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Abigail Boggan, a student at Toccoa Falls College, created the cover artwork. She explains that Christian leadership is learning to sit in the hurt and brokenness of our lives and to embrace the changing of the seasons. In doing so, we see new life blooming as we rejoice in the brokenness, knowing that the Father is at work in our lives. Christian leadership is learning to step into the process of mourning, reflecting, and growing over and over again so that we can lead others through the same process. She hopes we never forget that our role as a leader is one of loving others deeply as we seek out the new growth that comes from seasons of brokenness.

Theology of  
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# THE GOLDEN KEY FOR LIFE AND LEADERS: THE IDEA OF OFFICE

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Kornelis Sietsma, *The Golden Key for Life and Leaders: The Idea of Office* (Trans. Henry Vandergoot). North Star Ministry Press, LLC, 2019, pp. 123.

Kornelis Sietsma was a Reformed (Protestant) Dutch pastor-scholar who, before World War II, had written a short treatise on the exercise of authority as irrevocably tied “to the possession of office” (p. 9). That paper stated that “apart from office, there is no obligation to obey another person. There is no natural right for one person to rule over someone else” (2019, p. 10). In early 1942, Germany had invaded the Netherlands, causing the royal family to go into exile in London and installing a pro-Nazi regime despite the 1939 Dutch declaration of neutrality. Presiding over a local Reformed Church leaders’ assembly, Sietsma had led a discussion of particularly controversial topics for the day, such as praying for the royal family and opposing mandatory military service imposed on young Netherlanders by the Germans. Two weeks later, Sietsma preached a controversial sermon on Luke 4:1-13, explicitly addressing the temptations that come with power. With Nazi spies present, Sietsma taught the perils of hubris, prayed for the safe return of the royal family, and took up a collection for missions to the Jews. The next day, Sietsma was arrested. Tried and convicted, Sietsma spent the next several months in concentration camps, ending up at Dachau, where he died of complications from dysentery that winter.

Other works by the same author include “The Idea of Office” in 1941–42, as a paper edited by his mentor, Dr. G. Brillenburg Wurth. Sietsma’s other writings (sermons) addressed the Christian life (1938-39) and “Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility” (1941). The 2019 editing of *The Golden Key* is based on “The Idea of Office.” Decades after the original work, Koyzis (2013) (2013) noted Sietsma’s careful attention to culture, climate, and context.

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## OFFICE

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Given this backdrop of sociopolitical tumult, how are systems and organizations, churches, and governments to operate? Sietsma asserted that only office could confer moral authority. The principal office is that of divine image-bearer (Gen 1:26-27), and all other authoritative roles originate in and are subject to that central office, the one “given by God himself” (p. 10).

Sietsma described office as “being called by God, or appointed and clothed with dignity... being justly appointed to a certain station in life” (p. 93). This position requires more than disposition, attitude, and more even than the presence of the Holy Spirit. Sietsma addressed various forms of office, including that of every Believer as well as office in the church. In the latter, Sietsma included three equal roles of pastor, elder, and deacon, stating that the three should cooperate to lead the church and the community of faith. The functions are described in terms of their service and administrative obligations, but Sietsma explicitly states that “all office is a matter of service...

whoever assumes power for his own, rather than for God's sake, loses sight of the essential service character of office" (p. 70). Any office-bearer who serves humanity without first serving God violates the office (p. 70), both in and out of the church. Once in the role, the office-bearer takes full responsibility for his commands and expectations (p. 71). A note on language: while Sietsma's early 20<sup>th</sup> century Reformist text excluded women in conceptualizing the roles of pastor, elder, and deacon, it is reasonable in contemporary contexts to believe that in these roles, women too must take full responsibility for their words and deeds.

Sietsma maintained that church leaders have human fallibility, but also carry the weight of spiritual leadership. "They possess genuine authority, and hence, any attack on the office as it rightly administers God's Word is a grave sin" (p. 75). Admonishment by an officer in the church may be appealed, or even humbly protested, but the office must be respected. The offender receiving correction must act as instructed until his or her grievance is resolved. Using membership in political parties as a provocative example, Sietsma pointed out that Reformed Church members in the Netherlands during the rise of the pro-Nazi Socialist regime had either ignored their church's pronouncements or had withdrawn from the church altogether.

Regarding the role of the Christian believer, Sietsma attacked the phenomenon of believer apathy, attributing it to lack of interest, lack of prayer, or a lack of concentration on the proclamation of the Word (p. 113). Believers in right standing with God recognized that adoption by God precedes life, experience, and choice, and they must devote proper attention to their duty of relationship to Him. Further, Sietsma suggested that believers should live separated from all who do not belong to the local church. In tumultuous times, officeholders (both leader and believer) bring structure to chaos and should avoid people who do not comply with orderly doctrine.

The responsibilities of the office of Believer accrue passively, according to Sietsma (p. 88). Believers nominate and affirm the ordination of specific office-bearers (pastor, elder, deacon), grant and receive church membership, and recognize the membership of minors who attain an age of accountability (p. 88). Believers (active members) engage in the processes of censure and excommunication or raise objections to these processes. By approving or acquiescing to the actions of the church leaders, the follower shares in the responsibility for them. Women may hold the office of Believer and are equals in "approbation of actions taken by special office-bearers" (p. 89).

Who, then, is a believer? Those who are "to be regarded as Christian and child of God" are identified by "the external givens... [that the person] has received baptism and belongs to a definite church" (p. 90). Citing Matthew 7:21-23, Sietsma said that "only those will be saved who God through His grace has elected, and will in time lead to faith in Christ, perhaps even in the last moments of life" (p. 91).

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## CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS AND RIGID PRAXIS

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It is a challenge to find the same interpretation that Sietsma offered in a more inclusive contemporary context. God's exclusive election remains an unresolved theological dialogue. Bridging the exclusionary approach with the praxis of faith approach, Sietsma identified man as active and responsible in the act of believing, while acknowledging that there is no standard to judge if faith is present and flourishing beyond the individual's outward behavior and speech other than God's sovereign and omniscient will.

Indeed, Sietsma shows some concern about judging others' spiritual standing, stating that "we need another standard... to judge whether anyone is in the faith or not" and then contradicting this by acknowledging that "the standard which matters is God's" (p. 95). Besides, "believers are those who live under the discipline of the Word and Spirit, and thus under the discipline of the office" (p. 95). God places a person in the office of Believer, by birth, baptism, and confession of faith. One can only decline or reject the office via sinful rebellion, according to Sietsma. There should be no inconsistency between "the office and the praxis" (p. 100). Still, if there is, other believers should hesitate to judge that individual because of the sanctity of the role. In contemporary, trans-denominational terms, this might be the proposal to extend grace to one another. Still, Sietsma asserted that we are to acknowledge and respect believers until they break the covenant through some specific act or declaration. Then the office of Believer can be lost.

Sietsma does not acknowledge baptism in a state church or Catholic church, stating that baptism does not mean appointment to the office of Believer by God. To be recognized as a Believer, one must belong to a church that has discipline and demonstrates it by removing members who have lapsed, forbidding the exercise of membership rights by those who live in conflict with the church's roles and responsibilities. The church itself must be a "confessional" church, requiring the public confession of sin, because members can only demonstrate their belief through confession of sin and right conduct. Sietsma here contributed to the dialogue about what confession means, taking the sin-based position ("confess your sins one to another" James 5:16, ESV) as opposed to the confession of faith, or the Greek *homologeō*, to say what has already been said (by God). Sietsma goes so far as to say that profession of faith is so critical that not to profess one's faith is to break covenant with God.

The traditional conceptualization of leadership is generally limited to ecclesial leadership roles and titles of office in the church. However, contemporary researchers, theologians, and thought leaders acknowledge that believers influence the world by being salt and light (Mt 5:13-16) in all spheres of leadership: business, the arts, politics and government, law, media, and family. In the third section of *The Golden Key*, Sietsma addressed parental and governmental authority, stating that "often church leaders, teachers, professors or managers of the economy understand the issues close to them much better than do the elected officials of the nation" (p. 43). The spheres should not infringe on one another, and each "has its own structure, and an office in one sets limits to offices in the others" (p. 43). In 2020, it is difficult to imagine such separation of the spheres of influence.

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## CONCLUSION

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In the Epilogue, the Editor gave a charge to the reader that starkly emphasized Sietsma's assumptions throughout the book. First, the Editor assumed a Christian reader, even a scholarly theologian, via erudite language and theological reference. Second, the author considered a Reformed/Protestant theology throughout the discourse. In the closing charge, the Editor stated that the "only comfort in life and death" (p. 123) for "God's own" is their faithful Savior, and having that comfort equips those persons "for living well in a thankless, godless world" (p. 123).

Sietsma's thoughts on office seem dated as a primer for contemporary Christian leadership in times of a global pandemic, racial injustice, violence, and unrest. By turns benevolent and exclusive, Sietsma modeled the religious doctrine of his time and denomination dating it for practical application to contemporary issues. *The Golden Key for Life and Leaders* provides erudite guidance to those following a specific ministry calling, or pursuing an academic analysis of Biblical office as a

concept. It further succeeds at encouraging individual self-examination of one's performance in the role of Believer. Sietsma's brave leadership and obedience to God in his own office are to be recognized and celebrated. Even now, humanity seeks effective crisis leadership as history seems to repeat itself.

The Theology of Leadership Journal acknowledges that the traditional church has interpreted God's commission as a call to followership. Kornelis Sietsma, pastor and scholar, wrote his treatise on *The Idea of Office* at a time that called for greater structure and clarity of expectation for both leaders and followers. In benevolent but unequivocal terms, Sietsma insisted that followers ("Believers") had an obligation to take ownership for making a clear declaration of faith and living by that declaration, joining with and the local church and adhering to its norms and mores as long as they were Scripturally sound. He taught that leaders in the church must provide full-throated guidance and shepherding for their people, which would in turn influence the people to make wise decisions in their business, social, and political endeavors. Those church leaders should maintain a respectful distance from the other spheres of leadership, focusing on serving God and then on serving man. The relevance and utility of *The Golden Key for Life and Leaders* in contemporary church leadership development center on its clear message of structure and accountability, duty and responsibility, with grace as the foundation.

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