

# THE ROLE OF OUR SHAPING VIRTUES IN GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP

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**M**y very first interaction with Sovereign Grace Churches came in 1995 when a pastor named C.J. Mahaney came to visit my church in the UK. I still remember it so very well. He spoke on “Christ and Him Crucified” and it was immediately evident that this man really loved the Savior. I’d never seen a man cry while he was preaching before. He was so grateful for what Jesus had done for him and so captivated by it; he simply couldn’t help it. I wanted to love Jesus like that, and yet what blew me away even more, was what took place after the service had concluded.

## *A Personal Testimony*

I was 19 years old at the time and well used to having senior leaders come into town. They always wore a suit and tie, came in right as the service was about to start and then usually headed off very quickly afterwards. If there was time for a conversation, then that’d only be done with other senior leaders and important folk. This was the norm I was used to after many years

Yet this guy, C.J. Mahaney, was different from that. For a start, he looked different. There was no suit and tie in sight! But more than that, as soon as the service concluded, he stayed around just chatting with people. He wanted to get to know the church, the individuals in the church. Then I watched as he made his way outside. He picked up a soccer ball and proceeded to play ball with some of the kids. It’s a simple thing. To many, it would’ve been no big deal at all. For me, though, given what I was used to, it simply blew me away.

What I was witnessing that day is called humility, and the more I got to see C.J. Mahaney as well as so many other leaders in Sovereign Grace, the more I got to see that this humility wasn’t an isolated trait. It was joined by other virtues like joy, gratitude, encouragement, generosity, servanthood, and godliness. All of the leaders I met at that time deeply loved Jesus. Gospel fruit was so evident in their lives, and I was sold. This is exactly what I wanted for my life. I wanted to know and love Jesus like they do. Therefore, I wonderfully found my home in Sovereign Grace.

## *The Testimony of Others*

Now, some 27 years on, as I travel around the world on behalf of Sovereign Grace Churches, I have been privileged on so many different occasions to discover that there’s plenty more stories out there just like mine.

Pastors who at some point have come across Sovereign Grace, maybe through a song or a friend, and who have then gone on to listen to some of our messages and read our books. They've been greatly affected by our music and our writing and our teaching, wanting to know more. But when they've actually started to encounter some of our people, either through pastoral visits or at a conference, they've been blown away. They've encountered a culture marked by humility, joy, gratitude, encouragement, generosity, servanthood and godliness. At that point, they want nothing else, just like it was for me.

We are certainly not the only denomination to enjoy these virtues. I have no doubt that there are many more out there, and thank God for that. But within Sovereign Grace Churches, the pursuit of these Shaping Virtues are a priority; they matter dearly to us. These virtues aren't optional extras, something to either take or leave. Rather, they're important markers of who we really are, flowing out of the gospel that we love. They're part of our culture in Sovereign Grace, and part of our mission not just locally, but globally as well.

### ***Virtues and Mission***

For that reason, these virtues over many years now, have been playing a very important role in our work of planting and strengthening churches around the world. At the time of this printing, we have the privilege of working into 39 different nations outside of the United States. We are increasingly becoming a global family of churches. As such, we continue to move forward eagerly desiring to make ensure these Shaping Virtues mark our gospel culture around the world.

To that end, whenever we plant a Sovereign Grace Church around the world, we want to plant with pastors that are gospel saturated and, as a result, who model these virtues for the dear saints that are entrusted to their care. We want to plant with pastors who simply can't help themselves, since they're so personally affected by the gospel.

That's why the Pastors College is so important, not only the United States college, but indeed all of our colleges around the world. These colleges, I believe, play an important role in teaching a pastor to watch his life and doctrine closely. This includes the embodiment of these shaping, gospel-saturated values. Because planters are ambassadors of both Jesus Christ and of Sovereign Grace in a new country or culture, it's important that we plant with men and teams that truly embody gospel culture.

Beyond planting churches, these Shaping Virtues play a very important role as we explore new global partnerships for Sovereign Grace Churches. When pastors reach out to us from the various corners of the world, one of the important items we consider is compatibility. We are not interested in accumulating churches for the sake of growth, but in building with churches who believe and cherish the same things we do.

To this end, we always begin with what we believe, our Statement of Faith and our Seven Shared Values. We also talk through and seek to look for compatibility with our Shaping Virtues: How has the gospel shaped the

culture of their church? Are we on the same page when it comes to what the gospel produces? And are we saturated and affected by the same things?

This sometimes leads to an end of the pursuit of partnership, and we're okay with that. Again, our goal is not growth for growth's sake, but to discover where the Lord is joining us with like-minded gospel-partners, that we might faithfully labor together for His glory. And it is a sweet and glorious moment when we find churches who are keen to be a part of us and share in our beliefs in doctrine and in culture. In God's kindness, I've experienced this many times. And, by his grace, I don't believe we're done yet.

As we labor around the world to plant and partner with churches, my hope and prayer is that these Shaping Virtues will remain important, cherished, and present traits of whatever God gives us the grace to build. They've wonderfully marked who we are for many years. As we continue to move forward around the world, I pray they'll mark us for many years to come.