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# OF FRUIT TREES AND HEALTHY REGIONS

*Jon Payne*

*Senior Pastor, Redemption Hill Church (Round Rock, TX)*

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**F**or years we had a fruit tree in the corner of our backyard. Well, I heard somewhere that it was a fruit tree. But it never had any fruit. Sometimes it didn't even have leaves. It had the reputation of a fruit tree, and that's about it. I don't know a lot about growing healthy trees (obviously), but I can picture what I think a healthy fruit tree looks like. It has a trunk that doesn't look like a leftover stick in the ground, it has branches that are sturdy enough to bear weight, it has a vibrant foliage of leaves, and of course, it produces regular fruit. It was precisely this picture of health in my mind that convinced me that the little scrawny stick with snowman arms and no leaves and no fruit in the corner of my yard was not healthy.

As we pursue our mission together as a family of churches, we obviously are not satisfied with mere expansion. Like a fruit tree, our numerical and geographic growth must be tended and nurtured so that it is *healthy* growth. Healthy believers. Healthy churches. And beyond the local church, health in our partnerships together.

The way our partnership is most immediately expressed among churches is through our regions. With all of our focus on the local church, we also need a vision of health for our regions. And we need to define what "healthy" looks like, so that we can cultivate health when it's missing and celebrate the harvest when it arrives.

So—with the goal of a spiritual harvest in view—what is a healthy region?

In Sovereign Grace, a "region" is a group of churches in a particular geographic area. Within our broader union, the churches in a region become to each other the primary expression of our Sovereign Grace partnership. The region is not

meant to function independently from the rest of the global family or from their national structure, but its smaller size allows the churches and pastors in the region to have a focused relationship and ongoing care for each other. The region takes primary responsibility to ensure that our denomination is a family of churches and not just a nominal association.

But let's look a little closer. What are the details of a healthy region? Here are a few marks that come to mind.

### ***1. A Healthy Region has a proactive regional leader.***

According to our *Book of Church Order*, the regional leader represents the elders of the region in their mutual responsibility toward each of the churches. This responsibility goes beyond mere administrative coordination and should be marked by initiation toward the pastoral teams to encourage team unity and effectiveness. The leader should also strive toward a theological and pastoral vigilance that is aware of the strengths and weakness of all of the churches in the region. He should seek to equip and exhort the elders with the goal that the churches would remain theologically strong, spiritually vibrant, and missionally coordinated.

### ***2. A Healthy Region guards the integrity and joy of the pastoral role.***

Formally, through our ordination and our adjudication committees, and informally, through the accountability and fellowship among our elders, the region should uphold the integrity of the pastoral office. Aspiring elders should not be "rubber stamped" into the ministry, and failing elders should not be shielded from appropriate correction and even disqualification. Yet this protection should not only be corrective. The pastors should uphold each other's faith and joy in the grace of the Lord and the privilege of pastoring. In a healthy region, no pastor should feel that they are laboring alone and without pastoral encouragement. A healthy region enjoys a robust, encouraging brotherhood among the elders.

### ***3. A Healthy Region sustains each other during a season of trial.***

All churches endure seasons of trial. It is our privilege as churches to care for one another in tangible and relational ways as we journey together toward

heaven. Like fellow pilgrims, we should hold each other up when we go through valleys of humiliation or death. This care should be expressed in corporate prayer for one another, in gifts of financial help, in the provision of preaching or pastoral care in local crisis, and in words of encouragement for pastors and members alike.

#### ***4. A Healthy Region cooperates sacrificially to plant churches and reach the lost.***

We are called to plant churches and reach the lost and we will be more fruitful if we strengthen each other in this mission and do it together. This takes the form of financial and public support for church plants, of sending out qualified church planters and church plant teams, and of encouraging our own precious members to pray about joining a church plant that is sent from another church. We should also find ways to strengthen each other in our calling to evangelism, building fellowship among those leading in evangelism in our churches and celebrating and supporting particular initiatives in outreach in our region and beyond.

#### ***5. A Healthy Region gives faithfully and sacrificially.***

As Sovereign Grace churches, we have committed together to follow the example of the Philippians (and to avoid the sluggishness of the Corinthians!) and to give faithfully to our partnership. The regional portion of our giving is crucial for a healthy region. This giving allows a regional leader to give hours and days of his time in care to the other pastors and churches in the region. Without this support either 1) the care for the churches will decline or 2) the home church of the regional leader will bear an undue financial strain or 3) the regional leader will become exhausted and have to resign. This giving also allows church plant reserves to be prepared for a future church plant. It can be used to strengthen churches in a financial crisis, to invest in future pastoral candidates, to cooperate together in mission projects, or to provide a regional gift to a missional need outside of our region. As with Christians, so with churches. Health comes as we sacrificially invest in our mission together.

## ***6. A Healthy Region cultivates partnership among the members of the churches.***

New Testament partnership was not merely an association of elders, and ours should not be either. The members of the churches were called on to love and support each other, and the apostolic representatives of the churches knew and loved many members of churches and were known and loved in return. This should be the picture of health in a Sovereign Grace region. This membership-level partnership can be cultivated by inviting regional pastors in to preach on a Sunday or teach in a seminar, or by praying for regional churches on a Sunday. But it is particularly strengthened when the members of the churches can serve or worship together. There is something powerful about joining with multiple churches in a men's or women's retreat, a youth and parent event, or on a mission trip. These events create tangible memories of our partnership—memories that I still carry from when I was a teen in a Sovereign Grace church, catching a vision of being a part of something much bigger than myself or even my home church. A healthy region should be jealous to create these partnership memories for our churches today.

## ***7. Finally, a Healthy Region doesn't only live for its own health.***

A person, a church, and even a region can be tempted by a kind of “localitis”—looking only after its own interest. But a healthy region, like a healthy church or church member, is eager to give outside of itself, to build relationships with the rest of the Sovereign Grace churches around the world. The region will always be the primary expression of our partnership relationships, but we should find ways to celebrate the Sovereign Grace union we have received. We are connected together in doctrine, in governance, in leadership, and in mission, and a healthy region should be eager to see that partnership continue in strength and faithfulness.

May the Lord strengthen each region of Sovereign Grace—those that exist now and those that will be created as we grow into the future. By his grace, may we encourage each other in our gospel mission, in brotherly love, and in the authority of his Word. May this orchard look more and more like the picture of health until the Lord of the harvest returns.