

“So much of what can be most beautiful about our churches is summed up in that single (and often overlooked) word: honour. Adam Ramsey’s book offers compelling insights that will help us all to make our church communities better reflect the love and glory of Jesus. This is vital to the health of our churches, and a vital key to having an impact on the world around us.”

SAM ALLBERRY, Associate Pastor, Immanuel Nashville;
Co-Author, *You’re Not Crazy: Gospel Sanity for Weary Churches*

“Surely one of the most neglected commands in the Western church is the command to outdo one another in showing honour (Romans 12:10). In a culture obsessed with self-love, self-promotion and self-fulfilment, the call to value others above ourselves can sound unreasonably hard and possibly harmful. Adam Ramsey helps us understand why honour among members and leaders is essential for the health of our churches, and how it can be a beautiful witness in our communities. He offers a compelling vision of a prayerful people committed to humble love, thoughtful encouragement and Christ-exalting service. This is a people I want to be part of! I pray this book will be widely read and that the church of Christ will shine more brightly as a result.”

CAROLYN LACEY, Author, *Say the Right Thing*
and *Extraordinary Hospitality*

“I am thrilled to recommend Adam Ramsey’s excellent new book. Having worked alongside Adam for close to a decade, I can attest to his exceptional character and unwavering commitment to living out what he writes in this book. In each chapter, Adam explores the true essence of honor within the church, showing us how we rightly honor God and one another through humility, biblical competitiveness and godly leadership. His insights are not just words on pages but a reflection of the honorable man he is. I wholeheartedly recommend Honor as an instructive, convicting and inspiring read that mirrors the wisdom and integrity of its author.”

BRIAN HOWARD, President, Acts 29

“In this work, my friend Adam Ramsey shows us that a culture of honor is God’s design for God’s people. Our churches need this—not only a biblical theology of honor but a biblical experience of it. Creating a culture of honor is a vital way we can carry out Jesus’ command to love one another, and in doing so, communicate to a watching world how the gospel truly changes lives and relationships, to the honor and praise of God.”

TONY MERIDA, Pastor, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, NC; Author,
Love Your Church and Gather

“Honor: what an incredibly misused or ignored word. Depending on your church background, it can evoke a myriad of feelings. And yet, it is not a word we can pretend simply does not exist. We are exhorted by the Scriptures to “outdo one another in showing honour”. Paul’s words beg the question, “how?” And in this wonderfully thoughtful book, my friend Adam guides us toward the answers. With wit and grace, he points us to a better way of being God’s people. What a beautiful invitation!”

LÉONCE B. CRUMP JR, Founding Pastor, Renovation Church, Atlanta

“As someone who has been under Adam’s leadership for the past decade, I have witnessed him to be both honouring, and honourable, in the way he loves and serves those around him. What is written in these pages has been lived before it was penned. The book you are holding paints a picture of the relational beauty of God’s kingdom being revealed in the lives of his people. And when his people rightly bestow honour upon one another, we get a glimpse of what the world is meant to be (and one day will be). I urge you to take these words in, and, by the Spirit’s power, to live them out. Your church will be a truer and more beautiful reflection of the kingdom of Jesus because of it.”

LAURA HAAS, Director of Ministries & Women’s Director,
Liberti Church, Gold Coast, Australia



honour

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FOREWORD

BY ALISTAIR BEGG

Just as our homes have a “feel” to them, so do our church gatherings. The Dutch have a word that is almost untranslatable: *gezellig*. It describes a place—a gathering, that is attractive, sociable, friendly, welcoming, comfortable, even cozy.

Our churches should be marked by much more than that, but never less. And a key to being that kind of church is to be one that is marked by an honoring of one another.

I have benefitted greatly from this book, especially as its publication comes at a time when the very notion of the biblical emphasis on the priority and necessity of a gathered community is being challenged. It is becoming increasingly fashionable, even desirable, to construct a digital alternative that makes it possible for us to design and control our environment. If physical friendships can be replaced by smartphones and online chat during the week, then why not extend that to church life? After all, as the pastor and author Christopher Ash has observed, the local church is not made up of people with whom we would naturally choose to spend our holidays!

At no other time in history has it been possible to be “together” while we are actually apart. Creating an online network is vastly different from the togetherness that the Bible describes and demands. We are not called to grow up in digital networks but in communities that honor God and each other, and that begins by being present.

The temptation to isolation is not a 21st-century phenomenon. The writer of Hebrews exhorted his readers to make sure that they did not hold themselves aloof from the church gatherings as some had begun to do—because it is in that context that we learn how to stir up one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24-25). We are not members of a club, held together by shared interests—we are members of the body of Christ, shaped by grace.

In the early 1970s, my wife and I spent some time with the members of a church plant in a housing scheme in Edinburgh. The average age of the congregation was very young and most were new believers. Some had, in their previous life, been members of opposing gangs. Honor in that realm had much to do with being tough—but now they had become tender. It was profoundly moving to be present as former enemies honored one another biblically, singing to each other the song “I Love You with the Love of the Lord”, with its glorious line, “I can see in you the glory of my King”.

I am similarly moved today when I look out on our congregation and see the way in which the lives of

people who would ordinarily never be in the company of one another are being wonderfully woven together in a tapestry of grace, building one another up and spurring one another on.

In commending this book to you, I freely acknowledge the challenge it brings to me first, both as a Christian and as a pastor. To be a church permeated by biblical honor requires church leaders to be honorable people—we cannot demand an honor that we do not deserve. Since a church does not progress beyond the spiritual progress of its leaders, Adam Ramsey’s book calls those of us in leadership to examine ourselves. As the 17th-century pastor Richard Baxter reminded ministers in his day, “The honor of your Lord and master, and of his holy truth, doth lie more on you than other men ... It follows that we should not expect [a church] to be living honorable lives towards outsiders and one another when the leadership has failed to live in light of the word of the prophet.”

But the call to be honorable and to honor others is not reserved for pastors. Scripture also requires church members to be ready to honor others—for us all to look more quickly to the interests and encouragement of those in our church than ourselves, and to be ready to humbly submit to those the Lord has called to shepherd the local flock we are part of.

In this book, Adam Ramsey shows us not only why we are to honor one another but what it looks like in the life

of the local church. In this sense, you have in your hands an invitation—an invitation to cause your church to become more and more *gezellig*. I trust that you will find it clarifying, stimulating, encouraging and challenging, just as I have.

Alistair Begg
Bible Teacher, Truth For Life

INTRODUCTION: REDEEMING A MISUSED WORD

I know, I know. Some of you (my American friends) are already slightly concerned that I don't even know how to spell the word, given that I've opted to use my native Australian-English spelling of honour throughout the pages that follow. Others of you, wherever you live in the world and however you spell the word, are perhaps a little nervous picking up a book with this title.

And I honestly don't blame you.

For some of us, this word *honour* comes with quite a bit of baggage. Perhaps you have experienced the toxicity of a church culture where this word was twisted for the personal gain of those in leadership roles—where, like a velvet fist, “honour” was used as cover for unquestioning submission, spiritual manipulation, or even outright abuse. Or perhaps you have experienced a different kind of brokenness, where there is an absence of honour in the

church. Neither of these are what the church is meant to look like, and my hope in this opening chapter is to tread a biblical pathway that avoids both of these ditches.

But before I do, let me paint you a picture of our destination. What if it were possible to redeem this word—*honour*—and reinfuse it with the fullness of biblical beauty that God intends? What *is* the togetherness of your church meant to look like? What *could* a culture of true honour look like?

Imagine a church where each and every person was serious about Jesus' command to sacrificially love one another *in the same way* that they have been loved by him; a church that honoured both his example and his commands in their esteem for each other. A Christian community where the only competitiveness was in the sincere desire to outdo each other in building one another up. A church where gratitude and gospel-motivated service to Jesus was the most normal thing in the world, and it spilled over horizontally into relationships with others in the church and into the surrounding community. Where repentance of sin was regular and real; where forgiveness was readily extended; where holiness was pursued and faithfulness was praised. A place where a heartfelt eulogy of the good in each other wasn't withheld until a person lay in a coffin, but was offered up freely, sincerely and regularly.

Imagine a church where men and women refused to make assumptions about each other's motives when

they disagreed, instead giving one another the benefit of the doubt in a spirit of humility; where patience was esteemed more highly than politics; where leaders dignified God’s people by refusing to use them and instead consistently cared for them, and where members gladly gave themselves to following such leaders in a spirit of unity, trust, and willing cooperation, out of reverence for Christ. A church where honour was not just unidirectional (from members to leaders) but omnidirectional (from *all*, to *all*), because nothing was more important to everyone than glorifying God by following Jesus into a life of humility—a way of living that Tim Keller called “the freedom of self-forgetfulness”.¹

Deep down, every one of us longs for this. And we need not wait for heaven to experience it. A right understanding of honour is vital to healthy churches. Its presence or absence is a barometer for humility—and God has made clear again and again that any community of professing Christians that is not marked by humility is opposed by him. For “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

When honour is perverted into something that is self-serving or when it is absent altogether, it indicates that our gaze is still far too much upon ourselves. Yet when we are so impressed with Jesus that we are free from needing to be impressive ourselves, a biblical culture of

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* (10Publishing, 2012).

honour will permeate our churches. That is a foretaste of the world to come. And that's what every one of us is really aching to know.

When practiced with purity and sincerity, honour is glorious. But that still begs the question: what exactly is it and to whom should it be given?

WHAT IS HONOUR?

Honour is both a word and concept that is mentioned hundreds of times throughout the Bible. At its most fundamental level, it means to value rightly and treat with appropriate reverence and respect. Particularly when it comes to those with authority. In the Scriptures, we are called to honour God above all else (Revelation 4:11). We are to honour our fathers and mothers in our homes (Exodus 20:12), elders and leaders in our churches (1 Timothy 5:17), masters or employers in our places of work (Ephesians 6:5), and governors and civil leaders with authority in our societies (1 Peter 2:17). Yet honour is not merely something that is directed upward, but also *outward*. Husbands are commanded to show honour to their wives (1 Peter 3:7), widows are to be honoured within the church (1 Timothy 5:3), and in case we missed anyone, 1 Peter 2:17 commands, "Honour everyone". When used as a verb, it means to "magnify" or "give weight to".

Honour, then, is a posture of life that exalts and rejoices over both God and others. It is a lens of looking at God

and honouring his glory, and then recognising that glory being woven into each person (on account of us being made in God's image—the *imago Dei*), or being woven into a position of authority. Romans 13:1 reminds us that there is something of God's glory that is revealed in earthly positions of authority. As we will see, honour is about giving appropriate weight to *both*, thus glorifying God and respecting one another. In light of the breadth and repetition of it in our Bibles, clearly this is not something we should brush over or take lightly.

While there is much we could say about honour in the home, the workforce or the world, the focus of this book will be about honour in the church. What is honour meant to look like among *Christians*? What is honour meant to look like towards Christian *leaders*? What kind of Christian leaders *are* we to honour, and what kind should we *refuse* to honour?

We've briefly named what honour is, and we will explore it further over the coming pages. But if we are going to recover any meaningful ground towards experiencing honour's true power in our churches, we also need to name upfront what honour is *not* and *must never be*. Strongly and unequivocally. As I've already mentioned, there are two ditches we can fall into on this subject. The first is where honour becomes manipulative. The second is where honour is missing altogether.

DITCH #1: WHERE “HONOUR” IS MANIPULATIVE

Sadly, honour can be distorted into something that is spiritually manipulative. And when it is, it inevitably and tragically sabotages a right experience with God and others in the local church. While this can play out in many forms, it usually boils down to two fundamental misunderstandings of honour.

The first is a version of prosperity theology—a widespread unbiblical and heretical teaching—that turns God into a cosmic genie who will shower his people with blessing, riches, health and long life if they will only rub the lamp in the right way, with enough faith. In this system, which bears an uncanny resemblance to a spiritual multi-level marketing scheme, the purpose of showing honour in the church is promoted as a get-rich-quick solution; a means to an end for upward mobility in the kingdom of God.

Yet despite what numerous books would have you believe, honour is *not* something we do in order to “position ourselves for blessing” or “attract God’s favour”. It is not a key through which we “unlock heaven” or a guarantee that will get God to give us our deepest desires. The way that some teachers speak about “honour” distorts God and diminishes honour into a Christianised version of the secular philosophy of the law of attraction. But biblical honour isn’t self-seeking. Prosperity theology says, *Jesus, I’ll honour you as a way to improve my life.*

Biblical theology says, *Jesus, I'll honour you because you are better than life*. To reduce honour to self-serving purposes is dishonourable in the highest degree; as are those who teach this.

The second way honour can be practiced perversely is when those with authority in a local church employ it in a way that elevates their own comfort and power, while using and dehumanising those under their authority. Or put more bluntly: *internships*. While there are certainly plenty of exceptions where churches do this very well, for the past few decades, many a ministry internship (at least in the West) has meant paying a lot of money to do a lot of free work for the church or for their church leader personally, in exchange for a poor theological education, a distorted experience of biblical leadership, and a lot of disappointment.

In the church that I pastor, there are literally dozens of men and women who were used by pastors and leaders in former churches: who, under the guise of “honouring them”, were reduced to something similar to ecclesiastical slave-labour. I could tell countless stories of those who were instructed to clean their pastor’s house each weekend, rise before the sun did to wash their jet-skis, put in 50-hour work weeks without pay, stand quietly behind them in the church foyer and hold their coffee (so they wouldn’t be inconvenienced by having to hold their own drink), keep “undesirable people” away from approaching the pastor after the

service, and serve those leaders without complaint or question... for Jesus.

Even if not being demanded to this kind of level—that is exploitation, not honour.

And nothing could be further from biblical Christianity, because nothing could be further from the example of Christ, who—having all authority—came not to be served, but to serve. He did not use his disciples to pad his own pockets or increase his comfort; he washed their feet. And in doing so, Jesus honoured them and showed them how those with authority are to use it. When teaching his followers who were in positions of power, Jesus could not have been more explicit with his profound message to invert the ways of the rest of the world:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. But it is not so among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave to all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

(Mark 10:42-45, CSB)

Leadership in the church is to be marked by servanthood. As we will see in later chapters, we should gladly and willingly honour Christian leaders who are *honourable*.

But when they are not, when leaders act *dishonourably*, abusing their positions and those under their care, we are to honour God by calling them to repentance and removing them from a position of power, even as we refuse to dehumanise them.

DITCH #2: WHERE HONOUR IS MISSING

Sometimes, however, the problem is not that a church misuses honour but that it is missing honour altogether. Maybe some of us are afraid of practicing honour for fear of falling into the previous ditch we just looked at.

At this point, I need to be up front with you and lay my cards on the table. I am Australian. Mine is a culture to which honour does not come naturally. Established as a British prison colony just a couple of centuries ago, Australians to this day still carry somewhat of a prison mentality. We are quite often suspicious of authority and slightly infamous for the social phenomenon and phrase known as “tall poppy syndrome”, where someone who is successful or gifted or has risen to a place of influence is cut down to size by those around them. The idea comes from the poppy—a flowering plant that tends to grow all at the same pace, to the same height. If one of the poppy flowers grows too high or too fast, the rest of the plant will strangle it at the root and bring it back down to earth. And a culture soaked in tall poppy syndrome is a great seedbed for a failure to honour one another in a biblical way.