. Any book that explains how God’s authority and judgment are not the opposites of God’s love, but rather its display, is radical—in the dual sense of recovering the root and offering prophetic critique—and this book is deserving of a serious hearing and a radical reception.”

**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, Research Professor of Systematic Theology,  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“I don’t know many people who have thought as long, as hard, and as well about the church as has Jonathan Leeman. He helps us to reconstruct our idea of the local church, not by rearranging the walls, but by refitting the two floorboards that undergird the church—love and authority. It seems our culture has been drawn to the former and rejected the latter because it has understood neither. In a world that is quick to react, Leeman challenges us to step back and reconsider love, authority, and the way they were designed to relate to each other. He opens our eyes to our hidden assumptions and fears about love and authority. With theological precision and pastoral sensitivity, he does much more than highlight our problems and fears—he also shows us a grand vision for the gospel working in the world through a church that rightly understands love, authority, and their inseparable connection. This is an excellent work for pastors, church members, and even people on the outside trying to make sense of what Christians believe. I am grateful that Jonathan has condensed his years of study about the church and pastoring in the church into such a potent book, and I’m excited for others to get their hands on this.”

**John Onwuchekwa**, Pastor, Cornerstone Church, Atlanta, Georgia;  
author, *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church*

“In an age when authority is often undermined in the name of love, Leeman helpfully reminds us that love and authority are not opposites. Instead, he refreshes us with the biblical reality that love isn’t defined by itself at all, but is defined by God. That also means that we cannot love our families, our churches, our neighbors, or our friends and leave God out of the picture. We love truly when we love for Christ’s sake as we are brought into the orbit of God’s love for himself.”

**Abigail Dodds**, author, *(A) Typical Woman: Free, Whole, and Called in Christ*;  
contributor, [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)

“While multiple words can be used to describe the many strengths of Jonathan Leeman’s new book, the word that most comes to my mind is *timely*. On the one hand, he clearly and cogently articulates how our culture has undermined the nature of God’s love, especially in relation to the ideas of authority and judgment. On the other hand, he persuasively and passionately presents how the church of Jesus Christ, armed with a biblical view of God’s love, can present to a needy world the goodness and beauty of God in multiple ways. Every church, with its pastors and people, needs to read this timely book.”

**Julius J. Kim**, Dean of Students and Professor of Practical Theology,  
Westminster Seminary California

“The world does not understand divine love. Amazingly this is far too often also true of many Christians. Jonathan Leeman does a superb job in providing a biblically faithful and theologically rich study of this important teaching. I was personally helped to better appreciate this doctrine, and I am delighted in commending this book to others. You will be blessed.”

**Daniel L. Akin**, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In *The Rule of Love*, Jonathan Leeman skillfully demonstrates how a God-centered approach to love is far more satisfying and sustainable than our culture’s fluid, anemic, me-centered approach. As it unpacks how God-centered love involves things like holiness, discipline, and authority, this concise book brings clarity to our cultural confusion and poses a timely challenge to the church: Will you display this love to the world?”

**Brett McCracken**, Senior Editor, The Gospel Coalition;  
author, *Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge  
of Christian Community*

“It is not only our society that is confused about what true love is and its proper relationship to authority, but also, sadly, the church. After perceptively diagnosing the condition of our culture, Jonathan Leeman offers a biblically and theologically faithful antidote to the distorted views of love and authority that we too often have embraced. Rightly grounded first in our triune God’s holy love before moving to how love and authority function in the church, this book is a must-read if God’s people are to recapture the beauty and glory of how our local churches ought to reflect God’s love and authority before a watching world. My prayer and hope is that this book will be not only carefully read but also put into practice in our daily lives for the health of the church and the glory of our triune God.”

**Stephen J. Wellum**, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist  
Theological Seminary; author, *God the Son Incarnate; Kingdom through  
Covenant*; and *Christ from Beginning to End*

# THE RULE OF LOVE

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# THE RULE OF LOVE

How the Local Church Should Reflect  
God's Love and Authority

Jonathan Leeman

*The Rule of Love: How the Local Church Should Reflect God's Love and Authority*

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To Alex Duke, Bobby Jamieson, and Ryan Townsend,  
dear brothers and partners in the gospel



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# Series Preface

The 9Marks series of books is premised on two basic ideas. First, the local church is far more important to the Christian life than many Christians today perhaps realize.

Second, local churches grow in life and vitality as they organize their lives around God's Word. God speaks. Churches should listen and follow. It's that simple. When a church listens and follows, it begins to look like the One it is following. It reflects his love and holiness. It displays his glory. A church will look like him as it listens to him.

So our basic message to churches is, don't look to the best business practices or the latest styles; look to God. Start by listening to God's Word again.

Out of this overall project comes the 9Marks series of books. Some target pastors. Some target church members. Hopefully all will combine careful biblical examination, theological reflection, cultural consideration, corporate application, and even a bit of individual exhortation. The best Christian books are always both theological and practical.

It's our prayer that God will use this volume and the others to help prepare his bride, the church, with radiance and splendor for the day of his coming.



# Introduction: When Love Is God

We got to let love rule.

—Lenny Kravitz

God is love, says Scripture. It's one of weightiest and most precious truths imaginable for a Christian.

God is love like oceans are wet and suns are hot. Love is essential, love is definitional, of God. His goodness is loving. His holiness is loving. His judgments are loving. His affections, motions, purposes, and persons are loving. Father, Son, and Spirit abide together purely and forever as love.

How sweet is that! The One who designed comets and acorns, who sustains our souls and bodies, who knows every one of our days before each comes to be—he is love.

Yet slow down. We need to think about what the Bible means here. When it says, “God is love” (1 John 4:8), it's not saying there is this thing out there called love and that God measures up to it. There is no dictionary definition of love hovering outside the universe, independent of God, so that God answers to it. Rather, God *in himself* provides the definition, the reality, of what love is. Love is not an abstract concept but a personal quality of God.

It's super important that you understand this. God's own character gives us the definition and standards of love. Dictionary writers should observe God and then draft their definition of *love* on that basis. Anything called love that does not have its source in God is not love.

Which means that understanding what love really is requires us to look at everything else about God—his holiness, his righteousness, his goodness, and so forth. God’s righteousness, for instance, shapes his love, just as his love shapes his righteousness. The two are inseparable. Lose one and you lose the other.

Which also means that people today might say they love love, but if they reject God, they don’t really love love.

Now, you and I could name dozens of romance movies and love songs popular today or yesterday. Love sells. Love is enticing. We devote a holiday to it every February, and our children give each other stale heart-shaped candies in celebration. Love is in the air and in the culture. But remember what I’ve said. Most fundamentally, love is not something independent of God but is a personal quality or characteristic of God. So to reject God is to reject that quality or characteristic, at least in part. We might think we love love, but rejecting God means it’s something else we love.

Today you can justify pretty much anything by invoking the word *love*: “If they really love each other, then of course we should accept . . .” “If God is loving, then surely he wouldn’t . . .” Yet notice what’s happening in these statements. We’re no longer interested in the God who is love. Rather, we’re interested in our own ideas of love, which become god. “God is love” is traded in for “Love is god.” Instead of going before the Creator of the universe and saying, “Tell us what *you* are like and how *you* define love,” we start with our own views of love and deify them.

As a result, we harbor an idol hid in an utterly convincing costume, a lie no one can recognize, an angel of light. Love—or our notion of it—becomes the supreme justifier, boundary setter, and object of worship. That’s what a god is and does.

So now we carry around something called love which possesses all the moral authority of God himself. The trouble is, it’s not God. It’s nothing more or less than our own desires—especially the desire to rule ourselves.

## **A “Love” Story**

I read a love story in high school that popularizes this kind of costume. Generations of students have been shaped by it.

The story opens on a sunny summer's morning with five women gathered on a grassy plot outside a town jail. The date is unspecified, but it's sometime in the seventeenth century. The place is a small Puritan settlement in New England called Boston.

The action begins with a hard-featured woman of fifty offering counsel to four other women:

Goodwives, I'll tell you a piece of my mind. It would clearly be for the public's benefit, if we women, being of mature age and church-members in good repute, should be given responsibility for handling a malefactress<sup>1</sup> like this Hester Prynne. What think ye, gossips? If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, would she have come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? I think not.<sup>2</sup>

The so-called hussy, Hester Prynne, has committed adultery. The proof is the infant daughter cradled in her arms inside the jailhouse. On this particular morning, the town's magistrates have decided that Hester will emerge from her cell, proceed to the town scaffold, and receive several hours of public scorn for her sin. Along the way, and for the remainder of her days, she will be required to don an embroidered scarlet *A* on her chest. The *A* stands for *adulteress*.

The church is mortified, and the church's preacher, Reverend Dimmesdale, is aghast. A second woman explains, "People say that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very grievously to heart that such a scandal should have come on his congregation."

It's not just Hester's sin that scandalizes the church and the town. It's the fact that her illicit lover, the child's father, remains unknown. A hypocrite is at large, a hard fact to stomach in a "land where iniquity is searched out and punished in the sight of rulers and people."<sup>3</sup> Hester's refusal to reveal the father's identity doubles her guilt, and the gaggle of gossips wants blood. A third matron speaks: "The town magistrates are

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1. A woman who violates the law.

2. This and the following quotations within the same conversation are taken from the edition of Nathanael Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* that I read in high school (New York: Washington Square, 1972), 51–52. I have slightly modernized the language in several places.

3. Hawthorne, *Scarlet Letter*, 62.

God-fearing gentlemen, but too merciful. At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead." Then a fourth: "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there no law for it? Truly, there is, both in the Scripture and in the statute-book."

I read Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, in my junior-year English class. Perhaps you did too. The entire class was scandalized—not at the tragic heroine Hester but at the townsfolk. Did people like this really exist? We glared at them with all the disdain they poured onto Hester. How could they be so self-righteous, cruel, benighted?

Hawthorne's own sympathies in his story are hardly hidden. His descriptions of the five gossips make them look like gargoyles. This last woman he describes as "the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges." Compare this woman's portrait with Hawthorne's portrait of the woman she is attacking. The young Hester

was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. . . . And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like . . . than as she issued from the prison. Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even started to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped.

The contrast is clear. The reader can sympathize either with ugly and pitiless old women or with Hester's shining halo of beauty—not a tough choice for most people. Who wouldn't choose to sympathize with Hester? Employing a beautiful woman to "make the sale" is hardly an innovation of our marketing-hysterical age.

The reverend mentioned by the gossips, Arthur Dimmesdale, has a character of more complexity. It turns out that he's the secret scoundrel

who impregnated Hester and left her to absorb the town's attack. Yet his character is more pitiful than malignant. He and Hester speak several times through the course of the book and at one point plan to run away and begin a new life together. Yet Arthur remains torn between his affections for her and society's hold upon him. Love pulls him in one direction; the Bible and the church, in the other. All but the most pitiless reader can't help but cheer for his liberation and their reconciliation. Ultimately, he is destroyed by the conflict between heart and mind, soul and society.

Hester's disgrace, ironically, frees her from church convention and social constraint. Never stingy with his symbolism, Hawthorne places her ramshackle shack outside civilization in the woods where witches and Indians abide, like the unclean Jew or Gentile dog outside the ancient Israelite camp. Yet it's out there, beyond the boundaries of respectability, that Hester is freed to love truly and divinely. She can forgive Arthur and her persecutors. She can dream of a different future with him. She can begin her career of caring for the community's poor. She can raise the sprightly daughter who will, in the novel's climactic moment, bend down to kiss her broken father's forehead. Hester and daughter almost shine like angels.

## **Assumptions about Love**

If Hawthorne were living today, he might describe himself with the well-known mantra "spiritual, not religious." His fictionalized Puritan church codified every conceivable moral transgression and then handed these codes to the magistrate to be enforced. The problem was not the moral or spiritual impulse, Hawthorne would say. Spiritual impulses are good. The problem was placing these impulses inside a religious structure. The problem was institutionalization. Institutionalizing people's spiritual impulses is like covering flowers in concrete in order to protect them. See how long those flowers last.

It's worth noticing how Hawthorne managed to hit all of today's panic buttons: the church has subsumed the state; the private has become public; religious hate-mongers scorn the young, beautiful, and free. Even an innocent daughter is made a victim.

So just what kind of “love story” is *The Scarlet Letter*? It is one that well illustrates the assumptions about love that many people were beginning to make in the nineteenth century when Hawthorne wrote his book, assumptions that are foregone conclusions today.

*Assumption 1.* No moral boundaries or judgments can be placed on love. Rather, love establishes all the boundaries. You can justify anything by saying that it’s loving or motivated by love. Heart plus heart equals marriage, teaches the bumper sticker. Love justifies extramarital affairs, divorce, fornication, cohabitation, depriving children of their biological (surrogate) mother in order to fulfill two men’s dreams of being a family, never disciplining one’s children, speaking dishonestly, and more.

*Assumption 2.* Love means unconditional acceptance and the end of judgment. Daytime television host Ellen DeGeneres had a guest on her show who describes herself as “nonbinary.”<sup>4</sup> That means she refers to herself as “falling somewhere outside of the boxes of ‘man’ or ‘woman.’” She wants to be known not as a *she* or *her* but as *they* or *them*. Ellen struggled with this language but finally concluded that love gives us our answer: we accept this woman’s identity claim. “I think it’s just about letting people be who they are and love who they want to love, and if you’re not hurting anybody then there’s nothing wrong with it.”

Nathaniel Hawthorne never envisioned any of this, but there’s a surprisingly short trip from *The Scarlet Letter* to a society’s acceptance of a transgender movement. If love means unconditional acceptance, so that we should accept Hester’s marital unfaithfulness, we should also accept a woman’s claim, “God did *not* create me as a male or a female, but as something else.”

*Assumption 3.* Love and authority have nothing to do with one another. Authority restrains. Love frees. Authority exploits. Love empowers. Authority steals life. Love saves life. This disassociation between love and authority is nothing new. They have been divided ever since the Serpent suggested to Adam and Eve that God’s love and God’s au-

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4. “Ellen Meets Trailblazing Actor Asia Kate Dillon,” March 19, 2017, <https://www.ellentube.com/video/ellen-meets-trailblazing-actor-asia-kate-dillon.html>.

thority could not coexist. Yet the contrast between love and authority came into even sharper relief with the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment Romantics.

*Assumption 4.* It follows that love is anti-institutional. Institutions, after all, impose authority on relationships. They are rule structures. In our minds, the words *love* and *institution* just don't fit together. Love helps relationships. Institutions hurt them.

This means we are inherently suspicious of everything in a church that smacks of institutionalism and authority. That includes talk about membership, discipline, offices, leadership structures, and so forth. Don't make me sign anything, please. Just let me show up, enjoy the show, sing, laugh, develop relationships organically, and head to lunch with whomever I want. Once or twice a year you can ask me to volunteer in a soup kitchen. I'll accept an annual dose of guilt. But please avoid words like *commit*, *covenant*, and *correct*. Those are legalistic and authoritarian.

## Our Trouble with Authority

That brings us to the other topic of this book: authority. It's something that befuddles Westerners today. We don't like the idea of authority, as I was just saying, but our lives are suffused by it: hospital procedures, building codes, traffic laws, parental responsibilities, marriage covenants, student requirements, office rules, the laws of state, the grammar of language, the meaning of words, the rules of sports—on and on we could go.

Authority is the glue that enables people to live together. Apart from authority, all of life would be shaped by the preferences of the moment. There would be no traditions, no predictability of behavior, no stability of meaning, no shared morality.

Behind every authority structure, after all, is a moral claim. When we say, "You must do this" or "We must obey him," we are saying it's *right* to do so, and *wrong* not to. We are making a moral claim. "Honor your father and your mother," for instance, is the moral basis for the authority structure between parent and child.

The trouble is, we are a society that has destroyed its own ability to say “right” and “wrong.” We have no moral vocabulary left beyond personal desire and identity. Which means it’s nearly impossible with today’s vocabulary to validate any claim to rightful authority. Even the authority of the state is typically grounded in every person’s self-interest.

Yet how then do we organize our lives together? More crucially, how do we enjoy anything of transcendent value worth protecting over time? We protect something with *rules*. But how do we live as anything other than beasts whose only law is writ in tooth and claw? To decry all authority is to decry anything of transcendent value in human life. It is dehumanizing.

But if we do want to affirm the good of authority, who gets to say whose evaluations and structures are right? What if someone uses his or her evaluations and structures to oppress me? History offers a heart-breaking long list of such abuses. One group of people creates a story—a particular telling of history—that enables them to rule over another group of people, exploiting them for personal gain. Reacting to such exploitation and abuse, we become anti-authority and anti-morality.

And yet, we cannot finally escape moral evaluation and authority structures. Even a society of angels abides within them. Life indeed is impossible without them, putting Westerners into an unresolvable bind.

## The Local Church

Standing against all this, opposing the world’s misconceptions of love and authority, is the divinely irksome while vaguely attractive local church. To the world, the church is both a fly in the ointment and the ointment. It spoils natural desires and inspires supernatural ones.

The world presumes to understand love and authority, like it presumes to understand God. Yet it understands these things only in their fallen forms, not in their created or redeemed forms. God, being gracious, has embedded in the hearts of humanity signs and symbols of true love and authority. Think of a wife’s love of a husband or a father’s rule over young children. Yet, at best, the world understands these things in a two-dimensional, shadowy way.

The local church serves, therefore, as a three-dimensional display of God's love and God's authority. No church is perfect, but there you begin to discover what God's love and rule are like. You receive his love and authority, experience them, learn them, even practice them. This living, breathing, and ordered collective called a church demonstrates love's demands and authority's blessings.

By God's design, the local church defines God's love and authority for the world. And it's both the relationships and the authority structures that do the work. In a biblical church, relationships and structures are inseparable, like a body and its skeleton, a game and its rules, a marriage and its vows. The love-defining life of a church depends specifically upon a structure we call a covenant, and is nourished through the oversight of elders or pastors.

Since Genesis 3 the world, the flesh, and the Devil have denied that love and authority belong together. But God's love draws lines. It puts up boundaries. It exercises authority. It makes commitments and offers corrections. Loving churches will do the same.

To be sure, churches can draw lines, exercise authority, and offer corrections unlovingly. They often have. But don't judge a gift by its abuses. Instruct and warn against the abuses, but then look to Scripture for guidance about the better way. It's crucial to keep one eye fixed on lessons from the fall to guard against misuses of authority. Yet we must cast another eye on lessons from creation and redemption.

## **Rethinking Love and Authority**

This is a difficult message for our generation. On the one hand, we feel constrained to bow down and accept the morality and marital rights of all who say they do what they do for love's sake. On the other hand, we can view marital covenants as impositions on love. How much more, then, a church covenant? The idea of putting love and authority or love and binding commitments together clashes against some of our most basic intuitions.

Look at these verses from the apostle John, Christian. Do they make sense to you? Or do you have to tilt your head, gulp, and coach yourself, "Okay, I *suppose* this must be true"?

- “This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments” (1 John 5:3).
- “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me” (John 14:21).
- “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word” (John 14:23).
- “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10).

The fact that such verses don’t immediately make sense says something: our intuitions just might be malformed. Jesus, who spoke the last three verses, shows us what rightly formed intuitions sound like.

God is love, but God is also King. His authority is a gift; and his gift of authority to people, when used for its creational or redemptive purposes, is an action of love.

Mark Dever often reminds audiences of King David’s last words:

When one rules justly over men,  
ruling in the fear of God,  
he dawns on them like the morning light,  
like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning,  
like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.  
(2 Sam. 23:3–4)

Good authority strengthens and grows. It nourishes and draws out. You know this if you have ever had a selfless and loving parent, teacher, employer, coach, pastor.

The larger lesson of this book is that we need to learn anew what love and authority are, and what they have to do with each other. We need to re-form our intuitions. We need to remember something about love and rule that our ancestors in the garden forgot. For God, love and rule aren’t two things but different aspects of one thing. Our culture has twisted our views of each, and therefore perverted both.

The main goal of this book, then, is to refashion our views of God’s love and authority and their relationship together. I also have an ulterior goal: to suggest how the local church should embody these things. The

church's gospel word, combined with its practices of membership and discipline, play a crucial role in defining and demonstrating love and authority for the world. The practices of membership and discipline in particular put the people of God on display, like a herald who pronounces, "Here are the people of God, the bride being made ready for her Bridegroom." They help the bride grow bit by bit in loveliness and glory.

While this book won't discuss the church at length, it will offer lessons for the church along the way. In a sense, this book is like a prequel or a prolegomena—a pre-word—to thinking about and living as the church. Many Christians today have a hard time grasping what the church is, because so many of our intuitions about love and authority are compromised. I hope to help us think better about love and authority, and then trace out a few lines for how that should impact our life together within churches.

Lastly, you will notice that I try to build a literary illustration or two into every chapter. If I wanted to sound responsible, I would say I did that because good literature reflects our society so well, as I believe *The Scarlet Letter* does. If I'm being a little more honest, I would say that the English major in me just wanted a chance to come out of the closet, run around, and have fun. Either way, I hope you find them useful.

# **IX** 9Marks

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