

BUILD SOMETHING DURABLE: THE VALUE OF THINKING INSTITUTIONALLY

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Over the past decade, I have had the joy of observing and participating in the institutionalization of our beloved Sovereign Grace Churches. *Joy* is the right word and ought to be used far more often in connection with institutions, especially when we are talking about gospel-loving churches and denominations. There is a great blessing in belonging to something larger than ourselves, in creating structures that promote sound doctrine and biblical values, and in laboring to build something durable for the glory of Christ.

Christians everywhere should thank God for the gift of institutions. Such gratitude is distinct from institutional idealism because we know that institutions are capable of corruption and that every institution has its weaknesses and imperfections. This gratitude is also distinct from institutional pride because the gospel leaves no room for the sense that *my church* or *my denomination* is special, superior, or impressive. But a realistic, humble, joy-filled, and genuine thankfulness is pleasing to God.

When I first became a pastor in 2008, I thought of Sovereign Grace Churches almost exclusively as a movement and a family, and not at all as an institution or denomination. In some ways, that reflected who we were at that time. But as we have continued to mature, so has my thinking about institutions.

While some Christians resist institutionalization, and some even devote significant time and effort to tearing down churches, networks, denominations, seminaries, and other ministries, others of us desire a much different path for our lives. We are eager to labor constructively for the gospel. We see this as a time to build. We rejoice in the grace of God evident in many churches, denominations, and ministries in our day. We love the imperfect institutions we belong to, and we want to spend our lives cultivating and improving them.

This explains why the pastors and leaders of Sovereign Grace have established a healthy polity and a *Book of Church Order*, transitioned from a founder-led ministry to a denomination, codified our shared values, appointed national committees to serve our churches, reaffirmed the value of our Pastors College, and created a new *Statement of Faith*. We are still a family of churches, we are defined by the same mission and have maintained movement dynamics, but we are also an institution.

Institutionalization, at its best, is the joy of building something that lasts, something beautiful and Christ-exalting, something that contributes to the flourishing of many. This is the vision that lies behind the new *Statement of Faith* for Sovereign Grace Churches.

An Institutional Treasure

The creation of our *Statement of Faith* is in one sense ordinary and not at all unique since Christian churches and denominations commonly have a public statement of their doctrinal beliefs. At the same time, to create and affirm a confession of the faith is a profoundly counter-cultural act in today's world. In a culture that claims truth is relative, we hold that truth is objective. In a culture that minimizes the importance of the past, we are transmitting truth from generations that have gone before us. And in a deeply anti-institutional culture, we have ratified an authoritative, institutional document written and enforced by the church.

A confessional document is, by definition, an institutional document. It comes into existence only where an institution is valued, articulates institutional beliefs, and embodies institutional priorities, and its purpose is to function authoritatively within that ecclesiastical institution. Our *Statement of Faith* results from thinking institutionally and ought to be received as an institutional treasure.

Unfortunately, institutions are often somewhere toward the bottom of the list of the things we tend to get excited about. The word itself sounds boring and lifeless. It has become fashionable not only for the world but also for Christians to disparage our institutions. Seen in this light, our confession of faith is a declaration of resistance—it is an act of protest that defies the spirit of the age regarding institutions in general and the church in particular.

If we want to build something durable with our lives, if we want our limited time on earth to make a difference for the glory of Christ and contribute to the flourishing of others, we will need to cut against the grain of our society and regain an understanding of the importance of thinking institutionally about the Christian life.

Scripture has something important to say about institutions. God's command to fill the earth and subdue it includes cultivating institutions for the common good. Christ wants his church to build itself up in love and maturity, which involves embracing his plan for the institution of the church. Christians who love the gospel of Jesus Christ will love the church for which our Savior died. Therefore, we will speak and live to borrow Kevin DeYoung's words, "In praise of institutions and organized religion."¹

The Individualist and the Institutional

The problem is that we tend to think of our lives not in terms of institutional reception, contribution, and loyalty, but in terms of personal ambitions and self-fulfillment. The worldview of radical individualism has blinded many Christians to the value of church membership, ecclesiastical heritage, and denominational belonging.

Consider the difference between the individualist and the institutionalist. The individualist cares primarily about his journey; his life is the grand story in which he is both victim and hero. He takes a cynical view of institutions and their power, being primarily aware of the damage they have done and their potential for oppression and harm. He is deeply suspicious of those with organizational authority, including those in the church, convinced that their communication is self-serving, their decisions are self-protecting, and their use of power is self-advancing. All authority is deemed authoritarian.

1. THIS IS THE SUBTITLE TO *WHY WE LOVE THE CHURCH*, BY KEVIN DEYOUNG AND TED CLUCK.

Therefore, the individualist maintains distance from institutional commitment and postures himself as an outsider. There is a dichotomy in his mind between institutional health and individual flourishing. So he takes to social media (a naturally anti-institutional platform) to point fingers and cast suspicion on churches and other ministries. He rails against institutions in the name of justice, unaware of his harm to others and himself. In the end, he unwittingly becomes the primary contributor to his sense of isolation, disconnectedness, and discouragement.

The institutionalist, on the other hand, is much different. He is aware of the gift of institutions and knows that the institutions to which he belongs are vital for his connectedness and growth. The greatest joys in his life are identifying with and contributing to something bigger than himself. He positions himself as an insider, pouring his time and talents into the church and treasuring the group of churches to which he is united. He also values the health and reputation of other churches, denominations, and ministries in the broader body of Christ.

The answer is not to tear down but to cultivate integrity, humility, love, and hope.

The institutionalist is not ignorant of the harm that is sometimes done by institutions, nor is he unaware of the weaknesses in the institutions to which he belongs. He is no stranger to the doctrine of sin, or the ways power can be misused. However, he knows the answer is not to tear down or give in to cynicism but to cultivate integrity, humility, love, and hope. He has deep convictions about the ability of healthy churches to promote truth, build culture, protect the weak, enhance mission, and contribute to the thriving of each member.

Faithful Reception

In his insightful book, *On Thinking Institutionally*, Hugh Heclo explains why institutions are essential for human flourishing. He says that a life of fulfillment and meaning is found in institutional loyalties and that this is what we are most likely to cherish when we look back on the course our lives have taken.

According to Hecló, institutional thinking affirms the importance of organizations and maintains great respect for them. It means we always seek to operate with inherited institutional values in view. This unfashionable approach to our life and labor requires self-sacrifice and self-restraint to benefit others. There must be a willingness, in Hecló's words, to be viewed as naive, unoriginal, a lapsed critical thinker, a goody-two-shoes, and an elitist defender of the status quo. But, Hecló says, it's entirely worth it.

What is meant by institutional thinking? Hecló says it can be thought of as faithful reception:

As a basic orientation toward life, institutional thinking understands itself to be in a position primarily of receiving rather than of inventing or creating. The emphasis is not on thinking up things for yourself, but on thoughtfully taking delivery of and using what has been handed down to you. In taking delivery, institutionalists see themselves as debtors who owe something, not as creditors to whom something is owned. As debtors they have been freely given a world charged with meaning and calls to commitment. What is on offer is an invitation to engagement that goes well beyond self-engagement. Faithful reception gives life meaning by establishing a connection with exterior referents from the past that have, in a sense, already gone beyond and outlived you, and done so to your benefit.²

Hecló also describes thinking institutionally as stretching of time horizons.

To think institutionally is to stretch your time horizon backward and forward so that the shadows from both the past and future lengthen into the present. ...When thinking institutionally, current decisions are made with a continuing awareness that you are enjoying the fruits of something belonging to predecessors and successors. Therefore, while change is inevitable, the recognition of its implications is embedded in a strong appreciation for what has gone on before you were here and what will go on after you are gone.³

This idea of institutional thinking deeply resonates with me. As a pastor in Sovereign Grace, I am in the position primarily of receiving rather than

2. HUGH HECLÓ, *ON THINKING INSTITUTIONALLY* (NEW YORK, NY: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008), 98.

3. *IBID.*, 109-110.

inventing. More than anything, I want to be found faithful in stewarding that which has been entrusted to me. Past leaders have sown for my benefit. I am connected to them, and I have obligations to act in ways that are in keeping with what has been handed down to me.

The church's founding pastor where I serve is a godly man named Bill Patton. He led the planting of Covenant Fellowship Church in 1984. His life uniquely inspires me to faithfulness, humility, and commitment. Bill has taught me through his example that what I'm a part of is more important than the role I play. I often think of the many faithful brothers and sisters who have labored to build what I enjoy. I am reminded that I am, as Hecló says, "enjoying the fruits of something belonging to predecessors and successors." The same is true for many others.

Building Together

We all have a part to play in the strength of our local churches and, therefore, in the strength of our union of churches. We have the exciting opportunity to be a part of seeking to build something that will last. The need of the hour is for more Christians to think institutionally, see God's grace in their churches and denominations, and invest their energies not in tearing down but building up.

Our *Statement of Faith* exists because we desire to build a durable association of churches centered not on personality or celebrity but Biblical truth and shared values. We are not working toward pastors who gain the attention of the broader Christian world through their skills and personality, but churches that are growing into greater maturity and knowledge of the truth. Denominations at their best are formative, existing not to provide platforms for the talented and ambitious few but to contribute to the prospering of all.

The quiet, hidden, and unglamorous work of building belongs to us without concern for validation or fame. The aim of our ministry is not fast growth, bigger churches, or the expansion of a brand. Jesus says to the church, "I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word" (Rev. 3:8). Christ does not teach us to pursue a bigger platform but to value a long obedience in the same direction. Great power is nothing compared to faithfulness to the truth.

To my friends and fellow workers in Sovereign Grace: I encourage you, do

not lament the institutionalization of our family of churches. Instead, we should thank God for his kindness in helping us order and solidify so many of the things we love about our gospel partnership.

Andy Crouch is right that the greatest risk to human flourishing is not institutionalization but the loss of institutions. His application of this insight to the forms of church life we are building inspires me:

One of the great tragedies of the church in America is how many of our most creative leaders poured their energies into creating forms of church life that served just a single generation. Even when these efforts were built around something larger than a single personality, they were doomed to seem dated and 'irrelevant' even to the children of their founders.

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Perhaps a new generation of leaders will arise who want to build for posterity, plant seeds that will take generations to bear fruit, and nurture forms of culture that will be seen as blessings by our children's children.

If we are serious about flourishing, across space and through time, we will be serious about institutions.⁴

This is the vision that has captivated my heart: building for posterity, planting seeds for future generations, and, therefore, being serious about institutions.

Pressing questions confront all who belong to our small denomination: Will we seek to contribute to something that will last beyond our lifetime? Will we build on something sturdier than personality and gifting? Will we labor to hold fast to the truth delivered to us? Will we embrace the gift of institutions and the crucial role our partnership plays in our spiritual formation and the health of our churches?

4. ANDY CROUCH, *PLAYING GOD: REDEEMING THE GIFT OF POWER* (DOWNERS GROVE, IL: INTERVARSITY PRESS, 2013), 188.

Through our new *Statement of Faith*, the pastors of Sovereign Grace have answered these questions with a hopeful and prayer-filled, "Yes!"

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