

AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR STATEMENT OF FAITH

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Editors' note: The following article first appeared in the hardcover version of our Statement of Faith, given to Sovereign Grace pastors at our 2021 Pastors Conference.

The year 2022 marks the 40th anniversary of the Sovereign Grace family of churches (SGC). We are delighted to celebrate with the publication of this special edition of SGC's new *Statement of Faith*.

This new document represents a landmark in our denomination's history. It is a confessional document truly *for* our churches and *by* our churches. It's far more substantive and prominent than previous statements—already functioning throughout our churches in important and concrete ways.

Yet it also represents continuity with our past. From the beginning, SGC's robust theology has been protecting us from various winds of doctrine and uniting us upon the truth of Scripture. We have grown and changed in many ways, but by the grace of God, the guiding impulse of our mission together remains in place: a steadfast commitment to planting and nurturing churches with the Word of God and the glorious gospel to which it testifies.

Fundamentally, this new *Statement of Faith* is a testimony to God’s faithfulness to SGC over the decades. We continue to hold fast to God and his Word because he has graciously held fast to us. It is our fervent prayer that a Spirit-empowered embrace and application of these truths will help fortify our faithfulness to Christ for many years to come.

A Historic Occasion

November 10, 2020, was a historic day for the pastors and churches of Sovereign Grace. Seven years of careful theological formulation, discussion, and revision culminated in the ratification of a new *Statement of Faith (SoF)*. This document articulates the body of truth that our churches hold in common.

The idea for such a document was not new. Like most Christians throughout the centuries, SGC has long been identified by our commitment to a specific body of doctrine, expressed in our prior *SoF*. However, the establishment of our new polity in 2013 suggested the need for a far more extensive doctrinal statement. The unity of our churches depended on a thorough, public statement of the beliefs that bind us together. Our pastors needed a full and

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faithful summary of biblical teaching to which they could be held accountable. Future leaders needed clear standards to guide their training and evaluation. Above all, the cumulative weight of pastoral biblical commands—“follow the pattern of sound words that you heard from me” (2 Tim. 1:13), “guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:14), “teach what accords with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1), and “what you have heard . . . entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2)—impressed upon us the urgency of a clear, careful, and detailed doctrinal statement for our pastors and churches.

So what kind of confessional statement would suffice? As we pondered this question, certain qualities became clear. We desired a *SoF* that was both rigorously biblical and informed by historic Christian formulation. It needed to be of sufficient clarity and scope to protect us from ancient and contemporary forms of heresy. Moreover, our contemporary context demanded

a *SoF* that applied God's Word to new issues and questions raised by our current cultural moment.

A document that possessed only these protective qualities, however, would be incomplete. Our *SoF* also needed to nourish our churches spiritually, teaching and celebrating biblical truths we hold dear. In content and style, it should make sound doctrine clear and attractive, understandable and soul-stirring, for the shepherding of current members and the instruction of future generations. A new *SoF* was not simply a necessity for our churches—it was an opportunity to worship and glorify God.

Distinguishing Marks

Years of labor and cooperation among our churches have produced a confessional statement that satisfies these desires, making it functional for the present and durable for our future. Certain qualities make it particularly useful:

- ***Historically Informed***

Christians in the 21st century have the great advantage of standing upon over 2000 years of theological formulation, including 500 years in the Reformed tradition. Built upon these foundations, the new *SoF* fits firmly within historic Christian orthodoxy, confessing the great doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ as expounded in the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds. While Scripture is our *principium theologiae* (principle of theology)—the authoritative source and final norm of our theology—the framers sought to never lose sight of the church's theological tradition expressed in creeds and confessions.

- ***Ecclesiological Specific***

While benefitting greatly from the rich heritage of the church's historic confessions, our union of churches required a doctrinal confession specific to our ecclesiastic context. The new *SoF* expresses doctrinal positions precious to us as churches and vital to our unity as a denomination. Such affirmations include the glorious sovereignty of God over all things, including the redemption of sinners; our belief in and practice of believer's baptism; our continuationist convictions regarding the Spirit's ongoing ministry in the church; and our celebration of God's distinct and complementary purposes for men and women in the home and the church.

- ***Gospel Oriented***

In addition to the broader contours of Christian theology, the *SoF* also makes explicit the foundation of our doctrinal commitments and the driving influence in our churches' common life, worship, and outreach: the gospel of Jesus Christ. As such, the *SoF* is informed by not just systematic but also biblical theology, and therefore its doctrines are not disparate affirmations but interconnected paths that continually lead the reader to Christ and his preeminence.

- ***Appropriately Expressed***

To function effectively in our churches, the *SoF* needed to express truths in language that serves our intentions. We chose terminology that resonated with historical theology but was not pedantic. We desired language that was elevated in keeping with its weighty content but not esoteric. At the same time, we sought to articulate doctrines in ways that were understandable to a modern audience without being novel or idiosyncratic. Stylistically, we aspired to a *SoF* that was clear and accessible but not overly colloquial. The goal in all of this was to enable us to understand, marvel, and cherish these truths and apply them to our lives.

Seven Years in the Making

Beyond its content, the process that produced the new *SoF* also has great significance. The process began in 2013 when the Theology Committee was tasked with evaluating the previous *SoF* and its suitability for our newly constituted union of churches. It soon became clear that an expanded, rewritten confessional statement was needed, and in October of 2014, at the direction of our CoE, the Theology Committee began the seven-year process of formulating a new *SoF*.

Given the role this document would play among SGC churches, it needed to be the product of all our churches and not just the creation of a select few. Therefore, the SGC Council of Elders (CoE—a body comprising representative elders from each of our churches) and the SGC Theology Committee collaborated to arrive at a process that honored each elder and benefitted from our shared wisdom and experience. The result was a process that gave voice to our churches' convictions and, in so doing, fostered excitement and unity around the truths we confess.

Informed by our prior *SoF*, historical confessions, and key theological resources, the committee began by sketching out the contours of a new statement. Once a structure was established, the committee began to formulate the statement's content. The committee undertook the following steps each year of the process:

- Subcommittees were formed for detailed study and composition of specific sections, typically three sections per year.
- Each subcommittee submitted its drafts to the full committee for review and then revised their assigned sections.
- After a second round of reviews and edits, completed drafts of each section were submitted to the elders of SGC.

As noted above, it was important not only to gain our elders' affirmation of the *SoF*, but also to involve them in its development. With the input of the SGC Polity Committee and our CoE, the following process was designed to accomplish this priority:

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- After receiving sections of the *SoF*, each SGC eldership had 120 days to review and comment upon the sections. Every comment, along with the committee's responses, was posted for every eldership to see.
- This feedback was reviewed by the committee and incorporated into revised drafts of each section, which were then sent to the entire CoE in preparation for its annual meeting.
- The finalized drafts were brought to the CoE meeting for discussion, debate, and a vote for provisional approval. Full ratification would be contingent upon a final vote of the entire *SoF* upon its completion.

We followed this rhythm every year, with each of the 13 sections receiving provisional endorsement from the CoE. At the November 2019 CoE meeting, the Theology Committee received approval to extend this process one

additional year to review the complete *SoF* for coherence and to evaluate the need for any final additions or modifications. The committee also submitted the document for two external reviews—one theological and one stylistic.

This process culminated with the entire *SoF* presented to the CoE for final discussion and a vote for formal adoption. However, the year was 2020, and the pandemic forced this final vote online, taking place on a crowded Zoom call.

It proved to be a powerful moment. One by one, as each elder's name was called, a face would appear on the screen and a voice would sound. Some were expressive. Some were sober. Some gave their vote elaborate introductions, while others were succinct and firm. All were heartfelt in their glad affirmation of the new *SoF*. And so, on November 10, 2020, the CoE unanimously endorsed this document as the *SoF* for Sovereign Grace Churches.

One final step remained. The *SGC Book of Church Order* requires that 75% of our Regional Assemblies of Elders (comprising every SGC elder organized by geographic regions) vote to ratify the *SoF*. Once again, the *SoF* received unanimous approval from these regional assemblies in December of 2020, at which time this statement became the binding confessional document for the pastors and churches of Sovereign Grace.

Hopes for the Future

The new *SoF* represents many things: a history of theological rootedness, a maturation of doctrinal formulation, and our development as a union of churches. For all of this, we are immensely grateful to God. But, as I trust is evident by now, our true hopes for the new *SoF* lie in the future. Far from a static recitation of theological ideas, this document is a confession of faith that we pray will nourish and strengthen our churches for the glory of God and the progress of the gospel in and through SGC for years to come. To that end, the new *SoF* has a number of critical functions.

- ***Protection***

Most immediately, we pray that the *SoF* will help ensure doctrinal fidelity within SGC and protect our pastors and churches from theological drift and deviation. To be sure, doctrinal precision does not guarantee faithfulness, but it is a prerequisite for it. Yet, error and heterodoxy are not the only dangers

the church faces. We also hope that the intentional precision of the *SoF* will guard us from both novelty and distraction as we stay focused on the things of greatest and most enduring importance.

- ***Unity***

Like all such documents, our *SoF* is not a list of private beliefs. It articulates and confesses glorious realities that have shaped our lives and bind us together. The churches of Sovereign Grace share many things in common, but supreme among them is the gospel we cherish and the biblical doctrine we jointly confess and proclaim. Indeed, the only authentic and enduring unity among the people of God is a unity founded upon the truth of God's Word.

- ***Instruction***

All SGC elders subscribe to the new *SoF* as a confessional document, owning it as a faithful expression of biblical doctrine and a guide for their preaching and teaching. As a result, the *SoF* aids our pastors in the faithful transfer of biblical belief and practice. But the *SoF*'s audience is not confined to our pastors. Our hope is that the *SoF* will have a catechizing effect among Sovereign Grace churches, shaping worldviews and cultivating an ever-deepening understanding of and devotion to the truth of God's Word, upon which we gladly stake our lives and ministries.

- ***Worship***

The purpose of God's revelation to man, and the final goal of all theology, is the true worship of God by all those he has redeemed—in a word, *doxology*. Rightly pursued, an understanding of doctrine will lead us to worship and adoration of God with all that we are. This is our highest aspiration for the new *SoF*: that it would not merely guide belief but also elicit worship to the God who revealed himself to us and rescued us through the person and work of his Son.

The God-glorifying, Christ-exalting purpose of biblical truth best captures the ultimate goal of our new *SoF*. Above all, this document exists to guide our churches into truer knowledge of our Triune God, with all the love, trust, adoration, and joy-filled obedience such knowledge generates.

We invite you to join us in reading and reflecting upon the doctrines expressed in the following pages. As you do, we pray that your mind would

be enriched and your soul nourished by the truth of God's Word and the gospel of Jesus Christ which it reveals, all to the praise of his glory.

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