

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,
always in every prayer of mine
for you all making my prayer with joy,
because of your partnership in the gospel
from the first day until now.

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-5

CHURCHES IN PARTNERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Jared Mellinger

Senior Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

ONE OF THE SEVEN Shared Values of Sovereign Grace Churches is that we are united in fellowship, mission, and governance. In John 17:20-21, Jesus prayed that his people would be one, so that the world would embrace the good news of Christ. We believe this unity should find expression through churches partnering together for the gospel.

This partnership we see throughout the New Testament, and is God's design for the church today. It is through the interdependence of local churches that Christian unity is beautifully displayed, relationships are enjoyed, congregations are protected, and the message of the gospel advances in power.

This issue of the Sovereign Grace Journal is devoted to the happy theme of partnership among churches. Be sure to read Mark Prater's article which tells the story of why he is part of Sovereign Grace. Ben Kreps draws lessons on partnership from Philippians and Steve Whitacre does the same from the book of Acts. Riley Spring has provided a valuable explanation of what partnership means for church members.

The articles in this issue explain each aspect of our unity: united in fellowship, united in mission, and united in governance. It is our hope that pastors and church members celebrate each of these aspects of partnership. One of my favorite parts of this issue are the partnership stories. These stories could be greatly multiplied, and they illustrate the central theme of this issue: churches are stronger together.

Jared

THE GRACE OF PARTNERSHIP

Jared Mellinger

Senior Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

From the earliest days of Sovereign Grace, we have believed that churches are stronger together. It has been our shared conviction these four decades that in partnership we can accomplish far more than any one church could ever accomplish on its own. It is also my conviction that this theme of partnership will always be preached most powerfully not through any sermon, but through the example of faithful pastors and churches.

2 Corinthians 8-9 are familiar chapters on generous giving, but these chapters are often misunderstood. There are a few things to keep in mind as we examine this passage. *First*, the giving that is in view in these chapters does not involve *local* needs and *local* ministry, but *extra-local* ministry and needs. *Second*, Paul is not mostly after more money, he is concerned that the independent-leaning church in Corinth learn to demonstrate love and zeal for churches beyond themselves.

And *third*, these chapters are not simply about meeting an isolated, one-time need in the church in Jerusalem, they are about Paul's broader desire to join many churches together in an interdependent mission. This is why this larger section ends in 2 Corinthians 9:13-14 with an encouragement for the church in Corinth to be generous not only toward the Jerusalem saints but also toward "all the others," and Paul describes the Jerusalem saints as longing and praying for the church in Corinth. It's partnership.

Our goal here is not so much to focus on money and giving as it is to consider how these chapters shed light on the great New Testament theme of the unity and communion of churches. It is our hope that this biblical vision of the grace of partnership will deepen the convictions we already hold dear, and that this

in turn would fortify our resolve to build strong regions, to send men to the Sovereign Grace Pastors College, to be willing to send out pastors to plant churches and to serve other congregations. The goal is that our churches would continue, for generations to come, to be rich in the grace of partnership.

God's Word to the Church

2 Corinthians 8:1-24 is full of lessons on partnership among churches. Paul writes:

“We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”

But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord. With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will. We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man. And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men."

Fight as One

Some might recognize these words: "There came a day unlike any other when earth's mightiest heroes were united against a common threat. On that day the Avengers were born! To fight the foes no single hero could withstand!"

That quote introduces one of the major themes of Marvel's *The Avengers* (featuring Iron Man, Captain America, the Hulk, Thor, and many others), which is the theme of teamwork, interdependence, and working together toward a common goal. In their case, that common goal is to prevent the evil Thanos from wiping out the entire universe.

In the beginning, these superheroes are each doing their own thing independently. But they join together in the recognition that none of them can carry out this mission on their own. The opening theme song to the animated *Avengers* series is "Fight as One." It says,

"Our world's about to break, Tormented and attacked... But now I'm not alone.
Always we will fight as one, Till the battle's won, With evil on the run
We never come undone, Assembled we are strong, Forever fight as one."

Now, if you are wondering if I am comparing the churches of Sovereign Grace to superheroes—yes, that is exactly what I am doing. The illustration only breaks down because our churches are more glorious, our union is more epic, and our work is more important. That is certainly not because Sovereign Grace is special. It is because we are the churches of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are therefore, as the church, a cosmic display of the wisdom of God and part of the most important institution in world history.

We are called by God, as churches, to work together for the gospel. We are called to fight as one against the powers of darkness. We are called to joyful participation in the union of churches to which God in his great kindness has joined us.

The Snare of Denominational Superiority

When we talk about partnership, it's important to make a distinction between a healthy passion for partnership and an unhealthy sense of denominational superiority. Denominational superiority is a form of pride, a sectarianism that falls into thinking one's own denomination is the greatest and healthiest thing going. It is when we say, "Well, too bad most churches historically and globally have gotten so many things abysmally wrong. It sure does stink to be them, but hey, at least we are getting it right. We the few; we the faithful; we are the truly discerning."

It was the wise and large-hearted John Newton who insightfully said that every denomination tends to be proud and "abound with bigotry" in favor of themselves, and that all pastors and church members need to be intentional in freeing themselves from denominational pride. How do we do that? Newton says we cultivate denominational humility first by being filled with the Spirit and his fruits, and second, by intentionally seeing and celebrating the abundant grace of God that exists in the larger body of Christ.¹

1. Quoted in Iain H. Murray, *The Old Evangelicalism*, (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 210.

We must always remember that the church of Christ is much older and much broader than Sovereign Grace Churches. We must always remember that what makes our churches Christian is more important than other denominational distinctives, as important as those distinctives are. We have been wisely led over the years to love and honor and humbly learn from the broader body of Christ, and if we fail to continue in that practice, it will not bode well for the future of Sovereign Grace.

We still have much to learn and we have many reasons to be humble. Let every pastor and church member in Sovereign Grace continue to say “No” to denominational superiority, and let each of us continue to say “Yes” to the pursuit of a humble enthusiasm and passion for partnership. Our desire is not for everyone to love Sovereign Grace as much as we do; it is for Christians and churches everywhere to be a part of something they love, whether it is Sovereign Grace or another union of churches because *partnership is God’s plan for the church*. We love partnership because we know that churches are stronger together.

When Churches Join Together

There is a Peanuts cartoon (Charlie Brown) where Lucy demands that Linus change TV channels, and she threatens him with her fist if he doesn’t. Linus says, “What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?” Lucy responds, “These five fingers. Individually they’re nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold.” So Linus says, “Which channel do you want?” He turns away and looks at his fingers: “Why can’t you guys get organized like that?”

This is true. Individually, one church is significantly limited in what it can accomplish. But when churches are joined together, organized into a single unit, we form a weapon that is terrible to behold. There is power in partnership. There is power in cooperation and unity among churches.

We all know there is a tendency among individual Christians toward independence and autonomy. But the reality is, that same tendency exists among churches: there is a tendency *toward* independence and *away from* joyful participation.

The late missiologist David Hesselgrave says,

“Westerners (particularly North Americans) have a cultural bias toward promoting overindependency on the part of the churches they establish. Even when their churches actually belong to a larger fellowship of churches, the likelihood of those churches assuming an active role in the larger fellowship is not always great.”²

Like the Corinthians, we have our own independent leanings. It is the danger of the insular church, the solitary and small-minded church that has little vision for anything larger than itself and sees little need for anything beyond itself.

A Timely Challenge

This was the challenge in Corinth, and it is the same challenge we will face in our churches today. Paul Barnett, in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, points out that the Corinthians were strong in a number of graces that were local and centered on themselves, but weak in those that were for the benefit of Christians and churches outside.³ He says, “Paul’s words [in 2 Cor. 8-9] stand as a rebuke to the Corinthians’ myopic individualism and congregationalism.”⁴

Ours is an age of “myopic individualism.” It is also an age of rampant anti-institutionalism, which contributes to the sense of urgency I feel around this theme of partnership at this particular moment in our history. In recent decades, and even more in recent years, there has emerged a deadly cynicism and distrust toward churches, denominations, and every other institution. The result is that Christians in any denomination are more likely than ever before to be indifferent toward or even suspicious of denominational affiliation.

This aspect of the spirit of the age poses a serious threat to this particular shared value that we hold dear. I believe that this has become one of the primary

2. David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 300.

3. Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 403.

4. *Ibid.*, 449.

leadership challenges we face as pastors. If we are leading our churches into a biblical ecclesiology, the members of the churches we serve should not be indifferent to gospel partnership in Sovereign Grace Churches, they should be informed about what God is doing, and they should be rejoicing in what we get to be a part of.

Biblical Convictions

Pastors and pastors' wives, in fact all church members, need to have a passion for partnership that is informed and sustained by biblical convictions. In the New Testament, local churches are not independent, they are interdependent. Paul devoted himself to planting and building churches, and an essential aspect of the upbuilding of those churches was to build them together regionally for mutual support and mission.

Study the book of Acts and you will see the cooperation and fellowship the churches enjoyed—traveling coworkers, reciprocal greetings, detailed updates, generous gifts, bonds of affection, sharing resources, sharing letters, leaders in various churches deliberating matters together, congregations benefiting from external accountability and instruction, churches learning from each other's example, giving up laborers to serve other churches, churches praying and thanking God for each other. We see many of these things in 2 Corinthians 8-9 as well.

The entire framework of the New Testament letters and extra-local coworkers testifies to the necessity and the irreplaceable value that God places upon churches partnering together. New Testament scholar Eckhard Schnabel says that in the New Testament, partnership in the gospel is centrally connected to the progress of the gospel.⁵ How does the gospel advance? Through partnership in the gospel.

5. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, Vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1460.

Promoting and Protecting the Gospel

Bryan Chapell says,

“No one group can do all that is required for the advancement of the gospel. The varieties of gifts that bless individual churches are broadened and their effectiveness is multiplied when churches connect their efforts. ...[We] value such connectionalism both for what it promotes and for what it protects. By our support of one another we provide more coordinated talent and resources for the promotion of the gospel than any single church could supply.”⁶

Partnership is one of our denomination’s Seven Shared Values, and in God’s kindness it has defined us since our earliest days. In Sovereign Grace, we want to plant and build churches that are rich in the grace of partnership: churches united in fellowship, mission, and governance.

In order to maintain this strength into the future, we need a foundation for our convictions about partnership that is sturdier than subjective experience and shared history alone. Memories of early conferences are not going to cut it.

Over time our experience of partnership will be something less than pure bliss. In every church, and in every denomination, the waves will at times be rough, and if there is no biblical ballast for the principles that motivate our involvement and our joyful participation, we are not going to make it. We will find ourselves slipping into a Corinthian parochialism rather than maintaining a love for partnership.

Three Examples

To inspire us toward the kind of interdependence, cooperation, partnership, and corporate responsibility we see throughout the New Testament, 2 Corinthians 8 holds out three examples. We should learn from each of them: *first*, the churches of Macedonia reveal the beauty of partnership; *second*, the self

6. Anthony L. Chute, Christopher W. Morgan, Robert A. Peterson, eds. *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 200-201.

giving of Christ reveals the basis of partnership; and *third*, the commendation of Titus and his coworkers reveals the benefits of partnership.

Throughout 2 Corinthians 8 we see that Paul's method of persuading and appealing to the church is a leadership clinic. He is not laying down commands and burdens. He is inspiring them and inviting them into a fuller experience of the grace of partnership for their own good.

1. The Beauty of Partnership

In the churches of Macedonia, in verses 1-5, we see the beauty of partnership. These churches, which include the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica, are described and commended for their extraordinary example. Paul, as always, is relentless in his determination to celebrate the grace of God among the churches. And notice, he wants all of the members of the church in Corinth to be aware of God's activity in other churches.

This is a part of the interconnectedness Paul constantly labored to cultivate. He holds up these churches as an example, and points out their posture toward partnership. He says, "Look at these churches that have such an incredible extra-local concern and love for churches beyond themselves! Look at their external focus, their love, generosity, and joy, the eagerness for partnership among these churches!"

Paul describes this in verse 1 as a grace that was upon them: "We want you to know about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia." What is this grace? The Macedonians were extremely poor, but these churches faithfully resisted the temptation to turn inward. They had plenty of their own needs as churches, but they excelled at looking to the needs of others.

They gave "of their own accord" (verse 3), voluntarily and without compulsion. Verse 4 says they were begging for the opportunity to participate—"begging us earnestly for the *favor* [or the grace] of *taking part in* [that is, participating in, *koinonia*]." They were begging for the grace of partnership, the grace of participation. That was their passion. There was an overflow of joy, an excitement, about this partnership opportunity.

Verse 5 says they went beyond what was expected of them, as they gave themselves first to the Lord. They then gave themselves to these extra-local workers and the cause of gospel partnership.

God calls our attention to this glorious display of his grace: local churches abounding in love, giving generously and sacrificially, and displaying the beauty of partnership. The smile of God is upon local churches that have an eye to the welfare of other churches.

Lessons from Macedonia

The application of this passage is not so much “You need to give more.” Paul makes clear in verse 8 he is not issuing commands, which at this point might undermine the beauty and liberality of partnership. Paul says later (2 Cor. 12:14) that the last thing he wants is to be a financial burden to them, and he says “I seek not what is yours but you.” In other words, “I am not seeking your money, I am seeking your hearts.”

What God desires from us is this same eagerness, joy, and love—since as verse 8 and verse 24 say, this proves that your love is genuine. It’s a matter of the heart. It’s a call to love. Generous financial giving is but one aspect of the grace of partnership. It is important, but it is only one evidence and demonstration of the extra-local love for the saints that God has put in our hearts.

Notice, it was not the wealthier church in Corinth that provided a model of partnership, but the much smaller and poorer churches in Macedonia. This is an important lesson: no matter the size and resources in your church, your partnership impact can be immense and can be an example to other churches. We see that in Sovereign Grace as well—relatively small churches are having a massive partnership influence in our mission.

God wants every church in Sovereign Grace to be influenced and inspired by the compelling example of the churches of Macedonia. I encourage you to read Philippians. (Philippi is one of the Macedonian churches.) You will see it in even greater detail: the mutual affection and care, the abundance of joy, the valuable shared history (which is not to be quickly abandoned), the wealth of generosity, the honoring of extra-local workers, the gratitude and the encouragement.

The church in Philippi adopted this posture from the earliest days of the church—they did not wait to have their hearts invested, or to give generously, or to release extra-local workers. They modeled joyful participation from the first day.

The Flavor of Partnership

In the New Testament we learn what partnership should feel like—the aroma of churches partnering together. It doesn't feel like a book of rules and procedures. It certainly doesn't feel like dissension or quarreling or constant debate. It is love, joy, generosity, and gratitude.

I am convinced that the only way we will continue to be effective and fruitful into the future is for each of us to intentionally pursue this aroma, this flavor of gospel partnership seen in the best moments of the early church. Study Philippians and learn the marks of healthy partnership. Learn from the churches of Macedonia that Paul commends in these verses.

I thank God for our polity, but we cannot look to our *Book of Church Order* to preserve cultural values or mature partnership—it was never intended to do that. We are still a family of churches. Let's learn from each other. Let's remember that each part is needed and valuable. Let's always be looking for opportunities, privately and publicly, to praise and commend pastors and churches in other regions, as Paul does here.

Let's pray that God deepens our denominational unity and joy for decades to come, that we might experience and display the beauty of partnership.

2. The Basis of Partnership

The second example, following the beauty of partnership evidenced by the churches of Macedonia, is the self-giving of Christ (2. Cor. 8:9). Here we see the basis of partnership. This fellowship and sacrificial giving among churches is ultimately motivated and sustained by the gospel itself. Verse 9 is a familiar and precious verse:

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might

become rich.”

Paul says, “You know the grace of Christ, and yet it is my joy to remind you of it.” Christ was rich with all the treasures of heaven. He was rich as the firstborn of all creation, rich as the preeminent one who is before all things and holds all things together. He was rich in the complete absence of poverty and suffering. Yet he became poor! Born in poverty, tempted as we are, nowhere to lay his head, despised and rejected, slandered and persecuted, humbling himself to become obedient even to the point of death on a Roman cross.

Why would the Prince of Glory become poor? Why would the majestic Son of God shed his precious blood? “Though he was rich, yet *for your sake* he became poor.” He did it for your sake! He did it as a demonstration of his great love for you so that you and I, by his poverty, might become rich in the abundance of his grace. As the song lyric tells us:

“What gift of grace is Jesus, my Redeemer
There is no more for heaven now to give.”⁷

Behold, the self-giving of the Son of God! Behold, the riches of divine mercy poured out on sinners!

Maybe you don’t have much by way of resources in this world—finances are tight, your car broke down, you had to sell your house, you wonder how you will make ends meet. God is reminding you that for your sake Christ became poor so that you by his poverty might become rich in his grace. We can therefore say with the psalmist, “Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you” (Ps. 116:7). You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Primary Application

Notice the primary application of 2 Corinthians 8:9 in context. It is not a

7. Jonny Robinson, Michael Farren, Rich Thompson, “Yet Not I but Through Christ in Me,” CityAight Music, Farren Love And War Publishing / Integrity’s Alleluia! Music, 2018.

secondary application, it is the primary application, and it is this: that the sacrificial other-centeredness of Christ in his death has profound implications for how your church relates to other churches.

That's the whole point of this verse—The gospel, the self-giving of Christ for us, launches local churches (Corinth, and every one of the churches in our union) into generosity, extra-local love, and joyful participation. The gospel is the determining factor in how we will relate to other churches, and how we will engage the partnership needs and mission opportunities that surround us.

It is no coincidence that throughout our history we have sought to be gospel-centered and to excel in the grace of partnership—these things are connected. A stingy church is a contradiction of the gospel. This is why John Murray, in the brilliant things he writes about denominational responsibility, can refer to the “evil of independentism” that often plagues churches—the evil of “exclusive preoccupation with the work and witness of the local congregation.”⁸ It is a contradiction of the gospel and a failure to apply the gospel in our corporate responsibilities.

Yes, we must be faithful first of all in our local congregation. Faithfulness starts there, but it does not end there. The deeper we go in our understanding of what Christ has done for us, the more his grace inevitably overflows in selfless love and radical generosity toward congregations beyond our own.

Looking Beyond our Own Needs

One specific way we emulate the self-giving of Christ is by sending out leaders. The church I serve, Covenant Fellowship Church, was planted outside of Philadelphia in 1984, when C.J. Mahaney and the other brothers in Gaithersburg, Maryland sent out a team including the Pattons and the Redrups. That doesn't happen if a church isn't looking beyond itself and giving of itself. We see the same example throughout our churches, where pastors and members are sacrificially sent to serve in other places.

8. John Murraray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 277.

Do you remember in Acts 13, when Paul and Barnabas are commissioned and sent out by the church in Antioch? Commenting on that sacrificial act, Darrell Bock says, “God loves churches that look beyond their own needs.”⁹ What kind of church does God love? What kind of churches do we want to be? *Churches that look beyond our own needs.* We want to be churches that follow in the footsteps of our Savior—the One who looked to the interests of others and freely gave of himself.

3. The Benefits of Partnership

There is a third example to learn from 2 Corinthians 8. And here we learn the benefits of partnership in the commendation of Titus. In verse 10 Paul says “this benefits you” and in verse 23 Titus is described as a fellow worker for their benefit. This theme of the benefits of partnership extends into chapter 9.

Obviously there is a lot in 2 Corinthians 8:16-24 about wise stewardship and gaining the trust of others. But we also see the structure of New Testament ecclesiology and mission: churches are interconnected, and these churches have appointed and commissioned extra-local leaders to carry out key functions in service of the churches.

Look at the commendation of Titus. 2 Corinthians 8:16 says that God has put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care that Paul has for the church in Corinth. There was a stirring of affection, a disposition that oriented Titus toward loving involvement in the churches. He is earnest, he is passionate, not about their money but about their maturity. He cares about the church! He wants them to be blessed in their giving. A church that is not generous in having a portion of their budget going beyond their own local ministry and mission is defeating themselves. What does Titus care about so deeply? Not money! He cares about the health of the church.

Brothers with Earnest Care

One of the ways God shows his care for our churches is by placing on the hearts of gifted leaders a desire for our wellbeing and the flourishing of our churches. It is a beautiful thing in the sight of God when a pastor is given

9. Daniel Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 440.

an earnest care for other churches—in fact, that is the only way a group of churches can survive.

For me, one of the greatest joys of serving on the Leadership Team is seeing the care, the genuine love and concern, that Regional Leaders and men on the Leadership Team have for the churches. Mark Prater has led in this—he cannot be kept away from the churches, because he so deeply and genuinely loves the churches. Not only Mark, but Jeff Purswell, Jon Payne, Dave Taylor, and all the brothers—God has put into their hearts a concern for the welfare of other churches.

With Titus are two other unidentified coworkers who would carry the money to Jerusalem. Verse 23 describes them as messengers or apostles of the churches. Whether it is these men or all of the brothers and sisters in the churches who are referred to as “the glory of Christ” in verse 23, it is clear that the people of Christ reveal the glory of Christ. Verse 24 says that a report would go from these men to churches in distant places, who would speak of the grace of partnership that is upon this church.

I love the description of the unnamed brother in verses 18-19. What do we know about this brother? First, according to verse 18, he is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel—all the churches know him preeminently as a gospel-man, a herald of Christ and him crucified. Second, according to verse 19, he has been appointed by the churches to labor on behalf of the churches. So he loves the gospel and he longs to serve the churches. He preaches the cross of Christ and he labors for the communion of churches. That’s a beautiful ministry.

If I were writing a commentary, this is where I would commence ten pages of guesswork about who these unnamed men are. But because I am not a commentator I will spare us all and simply say I don’t know. And in fact, because I am a preacher I will even say it is a glorious thing that these men are not named. Charles Spurgeon has a delightful comment here on the identity of this man. He says,

“It may have been Luke. Probably it was. It may not have been Luke. Probably it was not. We do not know who it was. But it is not important. What does it matter? As Mr. Whitfield used to say, ‘Let my name perish, but let Christ’s name last forever.’”¹⁰

Yes, we are content to have our names unmentioned and forgotten, if only we can spend our lives as gospel people, who are earnest in serving the church and playing our role in the union of churches to which we belong.

Sowing and Reaping

In 2 Corinthians 9 Paul continues to appeal to the church that they have a certain extra-local posture, and includes the fact that this will benefit them as a church—as they sow bountifully (individually and corporately) their congregation will reap bountifully. “You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way” (v. 11) which will overflow in many thanksgivings to God (v. 12).

Think of all the blessing and promises given in chapter 9, in light of this context of urging the church toward extra-local participation. God is saying directly and plainly that there are blessings of every kind for local churches that sow bountifully into extra-local fields. These will be the churches that reap in abundance. Paul says to the church, “This benefits you!”

We need to continue to help our churches be aware of and celebrate the irreplaceable benefits of partnership. Our churches need to hear, “This benefits you.” Partnership means we have others who care about us. We experience the blessing of extra-local leadership. “This benefits you!” Partnership provides belonging and accountability. It provides greater stability. It provides increased opportunities for mission. Partnership means we get to be a part of building something larger than just our own church.

Every pastor and every pastor’s wife has the responsibility of modeling joyful participation in partnership. A founding generation set an example for us in

10. Charles Spurgeon, “Joining the Church,” Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, No. 3411, October 24, 1869, <https://spurgeongems.org/sermon/chs3411.pdf>

this. Let's continue in what we have learned. Let's continue to build friendships with other pastors and learn from other churches. Do all you can to send future pastors to the Pastors College. Do all you can to have your wives attend the annual Pastors Conference. Be willing to serve on committees. Contribute at least 10% of the church's finances to our union. Consider giving personally to Sovereign Grace. Pray for the churches of Sovereign Grace. Encourage and honor the brothers who serve our churches. Be willing to sacrificially release gifted men into the broader mission, plant churches, and support global missions.

As you continue to practice joyful participation, *this benefits you*. God will richly bless you in every way and we will together contribute to building something with a lasting impact for the glory of Christ.

The huge redwood trees in California are some of the largest things on earth and the tallest trees in the world. Some of them are 300 feet high and over 2,500 years old. You would think that trees this big have an incredible root system reaching down hundreds of feet, but they actually have a very shallow root system. When storms and winds come, the reason they don't fall is because they are locked together—their roots are intertwined. They don't stand alone, they are joined together, they support and protect each other.

We believe in churches in partnership. Together we will stand, together we will build, and together we will continue to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ among the nations.

When God Strikes the Match

John Calvin pastored in Geneva during a time of great reformation and revival. Calvin was convinced that however faithful and gifted individual pastors may be, reformation would not be sustained if churches were isolated and disconnected from each other. So one of Calvin's leading Reformation priorities was to cultivate unity and interdependence among the churches.

In the 1540s he organized a group of pastors into a formal group known as the Company of Pastors. These pastors originally served three churches in the city and a dozen churches in the countryside. Over the next 50 years, around

130 men would belong to the company.

Dr. Scott Manetsch wrote the book *Calvin's Company of Pastors*. His book repeatedly highlights the importance of interdependence, and pastors of various churches working together in partnership. Pastors all received the same theological training and went through the same ordination process. It was similar to what we do, but their oral theology exam was often led by John Calvin. Dr. Manetsch says that this group of pastors from various churches “depended on one another, learned from one another, were subject to one another, and forgave one another.”¹¹

God worked mightily through those 130 men, and nearly 500 years later we thank God for their labors. It is a reminder to us that our lasting influence in Sovereign Grace Churches is not found in the number of churches or pastors we have in our union. Our God delights to work through the weak and the few, especially when we partner together.

Sinclair Ferguson reflects on how God has worked throughout church history and says,

“It seems to be a divinely employed pattern—even when we may know only one or perhaps two names, those through whom the kingdom has been signally advanced are rarely, if ever, lone wolves. God in his gracious sovereignty characteristically assembles a small community and strikes the match.”¹²

God in his gracious sovereignty has assembled us in our beloved Sovereign Grace Churches. He has joined together this small community, and just as he has often done throughout history, I believe he is striking the match once again.

11. Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536-1609* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 305.

12. Sinclair Ferguson, “Introduction.” In *The Pastor: His Call, Character, and Work*, by Faculty and Friends of Old Princeton (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2020), vii.

God has brought us to this point. God has united our hearts. God has made us resilient. And God is empowering us by his Spirit for the mission set before us. We partner not for Sovereign Grace but for the glory of Christ alone. So let's do it! Let's abound in the grace of partnership, let's lead the churches we serve to thank God for the irreplaceable benefits of partnership, and let's continue to press on, for generations to come, in the conviction we have held from the beginning, that churches are stronger together.

PARTNERSHIP STORY

CARE

Matt Gray

Senior Pastor, Living Hope Church (Fayetteville, AR)

LIVING HOPE CHURCH IN FAYETTEVILLE, Arkansas was originally planted out of Sovereign Grace Church in Louisville, KY in 2017. Like many churches in Sovereign Grace, we deeply appreciate the strong relational ties that exist between all of our churches. However, the depth and benefits of these wonderful ties have been particularly used by God to sustain and strengthen us.

Replanting a Church Plant

At the beginning of 2020, we underwent a massive transition: *we replanted a recent church plant*. We changed our name, location, and leadership. And as you would expect, we were weary. The whole church was weary. We felt that we had the faith to make these changes but not necessarily the faith to sustain them. As a result, the future of our church was uncertain, to say the least. That's where Sovereign Grace stepped in!

I'll never forget Brian Chesemore (Sovereign Grace Church, Louisville, KY) and Dave Odom (Redeeming Grace Church, Franklin, TN) flying into Fayetteville to preach on two different Sundays in January 2020 because I was unable to get off work (my *other* job). Additionally, these men refused to receive any financial assistance from our church. *And it was good they refused because we didn't have any money to give them!*

Then in February 2020, Mickey and Jane Connolly (Crossway Community Church, Charlotte, NC) showed their love and commitment to our church by moving to Northwest Arkansas for a month so that they could care for us in our weariness. When they arrived, we collapsed into their arms. Their investment built faith into the team and hope into the church, which are still evident to this day.

Help in Word and in Deed

Not only did our friends in Sovereign Grace care for us relationally, but they also cared for us financially. At the time of the transition, we were broke and in desperate need of a new meeting place. This made it very problematic when the ideal church building became available. I'll never forget hearing Mickey say, "Get the building; we will figure out the money." He was right.

With just a handful of people and a few dollars in the bank, by faith we moved into a 4,000 square foot church building which was totally renovated and equipped with state of the art sound equipment. Though we were little in a large space, the Lord gave us childlikeness "[not to despise] the day of small beginnings" (Zech. 4:10), and he gave us eyes to watch for his hands to build the church.

The Lord has provided for us in so many ways, and many of those ways were through our friends in Sovereign Grace. We have been left speechless as several churches across the country sent financial gifts to Living Hope Church. At the same time, we have been blessed with grants from Sovereign Grace. Even individual members across Sovereign Grace Churches have given generously to us.

Receiving all these gifts and categorizing them correctly in our accounting has been another unsung hero, Mark Donovan (Treasurer and Deacon, Sovereign Grace Church, Louisville, KY and Business Manager, Sovereign Grace Central). Mark served our church in this capacity for over two years and remarkably never once requested financial compensation. He served our church with joy and selflessness which remind me of the character of Christ. Last year, Mark trained a qualified young lady in our church to take over these responsibilities so that we could take another step forward in health and independence.

Honestly, as I recount these evidences of grace in our church, through our partnership in Sovereign Grace, I find myself asking, "*Who does this sort of thing?*" I have never seen or heard of such commitment to one another in a denomination of churches like we have experienced in Sovereign Grace.

Changing Lives and Stabilizing the Church

As a result of Sovereign Grace's investment, lives have been changed. In August of 2020, we baptized a man who had been living as a homosexual for 30 years. In August of 2021, we baptized a young lady who found Living Hope a refuge from the prosperity gospel which had been influencing her for years. In 2022, we baptized a young man who had been an atheist for over a decade. We've continued to see baptisms as we watch God add to our number.

In May of 2022, I was ordained and installed as an elder at Living Hope with the help of my coach, Steve Whitacre. We also were able to install three trustworthy men into the office of deacon. This was only possible through the guidance and counsel of men in my region, such as Walt Alexander, C.J. Mahaney, Jeff Purswell, and Brian Chesemore. I'm happy to report, as a result of God's faithfulness working through sacrificial partnership, Living Hope Church is not only surviving, we are thriving and healthy.

With the Psalmist (Ps. 118:23), we at Living Hope say, "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." The members of Living Hope Church are deeply thankful to Sovereign Grace for their investment in our local church, for taking gospel partnership so seriously, and for living it out with sincerity. All glory to God.

WHY I'M PART OF SOVEREIGN GRACE

Mark Prater

Executive Director, Sovereign Grace Churches (Glen Mills, PA)

In the book, *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity*, edited by Anthony Chute, Christopher Morgan, and Robert Peterson, a winsome case is made for “how denominational affiliation can be natural without being negative.”¹ A chapter is dedicated to the importance of denominations, saying, “Denominations enable local churches to identify themselves with a rich confessional tradition in which denominational distinctives are placed within a larger framework of historic Christian orthodoxy. And denominational entities enable local churches to train missionaries, educate pastors, and provide literature within those theological boundaries.”² The book contains six chapters from different men that tell their stories of why they are a part of a specific denomination. For example, Timothy George explains why he is a Baptist, and Bryan Chapell explains why he is a Presbyterian. Overall, each of these stories gives a personal side for why these men “belong to Christ, why they belong to each other in Christ, and why they belong to denominations that seek to be faithful in Christ.”³

Not surprisingly, Sovereign Grace Churches wasn't included in the book. We are far too small and far too young (only 41 years) compared to the other denominations that were highlighted. Yet, like other denominations, we are a confessional family of churches who enjoy our own rich denominational

1. Anthony L. Chute, Christopher W. Morgan, and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 15.

2. *Ibid*, 64.

3. *Ibid*, 16.

distinctives, and it's my privilege to tell my story of why I'm part of Sovereign Grace, a family of churches that I dearly love.

My Introduction to Sovereign Grace

I distinctly remember the day when Jill and I, along with our three daughters (who were 10, 8, and 4 at the time), walked through the doors of Covenant Fellowship Church, a Sovereign Grace church in the western suburbs of Philadelphia. It was a Sunday morning in September 1990. At the time, I was working for a pharmaceutical company, and we had moved from the Midwest to the Philadelphia area because of a job change I had taken within the company. A friend of ours had invited us to Covenant Fellowship so we decided to check it out. We had no idea at the time how God was going to use that church, and our family of churches, to transform our lives.

On our drive home after the first Sunday at Covenant Fellowship, Jill and I discussed what just happened. Our previous church experiences didn't include expressive worship and the use of the spiritual gifts, which we observed that first Sunday at Covenant Fellowship. You can imagine the kind of questions we asked on the way home! *Why were people raising their hands as they sang? Why were people sharing from the microphone at the front of the auditorium?*

You see, Jill and I were saved at Converse Church of Christ in Converse, Indiana. It was a gospel preaching, cessationist church that was more Arminian in its theology. Jill was saved there when, as a junior in high school, she attended a youth retreat, heard the gospel clearly, and was born again. It was about 3 years later when Jill invited me to her church, that I heard the gospel, and the Lord mercifully saved me. Jill and I were married in that church, and we began raising our family there. We enjoyed rich fellowship, joyfully served that church, and dearly loved the people of Converse Church of Christ during our 8 years as members before the Lord moved us to Pennsylvania.

On our drive home after that first Sunday, we also talked about how we were wonderfully impacted by the service. We had never heard gospel-centered preaching like we did that Sunday, which included ways to apply the gospel to our lives. We were affected by the humility and approachability of the pastors, the warmth of the people, and the clear love they had for Christ and for one

another. Even with our questions unresolved, we decided to go back the next Sunday. Within a short time, Covenant Fellowship became our church home. Jill and I have now been a part of Sovereign Grace for 33 years, and God has used our family of churches to transform our lives. That's why I'm eager to share several reasons why I'm part of Sovereign Grace.

Our Commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Even though Jill and I had questions after our first Sunday at Covenant Fellowship, what kept drawing us back was the expository, gospel-centered preaching that we heard, which helped us apply the gospel to our marriage, parenting, and all of life. This commitment to the gospel was not just that of one church, but an entire family of churches. When we attended the annual gathering of churches called Celebration East, we again heard gospel-centered preaching and a commitment to advance the mission of the gospel. For 33 years, Jill and I have consistently heard "Christ and him crucified" preached from the pulpits of Sovereign Grace churches and at Sovereign Grace conferences. I thank God for C.J. Mahaney, one of our founders, who has modeled this so well. I also thank God for Sovereign Grace pastors who have faithfully preached the good news of Jesus Christ Sunday after Sunday in the many churches in Sovereign Grace.

One of the reasons I'm part of Sovereign Grace is because the preaching of "Christ and him crucified" is not just a declaration of good news, but results in application that has helped us connect the gospel to our lives. When we walked through the doors of Covenant Fellowship in 1990, I was not leading well in our home. However, God used the preaching of his Word, the conviction of the Spirit, and the fellowship of the saints to convict me of sin and grant repentance by his grace. As a result, our marriage and parenting were transformed. Jill and I often ponder where our marriage would be, and where our kids would be, if we were not in a Sovereign Grace church.

Seeking to be a "gospel-centered" family of churches is something we share with other denominations who are also pursuing gospel-centrality. I'm grateful for those in other denominations who have helped us keep the gospel central through the books they have written and the sermons they have preached. I think of men like John Piper, Jerry Bridges, John Stott, Michael Reeves, and many more.

Our Commitment to Sound Doctrine

Over the last decade, I've had a front row seat watching the men on our Theology Committee draft an updated version of our *Statement of Faith*. I'm especially grateful for how Jeff Purswell (Director of Theology, and Chairman of the Theology Committee) led through a process that included every eldership in Sovereign Grace. It was my joy to lead the Council of Elders meeting in November 2020 when our *Statement of Faith* was unanimously approved by all of our churches. This confession captures what we believe, helps us protect our churches from theological error, and provides the basis of our unity. I appreciate all the theological convictions found in our *Statement of Faith*, but there are a few that I want to highlight because they capture why I'm part of Sovereign Grace.

Reformed Theology

Jill and I were members of Covenant Fellowship Church when, in the early 90s, Sovereign Grace became more clearly reformed in theology while remaining baptistic and continuationist. Sovereign Grace was, from my perspective, born out of revival: the Jesus movement in the 70s. Early in our history, we were more vulnerable to some of the theological weaknesses of the charismatic movement. However, as we evolved and matured theologically, and because of the leadership of men like C.J. Mahaney, we began to read the Puritans and modern-day theologians like J.I. Packer and R.C. Sproul in the early 90s. The clarifying and solidifying of reformed convictions was a thoughtful, careful, patient process that focused on truths like the glory of God and the sovereignty of God, including the reality that he chose us for salvation—we did not choose him. I'm grateful for men from other denominations, like Packer and Sproul, who have taught us, and continue to teach us through their books, the glorious truths of reformed theology.

For Jill and me, the shift to reformed theology was eye-opening. We not only read our Bibles differently, but we also had a theological grid to better understand the challenges of living in a fallen world. For example, reading John Owen's doctrine of sin helped us understand why life is hard and why we desperately needed God's grace every day to put off the old man and put on the new. When life didn't appear to make sense, we pressed into God to discover how he was working out his good and sovereign plan especially when we didn't

understand. But it was reformed theology's focus on the glory of God in all that we do that gave us purpose and joy. In Sovereign Grace I found people who shared that same purpose and joy to live for God's glory. By God's grace, we are a family of churches that exists to glorify God and enjoy him forever, and it is my prayer that we will continue to give him glory for years to come.

A Robust Pneumatology

After our first Sunday at Covenant Fellowship, Jill and I had to wrestle with what we believed about the spiritual gifts and the work of the Spirit. Were we cessationists or were we continuationists? Our wrestling drove us to study Scripture. Months later we were convinced by God's Word that we were continuationists. Our study, along with the preaching we heard at Covenant Fellowship and at Sovereign Grace conferences, also showed us our daily need to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18), to walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), and to receive power not only to use our gifts, but also to bear the fruit of the Spirit in our lives (Gal. 5:22-23). I'm part of Sovereign Grace because we embrace the broad work of the Spirit in a way that points to Christ and stirs our affections for Christ.

Biblical Complementarianism

When we arrived at Covenant Fellowship, we heard teaching about God's good design of creating men and women equal in dignity and value, and yet with specific roles in the church and the home. Those sermons, reading *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* by Piper and Grudem, and benefitting from the resources produced by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) were used by God to transform our understanding of marriage and the roles of men and women in the church. God intends for men and women not to compete with each other, but to complement one another. In a day when God's good design for men and women has increasingly come under attack, and when many who espouse complementarian theology appear to be compromising its application, I'm part of Sovereign Grace because of how we hold to, rejoice in, and seek to apply the Bible's teaching on manhood and womanhood.

Our Commitment to the Local Church

I remember listening to cassette tapes (yes, there was such a thing) of a teaching series entitled, “The Dearest Place on Earth” preached by C.J. Mahaney. God used that series, along with our experience at Covenant Fellowship, to give me a fresh affection for the local church. As a result, Jill and I built our family into the life of Covenant Fellowship. We served alongside men and women who shared our love for the local church. We benefitted, and continue to benefit, from the biblical fellowship we desperately need to grow in Christ. However, when I observed how leaders in Sovereign Grace came to Covenant Fellowship simply to serve and care for our church, I learned that there was a whole family of churches who were committed to the local church.

Over the years our ecclesiology has been strengthened by greater definition. I’m grateful for the resources produced by other evangelical leaders that have helped shape our ecclesiology, despite our differences, and I’m grateful for our new polity and *Book of Church Order* that was ratified in 2013. Our *Book of Church Order* not only defines the partnership we share with other Sovereign Grace churches, but most importantly it exists to serve and strengthen the local church by providing processes for how a church can get help when in trouble, or how to receive support when planting a new church. Sovereign Grace churches are individually constituted and elder-governed, but also united in fellowship, governance, and mission in ways that strengthen us individually and corporately. It is a blessing to have a denominational home that both honors the individual integrity of local churches and connects us together for mutual encouragement, protection, and mission.

One of the great joys I have is to work alongside the men on the Sovereign Grace Leadership Team. We often remind ourselves that our primary purpose in leading Sovereign Grace is to serve the pastors and members of our churches. That’s important because our commitment to the local church keeps our mission focused where it should be—on the local church. This is what I mean: all local and global gospel mission springs from the local church, and leads to the planting of new local churches where disciples are made as existing disciples mature. Therefore, serving our churches strengthens the gospel mission that we share.

Our Commitment to Church Planting

Sovereign Grace has been committed to planting new churches as a means to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ from the very start. Covenant Fellowship Church was planted in 1984 because of this commitment, and my own story in Sovereign Grace includes church planting. In 1996, I was sent with a team of ten adults and several kids from Covenant Fellowship to plant a church in Pittsburgh, PA. Those on our church planting team made great sacrifices by moving, getting new jobs, and serving heroically to plant the church. However, my church planting story isn't unique.

There are hundreds of people in Sovereign Grace who have made the same kind of sacrifices to plant churches for the purpose of reaching the lost with the good news of the gospel. Our commitment to church planting isn't unique. Many other denominations have effectively planted churches. But church planting is a distinct work God has done in our small family of churches. My prayer is that God would stir young men in our churches to give their lives to the work of church planting so that we can continue to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ together.

Our Commitment to Train Pastors

Should God give us young men who desire to serve in pastoral ministry and plant churches, and should God allow us to be a multigenerational family of churches, men will need theological and pastoral training. Therefore, I'm grateful that C.J. Mahaney started a Pastors College decades ago. Following the model of Charles Spurgeon, he connected our Pastors College to a local church so that what is taught in the classroom can be observed in the church.

Because of the leadership of Jeff Purswell, our commitment to train pastors not only includes rigorous theological instruction, but also includes pastoral care for the students and their wives. I've consistently heard our Pastors College graduates say how well they were trained theologically, but even more importantly how their marriage grew during their year at the Pastors College. Our commitment to train pastors includes both theological instruction and helping men grow in Christ-like character so that they are equipped to keep a close watch on their life and doctrine for years to come.

Our Commitment to Produce Theologically Rich Music

What Jill and I failed to see during our first Sunday at Covenant Fellowship was the connection between the truth contained in the songs being sung and the passionate, expressive worship we observed. However, as we paid more attention to the rich theological truths contained in the lyrics of the songs, we realized that the passion of the people was not emotionalism, but the affectionate response that truth stirs in the heart.

In other words, faithful orthodoxy leads to doxology. We also failed to realize that many of the songs we sang were written by members of Sovereign Grace churches produced by Sovereign Grace Music. For 35 years, Sovereign Grace Music has been producing Christ-exalting songs to serve local churches. I'm grateful for the leadership of Bob Kauflin (Director of Sovereign Grace Music), who has given his life to training worship leaders in our churches and producing songs that are sung in churches throughout the world.

Our Commitment to Build Relationally

Sovereign Grace is a denomination, but because of our commitment to build relationally, we are also a family of churches. We build relationally in our churches and among our churches, which makes gospel ministry sweeter and gospel mission more effective. I'm part of Sovereign Grace because we are a family of churches on mission together, not as professional associates, but as friends who share a passion to see Christ proclaimed to every tribe, tongue, and nation.

A Committed Gospel People

These are just some of the reasons why I'm part of Sovereign Grace and why I dearly love our family of churches. I wanted to write this article because even though I see Sovereign Grace changing, it's very important that we don't change in fundamental ways.

As we become more of a global and generationally diverse family of churches, let us continue to be a people who are committed to the gospel, committed to good theology, committed to the local church, committed to training pastors, committed to producing theologically sound music, and committed to building relationally. Most importantly, let's remain committed to doing all that we do together as a family of churches for the glory of God alone.

WHAT DOES PARTNERSHIP MEAN FOR CHURCH MEMBERS?

Riley Spring

Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Parramatta (Parramatta, Australia)

Partnership among churches is not just a pastors' collective. Every member has a part to play and benefits from partnership.

Pay Attention to the Postscripts

Do you read and study the postscripts at the ends of the letters in the New Testament? You know, those last few verses that include the personal greetings, well wishes, and instructions from the author to the church(es) that were once practical but now seem quite irrelevant 2,000 years after.

I used to view them as nice but unnecessary. It was fun to read and try to pronounce their names, while imagining what they looked like. I pictured Rufus, a large, bearded man; Andronicus, a warrior disciple; Ampliatus, the one-armed evangelist. In my mind, the meat was in chapters 1-14 of Romans, and chapters 15-16 seemed like they were kept for posterity but were not quite as “living and active.” How wrong I was!

Far from being outdated and irrelevant, along with all the personal references in the epistles, these postscripts give us a wonderful window into the interdependent life of the New Testament churches and their leaders. Through these Spirit-inspired “*add-ons*,” we gain vital insights into what gospel partnership means, not just for pastors but for the entire church membership. They teach us, by example, so much about the duties, expectations, and benefits of interdependence across churches. They teach us that every member has a part to play and benefits from our partnerships.

In healthy New Testament churches, partnership across churches is not just for the pastors; it's for the whole church. And we have the same hope for Sovereign Grace Churches. We want to continue in our rich history of whole churches caring for other churches. We want to see the youngest members in our congregations embrace their own role in partnering with other churches. I want the members of my local church to sense their belonging and participate within our family of churches. This is a sign of health and maturity.

Mature Church Memberships

Mature church memberships are concerned for the welfare of other churches and their leaders. Immature church memberships are only concerned for themselves individually and at best their own church corporately. Why is this?

The New Testament church is a family, the "household of God" (Eph. 2:19, Gal. 6:10, 1 Tim. 3:15), within a broader, larger, universal church family, "your brotherhood throughout the world" (1 Pet. 5:9). Families care for one another, sacrifice for one another, protect one another, give gifts, share meals, welcome new additions, show deference and respect to uncles, aunts, and grandparents. They do this not only in the nuclear unit but also in the broader familial group for the good of the family name.

It's often been said that it's not "*Jesus and me*" but "*Jesus and we*," but it's even bigger than that. The "we" includes not only our local church but other local churches that we are called and blessed to be in partnership with as well. This is reflected in Paul's instructive greeting to the Corinthians: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:2). We are called to be saints together with other Christians. The most practical way for us to put that into practice is with our fellow Sovereign Grace churches locally, regionally, and globally.

This cuts against our natural individualism and our lionizing of corporate independence. Healthy New Testament churches are not *independent* but *interdependent*. And this is not just at the leadership level. Interdependence must make its way throughout the entire membership. Partnership is not just for pastors; it's for the entire congregation, with every member doing their part for the good of the whole.

The Mature and The Childish

The church in Philippi is heralded by Paul as a great example of a healthy and mature congregation that played their part in the furtherance of the gospel and the care for other churches beyond themselves. It took the whole congregation to make this happen. For example, multiple times the Philippians alone sacrificially partnered with Paul by sending him financial aid while he was shamefully bound in chains for the cause of the gospel (Phil. 1:3-7, 4:10-21). They sent out one of their best, Epaphroditus, to serve Paul and accompany him in his evangelistic mission and support for other churches (Phil. 2:25-30). They begged Paul for the opportunity to give financially to aid the Jerusalem church in her suffering, despite their own poverty (2 Cor. 8:1-5).

The Macedonians are honored because of their maturity amidst adversity. They cared for their partners in the gospel, their broader church family, and wanted to play their part.

The Corinthians, on the other hand, were childish and constantly beset by tribalism and independence. They struggled constantly to accept the extra local leadership of Paul and instead welcomed in false apostles (2 Cor. 10-11). Though they pledged to give aid to the Jerusalem church, they had begun to waiver in their commitment and needed a special envoy to remedy this lack (2 Cor. 8-9). They accepted immorality, got drunk at communion, sued one another, and used their spiritual gifts as badges of their own importance.

In a word, they were immature. Despite their wealth, status, education, and gifting, they didn't seem to excel in partnership or play their part in accordance with the grace given to them.

Partnership in Practice at the Member Level

So, what can you do as a church member to participate maturely and meaningfully with other churches? Here are five practices for how each of the members of a local church, not just the leaders, can participate in the cause of the gospel.

Give

Though 2 Corinthians 8-9 is often used to spur us on for giving generously to our local church, the context is actually Paul encouraging the Corinthians to set aside money to send outside of their church to the Jerusalem church. He sees it as their duty to support the hand that fed them at first. From Jerusalem came the gospel which saved them. And it is a matter of “fairness” (2 Cor. 8:14) that they who are wealthy now should support their suffering and poorer extended church family.

In Sovereign Grace we have so many wonderful opportunities to play our part by giving to the global mission of God. We can give to the work of the Asia, Africa, Latin American, and European development funds. We can give to Sovereign Grace Central. We can join together as regions to raise funds for church planting in our region and beyond. We find ways to help the poor, persecuted, and under-resourced churches in our family. It takes the work not just of big donors but people like the poor Macedonians who,

“...in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, *begging us earnestly for the favor* of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.” (2 Cor. 8:2-5)

Giving to Sovereign Grace is a wonderful way to support the work of other churches.

Receive

Whether it's Paul, Timothy, Titus, Tychicus, Epaphroditus, or countless others, local churches and their whole membership were called to humbly accept an extra-local leader coming in to serve and guide them. The church was to provide for their needs, receive the letters they brought, embrace them, and listen to their teachings, encouragements, and corrections.

When Paul sent Epaphroditus back to the Philippians he told them to “receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men” (Phil. 2:29). That is, the

whole church was called to welcome him back, take him in, and do it with a joyful heart, and even to go as far as to honor him. Paul also wrote to the Roman church to welcome Phoebe into their midst instructing them to, “welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.” (Rom. 16:2).

Let us do the same in Sovereign Grace Churches. When a visiting preacher or a serving team comes from another church, be invested and involved. Receive them, host them, care for them, honor them, and provide for them. Lean in to their leadership and wisdom. That’s partnership, and that’s maturity as a whole church.

Send

Can you imagine what it would have been like to have been in the church at Antioch? After hearing the gospel, turning to Christ, and gathering as a church, the great Barnabas is sent from Jerusalem to check on the church. He stays for a while and then leaves to get his friend to help—the Apostle Paul! They both stay there for a year of fruitful ministry.

Then in a prayer meeting the Holy Spirit sets aside both Paul and Barnabas for the cause of world mission. They fast, lay their hands on them, and send them out. What a blow! What a loss! But, what a gain! By sending out Paul and Barnabas, the Antioch church was caught up in the global plan of God promised from the time of Abraham to see the nations of the earth blessed (Gen. 12:3). They got to be an instrumental part of fulfilling the great prophecy of Isaiah 49:6: “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” And the rest is history. As they went out, they took the gospel to the Gentiles and from there sparked a sovereign chain reaction that reverberates into our lives today.

But what would have happened if the members of the Antioch church were only concerned for themselves? What if they wanted to keep their best pastors for themselves only? Imagine how great their sermons would have been! Imagine their Sunday morning classes! But also imagine their loss. There would have been no churches planted in Ephesus, Galatia, Thessalonica, or even Corinth.

Healthy and mature churches send leaders and send workers to spread the gospel and aid other churches. For

“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent” (Rom. 10:14-15)?

It takes courage and gospel sacrifice as a church to send out a church plant, to send out beloved members to join a team, to send a pastor on trips, to send out key leaders to aid other churches. And it takes a belief that the salvation of unbelievers and the health of other churches is our priority. Therefore, we must send!

Who is it in your church that needs to be raised up and sent out? When the call comes for a church plant, will you pray about whether God is calling you to join the team? Will you joyfully bear the costs of sending your leaders out regionally and globally to help the cause of Christ abroad? If you do, you will be involved in the great plan of redemption in a new and broader way.

Pray

Often what is most achievable can seem like the hardest thing to do, and that is to pray. It doesn't cost us money but it does require our time, energy, heart, and headspace. Yet, this is a vital means of healthy church partnership. Paul enjoins the Ephesians in the task of broad prayer, “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (Eph. 6:18).

And he calls them to join in praying for him and his gospel work: “and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph. 6:19-20).

Are you praying for matters outside of your local church? Have you signed up for the monthly Sovereign Grace “Global Missions Newsletter” so that you can be informed and consistent in praying for the nations? Do you pray

for church plants, planters, and their teams? This takes time and effort but is a beautiful way of partnering with our churches across the world.

Love

Probably the least obeyed command in all the New Testament is, “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (2 Cor. 13:12). This command, which may be confusing at first, was a Christian innovation, a beautiful expression of Christian love and “a token of deepest relationship and unity.”¹ This greeting broke down social, gender, and racial barriers, and enabled a visible and physical sign to express our solidarity in Christ. This unity is first to be expressed in our local churches but then radiates outward to “the brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Pet. 5:9). Although it isn’t necessary that we kiss physically, it is a reminder that our unity is to be affectionate, warm, genuine, and unprejudiced.

Sovereign Grace Churches is now a global family of churches. This is beautiful and it requires us to love people all around the world who are very different from us in almost every way. And so, we must do more than simply partner with our fellow Christians; we need to “love the brotherhood” (1 Pet. 2:17).

Do you love your brothers and sisters in your region, in your country, and across the world? Does your heart yearn for them? Do you hold them with affection?

Play Your Part and Feel a Part!

We have a duty and a privilege to be in partnership across our Sovereign Grace Churches. We *get* to play a part in God’s global mission, in big and small ways. And the benefit is, as we look outside ourselves, we also will *feel* a part of what God is doing. Paul told the Corinthians that their financial partnership “benefits you” (2 Cor. 8:10). This has been my experience: the more I participate, the more I feel a part, and the more joy I have.

Our church, Sovereign Grace Parramatta in Australia, was born out of sacrificial partnership from Sovereign Grace Church Sydney. Their church was

1. R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, Preaching the Word, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 234.

born out of generous partnership from churches in Wales and the U.S. And the cycle continues. Whole churches, like Inglesia Gracia Soberana in Juárez, Mexico, have the joy of hosting the significant Fieles Conference for 480 pastors. Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville in Kentucky adopts 10-15 future pastors and their families for 10 months and serves them, even though they know they'll all likely leave them and never return. The stories abound, and so does the joy!

Mature churches are concerned for the welfare of other churches and their leaders. They are in partnership as a whole church. They give, receive, send, pray, and love. And their Chief Shepherd, the One who gave it all to welcome us into his eternal family, watches with delight.

PHILIPPIANS

LESSONS IN PARTNERSHIP

Ben Kreps

Lead Pastor, Living Hope Church (Middletown, PA)

It was a miraculous demonstration of God’s sovereign grace. The Apostle Paul arrived in the city of Philippi and went to a place of prayer on the bank of a river, where he began to proclaim the gospel to a group of women gathered there. One of these was a businesswoman named Lydia, and we are told that she was a seller of purple goods—the equivalent of Armani or Gucci in that culture. As she heard the good news of the crucified and risen Savior, the Lord opened her heart to receive the gospel. Immediately following her conversion and baptism, she invited Paul and his traveling partners to stay at her house (Acts 16:1-15).

What we observe in this story is ground zero for the Philippian church plant.

As they met in Lydia’s home, the church began to grow even as Paul left to continue his expanding mission to the Gentiles. Though Paul was absent from this church personally, there remained an affectionate partnership which had been forged in the midst of church planting. Thankfully, we get a front row seat to this partnership because we have his letter to the Philippians given to us by God in holy Scripture.

We must understand that the word “partnership” in Philippians is not just a static connection; it speaks of active participation in relationship—participation for the good of the church of Christ, the advance of the gospel, and the glory of God. This letter is a gift because it contains a treasure trove of meaningful lessons in what healthy, biblical partnership in the gospel looks like both within the Philippian church and extra-locally.

Partnership is Rooted in the Gospel

Throughout this letter, Paul points them again and again to the fellowship that they share in Christ because of the grace of God. He greets them with a blessing that they would experience grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:2). He goes on to remind them that their partnership is rooted in the gospel as they are together partakers of the grace of God (1:5, 7) sharing fellowship in and through the Spirit of God (2:1). Gordon Fee writes: “What is unique to Paul’s relationship with the Philippians is that their ‘partnership’ with him was not so much ‘one on one,’ as it were, but a *three-way bond*—between him, them, and Christ (and the gospel).”¹

We are reminded that our partnership together within our local church and in extra-local partnership in Sovereign Grace Churches is not a pragmatic strategy or a club for like-minded people. It is nothing less than fellowship and participation in Christ, because of his finished work, and is therefore a thing of wonder—not to be taken for granted. We share an unbreakable bond, created by God, that unites us together by his grace, and our partnership gives expression to this through our active participation in each other’s lives.

Partnership is Marked by Gratitude, Joy, and Affection

Paul overflows with joy-filled thanksgiving and love as he writes this letter. When he remembers their partnership, his heart fills with joy and gratitude (1:3-5). He rejoices when he considers their prayers for him, and he longs for them to experience a lifestyle of joy as well (1:25; 3:1; 4:4). Paul does not merely feel this way because of his friendship with them; he loves this church with an affection that is rooted in the glory and reality of Christ’s love for them (1:8). He clearly desires not only to express his love, but also to encourage their love as he points them to Christ and exhorts them toward humble unity (2:1-11; 4:2). It must have been a rich experience for the Philippians when they opened this letter and read it on a Sunday morning, hearing the grateful heart of love that Paul communicated to them.

1. Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 444.

God-glorifying partnership shares in the heart exhibited by Paul. When we consider the fellow members of our churches and when we hear about and interact with others in our family of churches, we have much cause for gratitude, joy, and affection. God's grace is actively at work throughout our partnership, and we get to observe the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. It is only right that we, like Paul, express our gratefulness, our joy, and our affection to others as a means to encourage them and give glory to God for his amazing and active grace.

Partnership is Nurtured in Prayer

At the outset of this letter, Paul wants the Philippians to know that he continually holds them up before the Lord in prayer. Every time he remembers this church, his heart moves toward God in thanksgiving (1:3-4), and he provides them with the content of his prayers for these people whom he loves (1:9-11). He's also aware that they are praying for him (1:19), and so we find a mutual concern and care for one another through shared intercession. In all of this, he exhorts them to continue in grateful, persistent prayer so that they will experience the peace of God in their lives and throughout their church (4:6-7).

It is our joy and privilege to also be counted as those who pursue a faithful practice of prayer for our partnership both locally and in Sovereign Grace Churches. Martyn Lloyd-Jones gives us wise counsel when he writes, "Always respond to every impulse to pray...never resist it, never postpone it, never push it aside because you are busy."² As we interact with each other and hear updates about our broader partnership, let us commit ourselves to pray for one another. In doing so, we will find that our partnership is nurtured and deepened.

Partnership is Fueled by Sacrificial Generosity

The Philippians demonstrated their active participation in this partnership through their generous financial support of Paul and the advance of the gospel through his ministry (2:25; 4:14-16). Paul's response to their generous giving

2. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 170-171.

was pouring out his life to strengthen their faith and joy in Christ (2:17). Gospel ministry is fueled by this kind of mutual giving and hearts that are eager to give sacrificially and generously.

This kind of generosity is the fruit and effect of the gospel, and it not only multiplies the ministry we share together, but it enriches us all with spiritual blessing (4:17). There is only gain through our sacrificial giving in partnership! We do well to imitate this faithful church as we give generously in our local context and as we also provide for needs across the globe in our family of churches. We can give sacrificially with the expectation that our faithful God “will supply every need of yours according to his riches in Christ Jesus” (4:19).

Partnership is Strengthened by Encouragement

Again and again, Paul encourages the church through commendation and exhortation. He reminds them of the promises of God and that God will complete the work he has begun in them (1:6). He exhorts them in their conduct, urging them to “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (1:27). He encourages them to persevere in the faith as he points them to the glorious hope of the resurrection in the day of Christ (3:20-21). Paul gives a master clinic in encouragement.

We ought to reflect Paul’s heart of encouragement for the strengthening of our partnership. Sam Crabtree writes, “We should all desire to be people with a reputation for refreshing those around us.”³ Encouraging one another with the promises of God and exhorting one another to live faithfully fortifies our souls, strengthens our bond of fellowship, and is vital for strong partnership.

Partnership is Crucial for the Advance of the Gospel

Beyond our mutual encouragement, healthy partnership is also a means of protecting gospel doctrine and sound theology. The Philippians’ support of Paul was not aimed at mere expansion, but also at doctrinal fidelity. They participated together in “the defense and confirmation of the gospel” (1:7), understanding that protecting and preserving the message of the gospel was

3. Sam Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 40.

crucial to its advance. Paul exhorted them to hold fast to the word of life and to emulate his example of doctrinal faithfulness because very real enemies of the cross of Christ exist (2:16; 3:17-18).

One of our seven Shared Values is that we are “United in Fellowship, Mission, and Governance.” This means that “our shared governance and mission protects our churches doctrinally and ethically, enabling our individual churches to do far more together than we could ever do separately.” As we together, both locally and extra-locally, treasure sound gospel doctrine, we advance the authentic good news of the risen Christ that is the power of God unto salvation.

Our Message to the World

Alec Motyer writes of our partnership in Christ:

“It is in him they find their present oneness, which they seek to implement by loving each other as he has loved them and by conforming their emotions to his. He is their message to the world, and their chief prize when this passing world is done.”⁴

Our partnership across the churches of Sovereign Grace is a gift from God, rooted in Christ. Let’s seek to implement this God-given union through loving each other, praying for each other, encouraging each other, and caring for each other as we work together to see the gospel advance throughout this world. We are all making our way to the return of Jesus Christ, when this world will pass away and we will dwell forever in a new heavens and new earth. Let’s make our way together, arm-in-arm, by the grace of God and for the glory of his name.

4. J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2020), 23.

ACTS

LESSONS IN PARTNERSHIP

Steve Whitacre

Elder, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville (Louisville, KY)

The brothers were born four years apart but were similar in so many ways, they were described as “unidentical twins.” They shared an inventive drive and an uncanny ability to conquer complex technical challenges. But they were also very different men. They both loved music; one played harmonica, the other mandolin. Both enjoyed cooking; one made great biscuits, the other specialized in gravy. According to one biographer, the older brother was outgoing, while the younger was painfully shy. One had a vivid memory, the other was forgetful. Like all brothers, they argued, sometimes hotly. But their occasional disagreements catalyzed rather than curbed their collaboration, for they had an unusually strong partnership. “What the two held in common above all was unity of purpose and unyielding determination. They had set themselves on a ‘mission.’”¹ To their neighbors, Wilbur and Orville Wright were just another pair of tinkering, bachelor brothers. But through their partnership, an idea grew into a dream, the dream leapt into reality, and the reality took flight.

Partnerships are powerful. Wise partnerships maximize strengths, mitigate weaknesses, sharpen focus, and prompt action. The power of partnership can be seen in business, in literature, in sport, in the Wright Brothers’ workshop, and in the church. Perhaps nowhere is partnership more powerfully displayed, with more significant results, than in the book of Acts. Scripture’s compelling chronicle of the early church reveals *gospel partnerships as the pattern for multiplying ministry*. Over and over again, gospel partnerships are modeled by individuals and churches, mentors and peers, unnamed Christians and famous apostles, resulting in the saving message of Jesus Christ being spread to the

1. David McCullough, *The Wright Brothers* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 6-8.

furthest ends of the known world. With “unity of purpose and unyielding determination,” the early church engaged in fruitful partnerships to fulfill its gospel mission, leaving us a pattern to follow today.

The Scope of Partnership

It is true that there are a few impressive solo performances in the book of Acts. Stephen disputed, testified, and was martyred alone (Acts 6:8-7:60). Only Philip can verify the story of the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch and the sudden transportation to Azotus (Acts 8:26-40). Peter’s ministry to Cornelius and miraculous release from prison are narrated as essentially solo affairs (Acts 10:1-48; 12:1-19).² But these stories are remarkable for their abnormality. The dominant pattern in the book of Acts is that gospel partnerships multiply ministry. Partnerships in Acts take several forms, varying configurations of individuals and churches as the needs of the ministry and the moment required. The gospel partnerships exist between individuals, between individuals and churches, and between churches.

In many cases, Acts depicts individuals partnering together for the sake of the gospel. For example, Paul and Barnabas traveled together, fruitfully preaching the gospel and planting churches on Paul’s first missionary journey (Acts 14:1-28). When Paul arrives in Corinth, he joins up with Aquila and Priscilla and together, they work in Corinth for 18 months (Acts 18:1-4). Aquila and Priscilla in turn mentor Apollos, who goes on to fruitful ministry in Greece. Paul is regularly found traveling with an entourage, a rotating collection of gospel partners, including Silas, Timothy, Luke, and others (Acts 15:40; 16:3; 16:10; 17:10; 19:9; 20:4). However, this pattern is not limited to the pages of Scripture. Individual gospel partnerships are seen in Sovereign Grace Churches today when elders, deacons, and other ministry leaders work together to serve the church. Fellow small group members might serve a family in need or organize an evangelistic outing. Even serving regularly in children’s ministry is a great example of individual gospel partnerships.

2. Notice that these examples all occur in the early chapters of the book, as the church is growing, finding her footing, and expanding into new territories. Even Paul’s excursion back through Galatia and Phrygia (18:23) was likely accompanied by younger men in ministry, given Paul’s pattern.

Gospel partnerships also exist between individuals and churches. For instance, at the close of the Jerusalem Council, the Jerusalem church resolved to send Paul and Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 15:22). Later, the Ephesian church wrote a letter of recommendation for Apollos and sent him to minister in Achaia (Acts 18:27-28). One way churches partnering with individuals is echoed in our churches today is in sending qualified men and their families to invest ten months in training at the Pastors College, and receiving them back for further training or sending them out to gospel ministry. These men and churches follow in the footsteps of the partnerships in Acts.

Finally, gospel partnership is modeled in Acts between congregations in a variety of ways. There was regular communication between churches, sharing news about gospel expansion and needs among other congregations.³ Churches sent teachers to serve distant churches (Acts 18:27) and worked together for doctrinal formulation and ministry direction.⁴ Sovereign Grace Churches continue this tradition today through our commitment to interdependence. The gospel partnership between churches that is modeled in the book of Acts has always been central to Sovereign Grace Churches. It was the basis for the founding of this denomination years ago and now, as we begin our fifth decade of partnership together, it is a chief characteristic of our work together. Our gospel partnership is described in our Shared Values and Shaping Virtues, codified in our *Book of Church Order*, and lived out through conferences, regional events and committees, and church relationships that we enjoy.

The Nature of Partnership

Partnership in Acts is described rather than defined, but perhaps we can venture a definition based on the aggregate of insights that we gain from the book. In Acts, partnership is fundamentally a *gospel* partnership: Christians and

3. For example, communication between Jerusalem and Antioch in Acts 11:22, 27; 15:1-3.

4. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1-31 seems to have involved at least the congregations in Jerusalem and Antioch. Notice the ongoing fruitfulness of cooperative ministry formulation and ministry direction: the doctrinal resolutions of the Jerusalem Council are spread among the churches (16:4; 21:25-26) and credited as one of the reasons “the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily” (16:5).

churches work together to spread the gospel, disciple Christians in the gospel, and build churches upon the gospel. There are at least three characteristics of gospel partnership in Acts: starting churches, strengthening churches, and sustaining churches.

Starting Churches

First, individuals and churches worked together to start churches throughout the book of Acts. This is so obvious it barely needs mentioning, as everyone's Bible has a map in the back of the eastern Mediterranean Sea with colored lines charting Paul's missionary journeys. Follow the lines and you will find the churches Paul started, all with the help of other capable individuals and aided along the way by other churches. The churches in Jerusalem and Antioch sent Paul, Barnabas, and others to start what would become some of the best-known churches in the New Testament: Ephesus, Philippi, and Corinth.

Strengthening Churches

Second, partnership exists in Acts to strengthen churches. Many churches are planted in Acts, but none are left to survive alone. Paul revisits churches he has planted and his delegates are regularly coming and going, bringing news to Paul and going back with encouragement and help.⁵ The mission and ministry in Acts is regularly punctuated by descriptions of Paul and others strengthening churches.

- Having planted churches in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra, Paul and Barnabas retrace their steps, visiting the churches and “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).
- At the Jerusalem Council, “Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words” (Acts 15:32).
- Paul and Silas “went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches” (Acts 15:41).
- After returning to Antioch, Paul “departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples” (Acts 18:23).

5. For example, Silas and Timothy (Acts 18:5); Timothy and Erastus (Acts 19:22).

Taken as a whole, the depiction in Acts, supplemented by indications in Paul's letters, gives the impression of a growing network of thriving local churches, distributed widely throughout the Empire, dependent on one another and on extra-local leadership for health and strength.

Sustaining Churches

Third, partnership in Acts exists to sustain churches, especially in the form of financial support. Where necessary, individuals and churches gave generously to support the work of gospel mission in other churches. In some cases, wealthy church members sold assets to support needy church members, (Acts 4:34–37) or allowed the church to meet in their homes for services or prayers meetings (Acts 2:46; 4:34; 5:42; 12:12; 18:7). Furthermore, financial partnership is seen as churches support one another in mission, sending funds to the aid of struggling congregations. For instance, the church in Antioch sends Paul with contributions to support the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29). Later, Paul again returns to Jerusalem bringing “alms to my nation”(Acts 24:17).⁶ The awareness of and giving towards needs in distant churches, seems to imply at least a) regular communication between congregations, b) a disposition to help presumably motivated out of Christian love and shared commitment to gospel growth, and c) actual sacrifice on the part of giving churches to meet the needs of others. It is hard to imagine a more direct, tangible expression of partnership than this, especially given Paul's description of the poverty from which the Macedonian churches gave to serve the congregation in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:3-5).

Thus, partnership in Acts aims at specific goals. Gospel partnership points to the gospel goals of starting, strengthening, and sustaining local churches. By God's grace, churches in Sovereign Grace have seen and sought the same goals for our gospel partnership. We cherish church planting: in 2022, Nick Kidwell and a team were sent out from Covenant Fellowship Church, *starting*

6. Peterson notes the collection of funds from far-flung churches to support the struggling congregation in Jerusalem was less important to Luke than it was to Paul. Luke offers only this passing reference, while Paul mentions the collection in Romans 15:25–27; 1 Corinthians 16:1–4; 2 Corinthians 8:3–5; 9:1–5, 12–13 (David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 637).

Valley Creek Church in Malvern, Pennsylvania. Sovereign Grace Churches partner together in our regions—and often beyond our regions—for mutual *strengthening* and encouragement. In 2020, Crossway Community Church sent Mickey Connolly to northwestern Arkansas for two months, serving Matt Gray and *strengthening* Living Hope Church. Finally, Sovereign Grace churches have a long history of *sustaining* gospel ministry through financial partnership together. In the book of Acts, and in churches today, the results of gospel partnership multiply ministry.

The Result of Partnership

Acts depicts the rapid proliferation of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire, fueled by the faithful ministry of mobile men and memorialized by the thriving churches they left in their wake. In city after city, despite opposition and obstacles, churches were planted, many of which grew and planted other churches.

How did this happen? Acts 18:8 succinctly describes the process: “Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians *hearing* Paul *believed* and were *baptized*” [emphasis added] (Acts 18:8). They heard, they believed, and they were baptized. The process is as simple as it is profound. And such fruit resulted from the multiplication of ministry that gospel partnerships create. Called and qualified men took the gospel to distant lands. Along the way, they gathered, identified, trained, and deployed “faithful men, who would be able to teach others also,” (2 Tim. 2:2) such as Silas and Timothy. Even John Mark, who sparked the separation between Paul and Barnabas, (Acts 15:37–41) would mature greatly and would later become “very useful” to Paul in ministry (2 Tim. 4:11).

The history of the early church without gospel partnership is nearly unthinkable. How would the gospel have spread without the cooperative efforts of individuals and churches? But gospel partnerships led to the conversions of Paul, Tabitha, Cornelius, Timothy, Lydia, and many more. As we continue the pattern of gospel partnership, we have ample reason to expect gospel fruitfulness for generations to come.

Growing Together in Partnership

How can we imitate the apostles and the early church and continue to strengthen our gospel partnership? Three suggestions: First, *pray*. There is no better way to develop your sense of partnership with other churches. A list of Sovereign Grace churches is on the website.⁷ Print it, pray for several churches per week, and by the end of the year, you will be ready to take another lap around. Paul left us many examples of his own prayers for churches that we can use. Ephesians 3:14–21 is a great place to start:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.⁸

Second, we can grow together in partnership by *giving*. Jesus said that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt. 6:21). If you want to treasure partnership, and treasure the churches and ministries with whom God leads us to partner, consider how your church can invest resources in gospel partnerships.

Finally, prioritize partnership by *going* (maybe) and *sending* (definitely). God may lead you to express gospel partnership by going: maybe attending the Pastors College to get equipped for a more robust partnership, or going to help plant a church across town. But it is only a matter of time until you are called to send. Others will go: some on the church plant, some to PC, some

7. www.sovereigngrace.com

8. For more direction on how to pray Scriptures, consider Tim Kerr's *Take Words With You* and D. A. Carson's *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*.

might serve internationally. We partner with them by praying for them, by stepping up to serve in the gaps they leave behind, and by forging newly gospel partnerships with the fresh faces they make room for as they go.

The book of Acts reveals *partnership as a pattern for multiplying ministry*. By the power of the Holy Spirit, our partnership is capable of something far more profound than a new era of human flight. As we work together for the sake of the gospel and for building local churches, may the Lord use our partnership to advance the gospel, for his glory and the good of all the Christians and churches whom he has called us to serve.

PARTNERSHIP STORY

MINISTRY IN HARD PLACES

Stephen Bowne

Senior Pastor, Grace City Church of Frankford (Philadelphia, PA)

THE FRANKFORD NEIGHBORHOOD OF Philadelphia is saturated with the effects of decades of urban crime, poverty, and brokenness. The schools are terrible, government services are overwhelmed, and most people have little hope things will ever improve. That hopelessness often leads to substance abuse, immorality, and violence. Most families and businesses leave the neighborhood as soon as they are able. The properties they leave behind fall into blight or are converted into shelters, drug rehabs, or boarding houses. Other properties become “bandos”—a slang term for abandoned properties that are newly occupied by homeless people and drug addicts.

All of these dynamics make Frankford a challenging place to plant, build, and sustain a church. However, by God’s grace and the partnership we have in Sovereign Grace, Grace City Church of Frankford has been established in this neighborhood and continues to thrive.

The Backstory of Partnership

My wife and I did not grow up in a neighborhood like Frankford. However, about 20 years ago, we sensed a call to do ministry in a poor, urban community. After living in several low-income neighborhoods in various cities and receiving seminary training and experience in urban ministry, we continued to seek guidance from the Lord on where he would have us go. After I graduated seminary, we had a desire to join a denomination with which we had theological solidarity as well as a shared burden for urban ministry in low-income neighborhoods. We were delighted to find both of these in the pastors and churches we interacted with in Sovereign Grace.

We joined a Sovereign Grace Church in the Northeast section of Philadelphia that desired to plant churches in other neighborhoods in the city. While serving at that church, we bought a home in Frankford and eventually led a small group

in our home that was attended by people who lived in the Frankford area. However, we were traveling all the way to Northeast Philadelphia to attend church. In 2018, our small group finally was sent out as a church plant in Frankford.

Financial Support through Partnership

Our sending church, our region, and other individuals and churches all recognized that it was very unlikely that our church would ever be completely self-supporting if we remained focused on reaching the people of Frankford. Most churches in neighborhoods like ours cannot support a full-time pastor on their own, and many churches occupy large buildings they struggle to maintain.

As a result, many pastors in neighborhoods like ours work second jobs to support themselves while trying to keep pace with the regular preaching and leading of the church. Additionally, the pastoral care and discipleship needed for many of the people raised in these neighborhoods is significant. As a result, pastors quickly burn out or take positions at churches in other communities.

However, by God's grace of partnership, that was not our experience. The partnerships that we have in Sovereign Grace and with other churches have provided abundantly for us. I am able to serve full-time as a pastor of the church. In addition, we have been able to purchase and renovate our own building in Frankford that will serve as a church, Lord willing, for generations to come. The financial provision has just been incredible to see—and it's all from God's grace of partnership. However, the grace of partnership goes well beyond financial support.

Partnership Supports the Pastor

- Through partnership, I am personally encouraged. I meet regularly with pastors from our sending church and our region for counsel and support. Those meetings are so life-giving to me and have a positive impact on my family and our church.
- Through partnership, I am equipped. I participate in monthly video meetings with pastors in our region where we discuss preaching and in other regional meetings where we discuss evangelism.

- Through partnership, I am accountable. Our *Book of Church Order* and judicial processes protect our church should I ever go astray.
- Through partnership, I am a part of stewarding a denomination—a trellis that supports local churches around the globe.
- Through partnership, I am refreshed at Regional Assemblies, regional events, and at Pastors Conferences.

Partnership Supports the Church

In addition to the benefits of partnership to me personally, our church as a whole benefits in even more ways than financial support and having a well-supported pastor.

- Through partnership, our church has access to events and conferences in our region that a church our size in our location would not normally have.
- Through partnership, our congregation is able to be a part of helping refugees in Ukraine, training pastors in Africa, and planting churches in the Philippines.
- Through partnership, our church has access to incredible resources for music, children, and counseling ministries.
- Through partnership, we are able to reach out to like-minded churches for help with hygiene bags to give to the homeless, school supplies to give to children, and clothing to give to the needy in our neighborhood. Partner churches have provided preaching help and worship leaders when we needed them.

Praise God for Partnership

Partnership is an amazing gift from God. My soul and our local church have been so blessed by it. Our church's resources are limited, as are my personal resources to fulfill my role as their pastor, but God's grace meets us in our weaknesses. Very often, the way he meets us is through partnership. Praise God for partnership!

A BAND OF BROTHERS

PASTORS UNITED IN FELLOWSHIP

Steve Teter

Senior Pastor, Living Faith Church of Franklin (Franklin, WV)

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up” (Ecc. 4:9-10).

Don't become a pastor if you could be happy doing anything else.” That advice was given to me in 1988 when I was six years into my career as a dentist. Life was full and I was happy. My wife and I were deeply involved in our young church, the dental practice was growing rapidly, and I loved working together with my dad who was both an outstanding dentist and a wonderful Christian man. At the same time, along with others around me, I had been sensing that I was being called into full-time pastoral ministry.

Lonely in Ministry

One particular morning in the office, my patients included a local Christian pastor along with his wife and family. He was in his 40s and had moved to our town a couple of years before to lead a local Baptist church. I knew he loved the Lord and was committed to his church. Since I was seeking encouragement or a word of wisdom from someone with many years of experience in ministry, I posed a question to him: “I'm thinking about becoming a pastor. What advice would you give me as I make this decision?” His reply was quick and to the point. “Don't become a pastor if you could be happy doing anything else.”

Initially I was shocked! To his defense, he probably wanted to make sure I counted the cost of pastoral ministry, which he knew would involve a level of personal sacrifice. However, I honestly think the thrust of his answer was born out of his own experience of pastoral ministry which meant moving regularly, experiencing relational isolation, and sadly, a solitary lifestyle often

characterized by discouragement and loneliness. It meant committing yourself to a life devoid of deep, personal, and honest friendships. Finally, his was the type of pastoral ministry where one's life could be upended at the whim of others with no one "in your corner" to help, all while watching your wife and family pay a steep price as well. Shortly after he gave me this advice, the pastor and his family moved away from our town, on to the next church, or maybe out of pastoral ministry.

I'd seen the same struggles with the ministers of my own church where I grew up. As a result, though I'd become a Christian at a young age and wanted to serve the Lord, becoming a pastor myself was never even a remote consideration. Who would want *that* lifestyle for themselves or for their family? Not me! No way and no how! I would *never* become a pastor. Then our small local church heard about, and later joined, Sovereign Grace Ministries (as we were known then) and my understanding of pastoral ministry was turned upside down.

Together in Ministry as Brothers

From my first interactions at Celebration Conferences (annual gatherings of Sovereign Grace Churches), my perception of pastoral ministry began to change. I observed that Sovereign Grace pastors were passionate men who loved the gospel and the local church, but who also desired to labor and build together, not in isolation, but as brothers and even friends. For the first time in my life, I saw a compelling model of ministry where men not only cared for their churches but also cared for one another.

These men regularly encouraged, honored, prayed for, and sought to strengthen one another. In the midst of their serious pursuit of the Lord together, they also laughed, joked, talked sports, and mocked one another (in love, of course). They would hang out together, even outside of church contexts! I realized I was watching a model of pastoral ministry that was not merely tolerable, but compelling.

Not long after my encounter with the pastor that morning, I sold my dental practice and began serving as a pastor in Sovereign Grace. Now, for 33 years, I have thankfully and joyfully never felt or been alone. On the contrary, my family and I have been surrounded by men locally, regionally, and throughout

Sovereign Grace who are not only true brothers in the faith, but also partners in life and ministry. Most of all, these fellow pastors are truly our friends.

The Value of Relationships

We pastors in Sovereign Grace value relationships. We pursue and experience biblical fellowship. Yes, we are united in mission, in doctrine, and in governance but those don't detract from our relationships. They only serve to unite us in fellowship more deeply. Ours is more than an association of disconnected individuals, each independent and isolated, pursuing his own personal ministry in his own local context. We are joined together regionally, nationally, and increasingly internationally as well. Which of us does not sense that camaraderie and union each month when reading Dave Taylor's *Emerging Nations* updates from our brothers around the world?

We in Sovereign Grace share a long and deep history not merely as co-laborers but as a "band of brothers" whom the Lord has providentially called together for his glory and for our good. We are a denomination where "loving one another" is taught to our members but also modeled by the pastors. That value is lived out even in our conferences where the amount of time spent together over meals or drinks rivals or often exceeds the time given to formal teaching and training. Even our dress communicates more of a family reunion than a professional association: No suits and ties! (Thank you, C.J. Mahaney!)

Obviously, building relationally has not always been easy. We have experienced more than our share of trials, separations, and even heart-breaking disloyalty. However, even these we have navigated together, resulting in a deepening resolve, not only to serve the Lord's will to build churches and spread the gospel, but to do so together.

Ministry in Relationships Should Be the Norm

While I'm sure this type of interconnected brotherhood is not unique to Sovereign Grace, from what I've seen throughout my life, it is not the norm. Yet, shouldn't it be? We who were once "hating and being hated" (Titus 3:3) are now men made new. When Christ mercifully saved us, he not only reconciled us to himself, but he also reconciled us to one another. He made us children of God and members one of another. Since that is true for believers

as a whole, which it is, how much more for the shepherds who have the privilege to labor among them?

Deep, loving relationships were evident among Christ and his disciples. Gathering a group of men around himself—and what a motley crew they were—Jesus led them, taught them, and was forbearing with them. He walked with them, ate with them, and for three years carried on his ministry together with them and sometimes in spite of them. Yes, Jesus knew betrayal and he experienced deep rejection. Yet, is it not confounding that the eternal, sinless Son of God joined himself to a group of mere men so intimately? Jesus loved his disciples not only as Lord but even as brothers and friends, ultimately sacrificing his life for them—and for us!

“This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants...but I have called you friends” (John 15:12-15).

Jesus also said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

Partnership in Relationship

In the same way, Paul the apostle who said, “For me to live is Christ, to die is gain,” (Phil. 1:21) lived out this phenomenally focused life, joined in mission and in fellowship to other men. Yes, part of the reason was for the purpose of discipleship. Caring for a growing number of churches meant discipling new leaders, but this was no sterile ministry. Hear Paul’s description of sending Epaphroditus to Philippi in Philippians 2:25: “I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier...” My fellow worker and fellow soldier, yes, but I want you to know, Epaphroditus is my brother as well. Paul says this in spite of his own experiences of desertion, slander, envy, and searing disloyalty.

From the beginning, Sovereign Grace has valued fellowship among its pastors. We now have the opportunity to build more deeply with other men regionally. Our local team meets for lunch periodically with pastors from three other

Sovereign Grace churches in our region. We each drive a couple of hours to make lunch happen. We don't meet because of a sense of duty or to discuss theology. We get together to fellowship, to share the latest updates about our churches and our lives, and to learn how best to pray for one another. In April, we hold our Regional Assembly of Elders, and though we cover much business in those two days together, we do so, not as an association of professionals but as a "band of brothers" bound together in love for the Savior and with a rich and growing history as collaborators and friends.

We "older guys" in Sovereign Grace already have a rich history of relationships with other pastors locally, regionally, and beyond. Mickey Connolly has preached annually in our church for over 30 years. When he comes, we often fish or golf together. The church sees our close relationship and it communicates God's grace. Bill Kittrell and I have been brothers and friends since the first day he walked through the doors of Sovereign Grace in the early 90s. Two of my daughters are part of his growing church. My sons-in-law both serve in the church, one as a bi-vocational elder, the other overseeing children's ministry. Bill tells me our five-year-old grandsons are friends. They also need to be separated from one another in children's ministry! I hope when they are older, they share a friendship like their grandfathers have known.

Our church loves C.J. Mahaney and the joy he's brought over the years. He does not only preach as one "filling the pulpit." He loves our people. There are so many others—a list much too long to include by name. There are men of all ages throughout Sovereign Grace who have blessed our pastors and our church. These men have shared not only their ministry but their very lives with us. These relationships have changed our church's understanding of Christian ministry and the Christian life. This has informed our understanding of what it means to experience the love of God through Jesus Christ.

Not Lonely in Ministry

As a pastor in Sovereign Grace, my ministry has been filled with Christian brothers who are my friends. When I've struggled with sorrow, they have comforted. When I've struggled with discouragement, they have encouraged. When I've felt like quitting, they have urged me on by their friendship and example. When I've experienced sickness, they have offered to jump in to help

carry the load. Being united in fellowship with other pastors in Sovereign Grace has strengthened my life, my marriage, my children, and our church.

If a young man came to me and said, “I’m considering pastoral ministry, what advice would you give me as I make my decision?” I would say, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33). Then I’d say, “Don’t do ministry alone. Find a group or denomination whose pastors not only keep the gospel central, but who live out the implications of that gospel united together as brothers and friends—and I know just the group.” And I’d add one more thing: “For me, because of the ‘band of brothers’ I’ve come to know and love, I couldn’t imagine being happy doing anything else.”

UNITED IN GOVERNANCE

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOVEREIGN GRACE POLITY

Rob Flood

Elder, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

Believers throughout Sovereign Grace—throughout the world—rally around the central mission of the church: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). This is the Great Commission of the church local, denominational, and universal. It unites believers across cultures, languages, and ages. It is the central “why” behind everything that we do, and it must never be displaced.

In light of the glorious calling and central focus of the Great Commission, nothing ought to supplant it. In the life of church partnership, we must be diligent not to allow topics such as polity to take center stage. “United in governance” is a lousy denominational mission statement. We need to be about mission, not structure. We need to be about Jesus, not governance. May God protect us locally and denominationally should our *Book of Church Order* ever become the main thing around which we unite.

Yet, this does not mean that polity does not matter. As we remain on mission, always on mission, we do so in the context of relationships. Some of those relationships are with other members of our local church. Some are with churches throughout Sovereign Grace. (This is what is in view here.) Relationships matter, *especially* while on mission.

Relationships get strained. We don’t often get to choose when they will be strained nor do we get to choose how this occurs. And, while I hope there is deep affection in the relationships you have with other Christians and with other churches, we cannot count on the strength of our affections to get us through relational strain.

Consider wedding vows. At the altar, we promise that we will always stay together, always be *for* one another, in good times and bad, etc. However, at least in western culture, the euphoria of that moment, the sheer depth of love and affection, often blinds us to the possibility that hard times will come. We recognize it in the abstract, but our affections assure us: “It could never happen to a couple like us. We love each other too much.” So why do we make promises about our commitment to one another for those “bad times?” We promise these things because bad times do come, regardless of love or affection, and we need those promises to teach and remind us how to behave in those bad times.

Our vows do more for us than protect us when times are hard. Vows are a reminder, a motivator, a governor for us as a couple. Why do we promise to lead or to follow? Why do we commit to build a home focused on the glory of Christ? We make these promises because our marriages need purposeful mission as much as they need the protection of vows. In marriage, we are partnering together to build a home upon the Rock and to raise children who seek after and follow Christ. We purpose to reach the lost, to entertain the sojourner, and to foster an atmosphere of grace.

The vows we make define who and what we are. They facilitate our mission rather than impede it. They tether us to the mission rather than distract us from it. They protect us from wandering rather than unhelpfully constrain us. Vows don’t trump affection; they bolster it. In many respects marriage vows, properly constructed and made in faith, form the polity of marriage. And this, oddly, takes us to Paul’s letter to Titus.

The Absence of Polity

Titus was a young pastor in Crete, and Crete was messy (see Titus 1). “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1:5).

Why did he leave Titus in Crete? To put into order what remained ... to step into the mess that was there and set it straight ... to address the messy relationships that were brewing and bring order. And how was Titus to do this? By appointing elders. After detailing the kind of men to look for (Titus 1:5-9),

Paul gets to the root of the problem. “For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced.” (v.10-11)

The situation in this Cretan church is dicey and needs to be brought to order. Among the items needing to be addressed is the teaching of those who are insubordinate and divisive. These include but are not limited to those from “the circumcision party.” These are the men who essentially distorted Paul’s gospel of grace with the requirements of legalism.

The issue troubling the church was not the opposition of the culture, where we so often (perhaps too often) look. The real problem Paul wants to address is the legalists within the church opposing his teaching of grace. They are asserting their own direction, their own teaching, and their own gospel. And he says flatly, “They must be silenced” (v.11).

Crete is not the only church or only city to have known such chaos. It has occurred in the church from the beginning and it continues in the congregations of churches even today...and SG is not exempt. The Enemy is delighted to introduce a little leaven of division into the congregations of Bible preaching churches and turn them against one another.

The Answer of Polity

Paul provides an answer for congregational chaos, for family in-fighting, and for God-honoring order. He provides clear direction for what to do in times like this. What they needed was clear leadership, clear authority, and clear definition for how to live. Paul exhorts Timothy to provide for the structure and the function of the church. Paul’s answer was polity.

Local church polity is not a necessary evil that developed over the evolution of the church. Its necessity has been recognized since the beginning of the church. Early in the Book of Acts, the congregation gathered underneath apostolic polity. There was organization, there was authority, and when a problem arose (Acts 6) it was clear whose job it was to address it—the problem came to the Apostles.

As the gospel pushed the church beyond Jerusalem, apostolic polity gave way to local polity. The Apostles used their God-given authority to establish what we now know as local eldership. The answer of polity was the same though the form of polity changed due to the mere number of leaders needed and the geographical area that leadership needed to cover.

Why does solid, biblical polity work? It works because it provides clarity, definition, and authority structures. And each only works when the authority structures are under the guidance and authority of Christ and the Scriptures.

To be clear, eldership is not the mission of the church, but the mission is carried out through the leadership elders provide. It is protected by the oversight and teaching that comes through the eldership. When Paul tells Titus to rebuke the troublemakers sharply, it is a direction for those *in* authority to rebuke those who are *opposed* to authority. It is a direction that will protect the mission of the church in Crete.

When Paul gets to Chapter 2, his command is to “teach what accords with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). Why? Is that just a random non-sequitur? No, it is a direct command that flows from Chapter 1. These people in the church need to be rebuked “that they may be sound in the faith” (Titus 1:13). But that is going to take more than rebuking. It is going to take teaching that equips them in sound doctrine. It will take discipleship, which is precisely what follows in Titus 2.

The Bridge to the Book of Church Order

We’ve established that polity ought not be the mission of the church or of a denomination. We’ve also established that no church or denomination can long exist without it. With the Scriptures forever in the primary governing position, we come now to our *Book of Church Order* (BCO).

Our BCO was designed to cover all the various facets of our partnership. The kind of robust local polity we’ve been discussing is defined, outlined, and described in sections two through five. Because our churches are joined together for mission, we’ve also developed extra-local polity that is equally robust in its definition and description. Our extra-local polity is defined, outlined, and

described in sections six through nineteen. Both local and extra-local polity are needed since healthy partnership thrives with healthy local churches, and local churches thrive with healthy extra-local partnership.

Local and extra-local polity are similar in function and structure. However, they are not identical, and the differences are important to understand, identify, and acknowledge. Let's look at just a few of those differences.

Local / Extra-Local Differences

These differences between local and extra-local polity are key to properly understanding and applying our polity in Sovereign Grace Churches.

Clarity of Biblical Definition

First of all, local polity is explicitly directed by the Scriptures. The pastoral letters both instruct us toward it and presume upon it. Our biblical grounds for our local polity are solid, even authoritative.

Extra-local partnership is not as neatly defined. At times, it almost has the appearance of being pragmatic and ad hoc. It is present in the New Testament, without a doubt. But the nuts and bolts of extra-local polity are not spelled out for us. There is a strong presence of apostolic discernment that belies formal structures. So, when we turn our attention to the use and deployment of extra-local polity, we must realize our biblical grounds are not as clear or sound as they are in local polity. This does not mean we ought not define it. Far from it, we actually must define it. But it does mean that the strength with which we biblically defend our extra-local convictions needs to be less than the strength with which we biblically defend our local polity.

Authority of the Polity

In God's Word, there is authority that is placed in the office of elder. There is ample instruction and exhortation given to elders not to abuse that authority, lording it over a congregation (1 Pet. 5). The authority held by elders is delegated authority granted by the Lord of the Universe and the God who created all things. This delegated authority is very real and ought not be trifled with.

The authority found in extra-local polity is different. It is granted by the church in partnership, not assigned by God himself. It carries the weight of partnership, but not the weight of the Scriptures as though it came from the Almighty God. In extra-local polity, biblical principles shape our practice, even if they do not clearly or specifically define it.

For example, the roles of Regional Leaders and Regional or National Committees are quite different from the roles of Elders and Deacons. When it comes to biblical authority or clarity, there is no real comparison. The local roles are more biblically explicit than the extra-local roles.

However, the difference in biblical clarity does not mean the extra-local roles lack utility. We still need clear definition of these roles and structures for partnership between churches to thrive. We must recognize the importance of having those roles and structures. Partnership cannot helpfully exist if we don't all agree on what a region is and what a region does. To that end, let's look at some similarities between Local and Extra-Local Polity.

Local / Extra-Local Similarities

While we cannot and should not equate local and extra-local polity, many useful principles are transferable between them. Even though some of these principles are not explicitly stated in Scripture, they nonetheless apply biblical wisdom and have been fruitful for millennia. Those similarities, while they don't come with biblical authority, apply biblical wisdom and have been doing so for millennia.

Polity Organizes What is Not in Order

Extra-local polity helps define what partnership is and isn't. It takes something ill-defined and nebulous and brings clarity so that everyone involved knows exactly what they're involved in. If a Pastoral Team was to drift into heresy, who has the right and responsibility to address that? And who governs whether they can remain in the denomination or not? If a solo pastor is brought up on charges, who hears and weighs those charges and who has any authority to make a decision on what should happen next? If the Executive Director or Leadership Team of SGC provides direction, how are we to relate to it? Is the opinion or counsel of a Regional Leader direction or suggestion?

Does partnership require full compliance or just careful consideration?

These and other questions hang over partner churches in the absence of clear extra-local polity. Without documented and mutually agreed-upon language, there is too much room for misunderstanding and confusion. It only works as long as it works. But when it stops working, partner churches are left with the aftermath of their assumptions and all suffer. Yet, in the presence of clear and documented extra-local polity, these questions are answered. What has been accomplished? We've "put what remains in order." Clear extra-local polity brings clarity, which simultaneously protects partnership.

Polity Facilitates our Mutual Mission

Just as elderships equip the saints for the work of ministry, position them in their gifting, and leverage kingdom resources for maximum kingdom impact, regional and national roles do this for our partnership in Sovereign Grace Churches. Their extra-local polity facilitates the very purposes for which we partner together.

Through Regional Leaders, we facilitate the care that is needed for each church, each eldership. Under the leadership of that role, we see regional committees envisioning the planting of churches and the raising up of new men for deployment in the church. Through our Leadership Team, we are all able to play a role in serving the churches throughout our denomination, to reach around the globe as we partner with churches in other countries, and to reach the lost through mission works.

Through our Council of Elders, we jointly lead our denomination. And the committees that function under its authority do the work the Council is called to do on the whole. Our Executive Committee serves and represents the whole Council of Elders, cooperating with our Leadership Team while ensuring that team focuses on the task set out for it by the Council itself. The clarity of function helps us all stay on mission.

Each partner church in Sovereign Grace Churches benefits from participation in this partnership. We are able to do far more together than any one of our churches could do on its own.

Doctrine and Polity

We left Titus in chapter 2 as discipleship is spelled out to all in the church. By the time you're halfway into Titus 2, it feels like Paul has moved past polity. It seems he's gone from polity to the gospel. But the condition of the church and the problem that must be solved hasn't left his gaze. He's still fixed on righting what has been wrong.

Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you. Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people (Titus 2:15-3:2).

He returns to the authority granted to the elders over this church. He returns to instruction, exhortation, and rebukes. He returns to leadership. He returns to polity. Leadership will not be the force that changes them. Such power is reserved for the Spirit of God through the work the gospel does in their lives. But the leadership, the authority, the polity protects the church while the gospel changes lives and directs the hearts of each member back to the same, life-changing gospel. It does more than hold its place until the gospel changes hearts. Polity is an active means of grace that facilitates the very gospel ministry that is needed, in Crete and in our churches today.

The Heart and Function of Our Polity

2 Samuel captures an historical moment when Israel is being attacked from both sides: one by the Ammonites and one by the Syrians. The battle is great and their resources are few. So Joab devises a plan. He divides the army into two halves, he in charge of one half and his brother Abishai in charge of the other. He then gives instruction: "If the Syrians are too strong for me, then you shall help me, but if the Ammonites are too strong for you, then I will come and help you (2 Sam.10:11).

Now, admittedly, the context of this passage is warfare and we are talking about gospel partnership. There are certainly differences, but there is more

than a little overlap when it comes to application. And that overlap is where we will close.

Look at the hope that Joab derives from knowing someone has his back. And look at his unwavering commitment to protect Abishai's back when the need arises. In this one verse, we see just how much safer and stronger we are when we work together in partnership. This value is at the heart of our *Book of Church Order*.

No local church is omniscient or self-sufficient to carry out the mission which Christ has entrusted to the entire church (Matt. 28:19-20). Each local body stands in need of other local bodies in a relationship of interdependence (BCO-1.6).

Each local church has endured hardship for the sake of the gospel. And for those who partner with Sovereign Grace Churches, each church is lifting a portion of the weight of our mission in our denomination. But this articulation of partnership, of interdependence, is of particular importance when you look at 2 Samuel 10:12.

“Be of good courage, and let us be courageous for our people, and for the cities of our God, and may the Lord do what seems good to him” (2 Samuel 10:12).

May we, with similar courage, strive for our people and for the churches in Sovereign Grace. May we, with hearts fixed on the hope that Christ has called us to the task, strive for the health of each of our partner churches. And may we carry one another on our hearts, eager to serve one another should the battle become too great in any one area.

The churches of Sovereign Grace are all about Jesus: who he is and what he's done. May that be true in all future generations of our family of churches. It is precisely because we want this to be true that we embrace with joy and conviction the polity we have in our shared partnership. Our polity serves us as we seek to serve Christ.

THE VALUE OF EXTRA-LOCAL LEADERSHIP

From the Working Group on Extra-Local Leadership

Editors' Note: In 2018, a Working Group of Sovereign Grace pastors was formed. They were tasked to study the issue of extra-local leadership and its expression in our Book of Church Order and to produce a report. In April of 2019, their report was sent to all Sovereign Grace pastors. The goal of the paper was to explain the design of our extra-local polity, giving particular emphasis to the role of extra-local leadership. Given the occasion of the paper, the focus is less a Biblical study and more a summary of how extra-local leadership finds expression in our polity. The following is an abridged and lightly edited version of that paper. We share it here to highlight the value of extra-local leadership in our family of churches.

Many of the blessings that have come to our churches have been the result of God working through extra-local leadership. The churches of Sovereign Grace have been shaped in our understanding of pastoral ministry, preaching, theological discernment, musical worship, pastoral counseling, and much more as a result of the gift of extra-local leadership. As we look to the future, we desire to continue to benefit from gifted pastors who provide specialized leadership in theological and pastoral instruction, church planting, global missions, conference planning, resource development, processing controversies, promoting our shared values and shaping virtues, and more.

We have learned this value from Scripture. One important aspect of the Biblical pattern of mission is found in the role of men who are set apart by the churches specifically for the broader mission of expansion and consolidation. Their work includes planting churches and initiating mission projects, cultivating relationships and interconnectedness among churches, strengthening and encouraging churches toward maturity, and serving churches in various other ways that transcend a single congregation.

We believe there is an apostolic gift, or a type of gifting that fulfills an apostolic function, which is distinct from the apostolic office of the New Testament and the unique role and authority of the twelve apostles and Paul. The ongoing apostolic gift or function refers to ministry that is engaged in church planting and in bringing leadership or influence that extends beyond a local congregation. Moreover, just as Paul had a large group of co-workers to assist in his broader mission and were commissioned for various extra-local tasks and ministries (as messengers, delegates, teachers, and church planters), churches today ought to follow the New Testament model and release gifted pastors to serve extra-locally, or beyond the local church.

What does this look like in Sovereign Grace? How is this value of extra-local leadership reflected in our polity? What protections are in place to guard against an unhealthy use of leadership? How ought pastors and churches relate to extra-local leadership? These are the questions this paper seeks to address.

A Polity That Values Extra-Local Leadership

The pastors of Sovereign Grace gave greater attention to defining our polity in 2011-2013. At that time, it was noted that the value of extra-local leadership is a doctrinal position upon which there is widespread unity within Sovereign Grace, and an area to be preserved in our polity.

During those years, the Polity Committee sought outside counsel on how to structure governance and leadership in a denomination. One prominent Presbyterian leader cautioned us regarding the historical tendency to have polity replace leadership. He observed that in the Presbyterian world there is a tendency to move toward the presbytery at the expense of leadership. Another Presbyterian minister observed that their system “was designed in several respects more to prevent the accumulation of influence than to accomplish mission effectively.”

As a result of extensive Biblical study, movement-wide philosophical conversations, the help and input of Sovereign Grace elders, and counsel from experts in other denominations, the Polity Committee proposed a polity that maintains a prominent place for those with outstanding leadership gifts to express that leadership in areas of extra-local ministry, as an important point of continuity with our past.

Serving Beyond the Local Church

In the Executive Summary of the original 2013 Polity Proposal, Regional Leaders (RLs) were presented as those “with outstanding gifting, ability, and experience.” Their leadership role is “wise and necessary.” “If the mission of the church is to move forward under the leadership of gifted men, then some local elders must be released, to some extent, to serve beyond their local church. The New Testament is replete with such men, and the same has been true throughout church history. They are a gift of God to the church.”

Likewise, Leadership Team (LT) members are presented as those who “play a critical role in extra-local leadership in the central aspects of Sovereign Grace in order to facilitate the pursuit of our mission together.” “As with Regional Leaders, we believe that the recognition and deployment of such men not only honors Scriptural teaching and precedent and church history, but is also vital for the fulfillment of the church’s broader mission. We also believe that a polity that does not recognize this category of spiritual gifting and does not deploy such men risks stifling an important aspect of leadership and becoming ‘polity heavy’ to the detriment of mission.”

Our polity is careful not to flatten out or democratize leadership, but is instead designed to give heightened influence to those leaders with exceptional leadership gifting and to amplify our most discerning and helpful voices. In our polity and *Book of Church Order* (BCO), the LT consists of men who are uniquely gifted by God and empowered by the Council of Elders (CoE) to truly lead Sovereign Grace Churches through their doctrinal discernment, strong teaching gifts, effective leadership, strategic wisdom, and evangelistic effectiveness. In certain aspects of their extra-local function and gifting they serve in continuity with first century apostolic ministry, but without their unique authority. As BCO-1.4.8 says, “Some of the non-authoritative functions of apostles are carried out by Regional Leaders and members of the Leadership Team.”¹

1. The Introduction to the 2013 Polity Proposal states, “You may ask what place does apostolic ministry have in our Revised Polity Proposal? It has a place but it is limited to gifting and function and does not include any office of apostle. It is most evident in the place we have made for gifted leaders to express that leadership in areas of extra-local ministry.”

Extra-local Leadership in the BCO

Our BCO was conceived to codify what has been described as a “modified Presbyterian” polity. It is “Presbyterian” in that it locates governance in elders rather than the congregation as a whole, contains no higher rank of office than that of elder, authorizes regional bodies (Regional Assemblies of Elders) to carry out designated functions, and creates a larger body comprised of local elders (the CoE), which is the highest extra-local authority in our union. Our representative government and the CoE is a crucial aspect of our polity and partnership, providing a valuable opportunity for every eldership to influence and experience ownership in the decisions, direction, mission, and faithfulness of Sovereign Grace.

However, what makes our polity a “modified Presbyterianism” is, in part, that we also preserved a place for gifted, godly, and dedicated extra-local leaders to exert pronounced influence in carrying out aspects of our common mission. Far from having all of our elders equally leading Sovereign Grace, or relegating the role of the LT to facilitating a representative leadership from the CoE, we install extra-local leaders and let them lead.

Significantly, leadership is viewed in the BCO primarily as a gift to be leveraged rather than a danger to be guarded against: “Leadership is a gift from the Lord and is to be honored and cultivated in our ecclesiastical union” (BCO-11.1). Therefore, “The Leadership Team is appointed and empowered from our Council of Elders and Executive Committee for the expressed purpose of providing leadership that is Biblical, humble, faith-filled, discerning, and gospel-centered.” According to the BCO, leadership is “honored and cultivated” in our union, not through the existence of the CoE and its committees, but through the LT.

BCO-11.4.1 makes the same point about the Executive Director: “The Executive Director is to inspire and impart vision to Sovereign Grace, resulting in joyful participation in its shared mission and appreciation of its shared doctrine and values. He is to encourage and exhort the churches of Sovereign Grace to fulfill their shared commitments and warn them against cultural temptations or internal inconsistencies with their doctrine and values.” BCO-7.1 similarly describes the leadership of RLs in terms of motivating, encouraging, exhorting, equipping, counseling, and warning.

The Gift of Leadership

What is the gift of leadership?² What the BCO says about local church polity is informative here. BCO-2.2.6 describes “The Gift of Leadership” as “having sufficient wisdom to make good decisions in small and large matters, the ability to communicate and implement those decisions, and biblical wisdom to speak to the affairs of the church.”

While all pastors must have a degree of leadership gifting (BCO-2.2.6) and each eldership has an important representative voice in the CoE (BCO-8), it is important to recognize that there are degrees of leadership gifting and that not all pastors are gifted for broader denominational leadership roles. Those who serve on the LT must be men “whose gifting for broader leadership is recognized by other elders” (BCO-11.1). Such individuals are commissioned precisely because of their recognized gifting, experience, and expertise.

The LT is not a self-defined group but is given a clear mandate within the BCO. It is “charged with leading the central aspects of Sovereign Grace’s shared mission according to its stated values” (BCO-11.3.1). Their responsibilities fall into the broad areas of “mission, doctrine and values, and partnership” (11.3.1). Yet, within this mandate is freedom to lead, so long as that leadership complies “with what the *Book of Church Order* explicitly mandates and refrain[s] from what it explicitly forbids, while operating in biblical wisdom in all other matters” (11.3.1).

2. We opted to not give detailed description of all that the Scriptures say about the nature, priorities, and expression of spiritual and pastoral leadership in general, given the expansive nature of the topic, the extra-local focus of our mandate, and the general agreement SG elders have on these things. For some interaction on the topic see (1) New Testament passages such as 1 Peter 5:1-5, Acts 20:17-38, and Matthew 20:25-28, (2) various works on eldership and leadership by Charles Bridges (*The Christian Ministry*), D.A. Carson (*The Cross and Christian Ministry; Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor; Praying with Paul*), Tim Laniak (*Shepherds After my Own Heart; While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*), Alexander Strauch (*Biblical Eldership*), and John Piper (*The Marks of a Spiritual Leader; Brothers, We are Not Professionals; Why I Love the Apostle Paul*), and (3) the BCO’s statements on leadership.

Authority and Leadership

It is important to recognize the distinction between authority and leadership in how our extra-local polity works. The role of the LT is best understood in terms of leadership rather than exercising governing or ecclesiastical authority. According to BCO-11, this leadership includes taking initiative, imparting vision, training and equipping pastors, providing direction, promoting shared doctrines and values, providing movement-wide communication, initiating fundraising, executing our shared mission, and more.

The CoE exercises final authority (that is, the right and responsibility to make binding decisions on certain limited matters outlined in BCO-8.5), while the LT exercises significant denominational leadership (that is, they have a real impact on the direction and day-to-day operation of our union as they carry out the responsibilities outlined in BCO-11.3).

In our polity, God-given authority comes to elderships who then delegate certain responsibilities and prerogatives, thereby authorizing and empowering extra-local leaders (including the LT and RLs) to carry out various tasks. The CoE and regional assemblies have authority over who occupies these positions, and have means for removing or redirecting them, but we value, deploy, and follow the leadership of these men.

In summary, we value the oversight of local elderships and the CoE as well as the releasing of our most gifted leaders to carry out extra-local functions that advance our common mission. We need the flexibility and gifting of our LT to influence our churches, respond to crises, and explore and act on mission opportunities. And we need the wisdom and participation of our elders and elderships in their Regional Assemblies of Elders (RAEs), the CoE, and in various committees. It is only through the combined efforts of our LT and elders that SG will continue to thrive.

Boundaries for Extra-Local Leadership

While the Council of Elders has created a BCO that gives Leadership Team members and Regional Leaders wide latitude to lead, they have also wisely built in boundaries for these leaders. The structure of our polity places limits on the actions extra-local leaders can take, locates authority in bodies such

as the CoE and RAEs, places real responsibility and influence in the hands of various committees and in CoE delegates from each church, and provides accountability for extra-local leaders. These factors strengthen our union and create numerous protections from unhealthy leadership.

First, local elders govern their own affairs.

BCO-1.4 says “The elders of each local church have sole responsibility to govern its affairs under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture.” Local elders rather than extra-local leaders are responsible to oversee the flock entrusted to their care (BCO-2.1). Extra-local leaders cannot make decisions on any matters of local governance, nor can they give binding mandates to a local church.

Second, significant authority and influence is invested in each RAE.

“After the local church, the entire Regional Assembly of Elders is the primary place of support, care, accountability, and cooperation in mission for each church” (BCO-6.1.2). Regional Leaders are appointed by the RAE, occupy no higher office, and are accountable to the entire regional assembly for their activities. Our polity includes decentralized authority, in which the RAE and its committees have responsibility within the region for church planting (and church adoptions), ordination, and adjudication. Regional elders also control their own budgets, thus determining things like RL expenditures, church plant support, and support for global initiatives. Members of the LT do not have the freedom to carry out those authoritative functions given to regional assemblies. They cannot direct regional funds, appoint RLs, affirm or deny ordinations, discipline elders, or censure churches.

Third, participation in SG is strictly voluntary.

Other than adherence to the SG *Statement of Faith* and BCO (including the Partnership Agreement), local churches and their elders are not required to and cannot be forced to participate in any SG activity or initiatives. Each SG church is independently constituted, its elders have the right to peacefully withdraw from our union, and the denomination and its leaders have no legal or ecclesiastical rights to the assets of any local church.

Fourth, our representative government gives each eldership a vote in the CoE.

This participation in the CoE gives SG churches and elders significant say in the overall affairs of the partnership. The *Statement of Faith*, the BCO, and the Partnership Agreement can only be amended by the CoE. Furthermore, CoE procedures assure that each council delegate has a voice in debate regarding any and every proposed amendment to the BCO.

The CoE votes to appoint members of key committees within SG including the Executive Committee (EC), the Polity Committee, and the Theology Committee. They also vote to appoint the Executive Director of the LT whose extra-local leadership, including the formation of the LT, has considerable influence on the day-to-day conduct of SG as well as the outworking of our partnership. The SG budget is approved by the CoE, and they could, if necessary, send the budget back to the LT and EC for desired changes. The BCO also provides for a specified minority of the CoE to call special meetings of the Council.

None of the decisions that require a vote of the CoE can be made by the LT. The LT cannot alter ordination standards, change the BCO or the *Statement of Faith*, appoint EC members, call a special meeting of the CoE, etc.

Fifth, the CoE is the highest extra-local authority in our union, and possesses unique authority.

The CoE is the only body in SG that can create binding mandates, prohibitions, and doctrines that must be followed by every church, leader, or elder in SGC. The LT does not possess this authority.

Sixth, those extra-local leaders who are elders are accountable in the ways described in Sections 2 and 11 of the BCO.

The Executive Director must be an elder in a local church (BCO-11.4.1), and the polity envisions most members of the LT being elders in a local church. As such, they are accountable first and foremost to God (BCO-2.7.1), and they perform their duties in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will return to judge and to commend. There is also accountability in the ordination process (BCO-2.7.2), a local plurality of elders who watch each

others' lives (BCO-2.7.3), and the local congregation (BCO-2.7.4). The BCO also specifies ways every SG elder is accountable to the other elders in their region and ultimately to all the elders in SG.

Seventh, the Executive Committee oversees the LT on behalf of the CoE.

Specifically, the EC is “to insure that the Leadership Team and its officers are acting in accordance with the mission and core values of the Sovereign Grace churches” (BCO-10.1.3.1), “to appoint and evaluate the Leadership Team” (BCO-10.1.3.2),³ and, “to determine the responsibilities of the Leadership Team” (BCO-10.1.3.5), giving direction to the job descriptions and decisions of the LT if necessary. Additionally, “Except for the Executive Director, any member of the Leadership Team for Director may be terminated from his position by a majority vote of the Executive Committee” (BCO-11.4.2).

In addition, the LT is directed to “provide leadership *in cooperation with* [emphasis added] the Executive Committee in situations when urgent communication or action is necessary to the local churches of Sovereign Grace” (BCO-11.3.4.8).

Eighth, the Leadership Team leads in plurality.

The BCO states that leadership involves genuine plurality, both locally and extra-locally. There is no one man calling the shots, to whom everyone else is expected to defer, and there are no important decisions made by individuals in isolation. BCO-11.4.1.6 requires the Executive Director to promote plurality on the LT. In summary, there are significant boundaries for extra-local leadership that are built into our polity. Their reach into churches is limited, their appointment and accountability is structured, and they cannot be “empowered with any authority already allocated in the *Book of Church Order*” (BCO-11.4.4.3).

Responses to Extra-local Leadership

An understanding of the value, responsibilities, boundaries, and accountability of extra-local leadership leads us to the important topic of how churches

3. This includes an annual evaluation and ongoing assessment of the Executive Director. The Executive Director also receives local eldership evaluation/affirmation for each LT member.

and pastors should respond to extra-local leadership within Sovereign Grace Churches. Though the LT and RLs do not have authority to require a church or elder to conform to a particular direction of ministry in their own church, they are charged and empowered to give direction to our partnership in the fulfillment of our joint mission, which depends on the active support of our individual churches. Thus, the long-term health and fruit of our ecclesiastical union depends upon a willingness to follow the direction of our chosen leaders whenever possible.

Followership is as essential to our mission as is leadership, since we cannot have one without the other, and we cannot have effective mission and spiritual health without both. Our churches and pastors should be willing to follow chosen and godly leadership, given the following:

1. Our shared conviction that God has gifted certain men to lead us extra-locally;
2. The effectiveness of pursuing our mission in unity rather than experiencing the gridlock of pursuing individual preferences;
3. The boundaries for extra-local leaders that limit authority, provide accountability, and create protections from unhealthy leadership;
4. Our trust in God's providence over decisions we feel are less than perfect.

This type of followership requires faith, patience, and humility, and does not allow for each elder or church to insist on their own way for our partnership, even in times of difficulty or when controversial decisions are necessary. This willingness to follow does distinguish our denomination from an alternative polity—a polity in which the governing body gives itself responsibility for both governance and leadership by representative council.

Sovereign Grace Churches practice a polity in which the body with ultimate governing authority limits the expression of that authority and instead authorizes gifted men to provide leadership which each member church intends to receive and follow in good faith, while protected by the structures and mandates of the BCO.

The godly response to leadership in this polity may be organized into three main categories: *active support*, *gracious deference*, and *peaceful separation*.

Active Support

The first category of response is active support. Every Sovereign Grace pastor, by virtue of their partnership agreement and their trust in the representative processes of selection and oversight of leaders, should intend to make this the normal response to leaders in Sovereign Grace. This support will be most effective if characterized by our historical pattern of celebrating evidences of grace and practicing gratefulness and encouragement. We are all strengthened in our mutual partnership when active support has a tone of joy in light of God's love for his people, of peace in light of God's sovereignty, and of appreciation in light of the fact that Sovereign Grace leaders serve for the good of churches and the advance of the gospel.

Active support will certainly include giving advice or counsel as we have opportunity and should not be understood as unanimity of perspective on any one issue or decision. It should also be noted that though voices of dissent are a normal part of a healthy partnership, dissent is not a value in and of itself, to be pursued for its own sake. Passive participation should likewise be rejected unless there are strong reasons of disagreement or conscience that require it. Active support finds its biblical basis in the New Testament churches which are commended for their humble sacrifice for the sake of the broader mission, their acknowledgement of their need for counsel from extra-local leaders, and their decision to send leaders and servants in order to plant and build other churches.

Gracious Deference

The second category of response is gracious deference. Disagreement with a particular decision is a normal aspect of life in any partnership. In most cases, these disagreements will not be in matters of conscience and will not result in incompatibility, but will require deferring to the decision or direction of those chosen to lead the partnership. Before and after a decision is made, there is a place for appeals both formally and informally. There are also additional recourses in the BCO in various situations. None of these should be viewed as divisive as long as they are practiced in good faith. However, once necessary

appeals have been made, churches should commit to communicating about the decision in a way that honors the character and intentions of those making it and those supporting it.

When a church or eldership strongly disagrees with the leadership direction of Sovereign Grace and when no additional informal or formal appeal can be made, those elders may even deem it necessary to inform their church of their disagreement, again showing care to describe others in the most gracious light and to lead their church in godly speech. Such a church announcement should not be considered divisive or slanderous, as long as the church demonstrates a gracious and respectful dissent from this particular decision or direction.

When a church or eldership strongly disagrees with the leadership direction of SG the elders may also find they need to refrain from certain activities within our union. This should be done carefully and soberly, taking pains to not diminish the strength of our union, to not insist on particular agendas, to not unwittingly create a partisan atmosphere, and to not fail to fulfill the requirements of our BCO. Those who graciously defer to decisions while appropriately expressing dissent should be affirmed by the Sovereign Grace family with all respect, grace, and affection.

Peaceful Separation

The final category of response is peaceful separation. As our BCO states, “We are an ecclesiastical union. No separation of such a union should be taken lightly or unadvisedly, but soberly, carefully, and only in light of strong reasons of conscience or compatibility, and then only after earnest efforts have been made to preserve our unity in the Spirit” (BCO-13.1.1; cf. BCO-1.10). When decisions are made that reveal substantial disagreement between a local eldership and the direction of Sovereign Grace, there may be a need for that church to peacefully withdraw their membership from Sovereign Grace Churches. Each church considering this course should ensure that this action is not taken due to a personal offense with another member church or individual within Sovereign Grace. They should also consider whether a course of gracious deference is a reasonable alternative to departure.

However, when a church finds that even passive participation in Sovereign Grace strikes at their conscience they may have no choice but to withdraw. Likewise, a church may notice over the course of some time that ongoing disagreements of direction or ministry priorities in Sovereign Grace reveal a fundamental incompatibility. In this case partnership can be more a source of debate than of joy, of disagreement than active support. When either conscience or incompatibility leads a church to the difficult but painful decision of separation, they should do so with faith, grace, and humility, entrusting their brother pastors to the grace of the Lord both privately and publicly, and committing to honor their character both during and after the departure.

According to the BCO, the region of a departing church has the responsibility to “commend, comment upon, or censure the local church’s departure” (BCO-13.2.8). Commendation should be freely given to those who depart in peace and honor, comment should be utilized when the ongoing health of the departing church or the region necessitate additional communication, and censure should be reserved for those who depart due to heterodoxy or scandalous sin, or who have actively slandered or divided the health of the partnership.

Honorable departures will be a normal, though hopefully infrequent, experience in our family of churches. We must not create the sense that to leave Sovereign Grace indicates some level of failure. We are but a small and imperfect part of all that God is doing in his church. Every peaceful separation of a church should result in a fresh reminder of our broader unity in Christ, our confidence in his promise to build his church, and our shared hope in the full and visible union of all true churches when the Lord returns.

In all of these responses, Sovereign Grace churches and pastors should keep their eyes on the Lord and their hearts full of the promises of his grace, knowing that God directs all our ways and will be faithful to lead us according to his own wisdom and love. We should seek to do all we possibly can to actively support the leaders among us with grace and gratefulness, and do all in our power to support our shared mission of planting and building faithful churches for the Lord. And, we should celebrate that our future is not ultimately dependent on the decisions of our leaders or the responses of our pastors and churches,

but on the unchangeable character of our God of all grace.

Conclusion

For the sake of our unity and our joy, we should all strive to appreciate the blessing of gifted and commissioned extra-local leaders, and should be eager to value and follow their leadership. Likewise, we should all strive to appreciate the ways our polity decentralizes authority and gives voice to each eldership, and should value the blessings that have come to us through a representative government.

We all have a crucial role to play in the health of our partnership, and each one of us will have an impact on our ecclesiastical union, for better or for worse. We can all do our part by continuing to hold fast to the gospel, faithfully serving our own congregations, eagerly participating in RAE's and the CoE, supporting extra-local leaders, treating fellow-elders throughout Sovereign Grace with charity and honor, and continuing to work together to plant and strengthen churches for the glory of God.

The Lord loves his church, and he has good things in store for us as a union of churches. We are ordinary pastors, but we have an extraordinary Savior. We are jars of clay, but we have a priceless treasure in the gospel. We are weak in ourselves, but strong in the Lord. As we press on together in our mission, may God continue to deepen our unity, fill us with joy and thanksgiving, and increase our passion to make Christ known in all the earth.

SOVEREIGN GRACE OVER THE YEARS

Mickey Connolly

Elder, Crossway Community Church (Charlotte, NC)

Editors' Note: In exploring the theme of partnership, it's important to remember that there is a rich history of God's grace that brought Sovereign Grace into being and has shaped our partnership over the years. We asked Mickey Connolly, a pastor and member of Sovereign Grace Churches with decades of experience, to share some of his memories of God's work in our midst. What follows is not an exhaustive history of Sovereign Grace, but a reflection upon some of what the Lord has done to shape our family of churches. It is our hope that present and future generations remember God's kindness to us over the years and thank God for his faithfulness to us throughout our history.

Sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Okay, now that I've got your attention... Many believe, and I would agree, that America experienced a genuine revival in the 1960s and 70s. As young people were falling into a culture of rebellion marked by, yes, sex, drugs and rock and roll, God simultaneously began saving young men and women and renewing an understanding of the Holy Spirit's vital role in building the church. Those men and women began to read their Bibles and hunger to experience what they read there, especially to see a restoration of the church to its biblical glory.

Acts 2:42-47 became a model for how to build local churches as those first century believers "devoted themselves to" (v. 42) teaching, worship, prayer, fellowship, the breaking of bread, mutual care and hospitality, doing it all with "glad and generous hearts" (v. 46). The hope and prayer was that like those first believers we would find "favor" (v. 47) and that God would add to us "those who were being saved" (v. 47).

As someone who has been around for most of our history, it's a joy to reflect upon Sovereign Grace's history as I've observed it. There is no way to fully capture 40 years in a brief article. But I do hope to convey some of the main facets of the Lord's faithful work among us.

Our Early Days

Coming out of early days of revival were two young men, C.J. Mahaney and Larry Tomczak. At the height of popularity of a mid-week meeting, change came as they continued studying the Scriptures. Through that study, especially Acts and Ephesians, they developed a conviction that the church was and always had been at the heart of God's plan to make and mature disciples from every nation. So, in 1977, the Gathering of Believers (later to become Covenant Life Church) was born in Gaithersburg, Maryland. It was a church that featured expressive, affectionate worship, biblical preaching, spiritual gifts, small group ministry, and more. It was a church that emphasized community, servanthood, evangelism, member care and accountability, and shared leadership. It became the model for what many of us wanted to plant and build.

But the New Testament talked about more than local church practice; it talked about a mission to the world spurred by extra-local ministry, evangelism, and planting new churches. The book of Acts, and Paul's missionary journeys in particular, painted a picture of this kind of gospel expansion. So in 1982, C.J. and Larry, along with some other gifted men, founded People of Destiny International (PDI), formed an "apostolic team" to lead us in a broader mission, and got about the business of extra-local ministry to plant and care for local churches.

The first church was planted in Cleveland, Ohio, and other church plants soon followed. In addition, unaffiliated churches requested to be adopted into the ministry. Because we not only wanted to plant but to care for local churches and because we wanted to build relationally, we tended to grow slowly, but that was fine. Rapid expansion was never the goal.

We started calling ourselves a "family of churches" to express the fact that we were more than just an organization or an institution. Rather, we wanted to build strong personal relationships both locally and extra-locally with mutual

love, care, and fellowship at the heart of our ministry together. Strong personal relationships, coupled with a first-importance commitment to Scripture and theology are values that we have retained to this day.

Our Conferences

Conferences became a big part of how we incorporated those two priorities over the years. Our Pastors Conferences were critical times for envisioning, equipping, and uniting our churches, and were also like family reunions where it was a delight to be able to fellowship together. They remain so today.

Celebration Conferences served the same purpose, as churches gathered in Indiana, Pennsylvania (the first was held there in 1984), Lynchburg, Virginia; Flagstaff, Arizona; Las Cruces, New Mexico; and Nottingham, England for days of worship, teaching, and fellowship. Our children and teens enjoyed ministry designed especially for them. Those times, especially through teaching, united us in heart and mind and built strong connections—not just among our pastors but between our churches and members. Even years later, I still hear folks bring up Celebration and the life-changing effect of the teaching and the life-long relationships that were formed.

Our Small Group Leaders Conferences served the men and women who led our small groups and other ministries. We can never thank our small group leaders enough for their selfless and sacrificial service in this critical aspect of our church-building theology.

In 1999 we held the first of several New Attitude conferences (later followed by Next and Transfer) that were designed to serve young college and 20-something men and women to grow in their love for God and commitment to mission. One of our hopes from the very beginning was to not be a single-generation movement. Very early on, C.J. cautioned us about the generational faltering that occurred historically when God was doing an unusual reviving work among a people. Typically, the first generation of men and women were so busy with ministry, that they regrettably neglected to disciple the next generation adequately and thus the work of God faded away. From day one we've purposed to "pass the baton" to a second and third generation (and, hopefully, many more), to ensure that God's work in the founding generation gets passed on to future generations.

Our Writings

In 1983 we started a magazine! People of Destiny Magazine's first issue featured articles on "Restoration of the Church." The magazine became another vehicle through which our apostolic team and other gifted men could communicate our vision and values to members in our growing family of churches. In 1992 we began publishing study books on topics like small groups, meeting with God, sanctification, parent/teen relationships, single life, and more. The conferences, magazines, and books reflected the value we placed on preaching and teaching God's word as absolutely foundational for all we were doing and ever hoped to do.

From People of Destiny to PDI

During that time we also experienced the first of our name changes from People of Destiny to PDI. The letters PDI no longer stood for People of Destiny International—it became an acronym that stood for Proclaiming God's grace, Developing local churches, and Influencing the world with the gospel. The new name rightly shifted to a more God-centered focus and better reflected our mission to plant and care for churches.

During these years, we moved from a building/creating/initiating phase to a refining phase. C.J. was placed in the primary leadership role in 1991 and began to implement some important changes. We publicly identified as reformed in theology, especially in our understanding of God's initiative in salvation. We became known for the combination of being both reformed and charismatic—a mix of theological understanding that in those days seemed an oxymoron to some but intriguing to others.

Shaped by Books Then and Now

In the mid-1980s C.J. started teaching on the difference between legalism and grace, leading us to live motivated by grace. This emphasis became an important hallmark for how we wanted to build our churches. In the 90s C.J. wisely began connecting us to church history, which helped us avoid the "reinventing-the-wheel." and tethered us to historic Christianity which strengthened and preserved us in many ways.

We were introduced to the Puritans and men like Charles Spurgeon. John Owen's *Sin and Temptation* set a trajectory for the pursuit of holiness. We further benefited from men like David Powlison and Paul Tripp of the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (CCEF) who helped us build a strong, biblical foundation for our counseling. Likewise, C.J.'s friendships with men like Wayne Grudem (whose *Systematic Theology* became a key text for our pastors), John Piper, Jerry Bridges, R.C. Sproul, and Kevin DeYoung among many others broadened our horizons.

Unquestionably, the most important teaching that came out of those days was C.J.'s emphasis on the cross of Christ and living gospel-centered lives. Soon followed Sovereign Grace books that have long-shaped us: *The Cross Centered Life*, *Christ our Mediator*, and *Living the Cross Centered Life*. With an eye toward equipping the women in our churches, C.J.'s wife Carolyn and daughter Nicole published *Feminine Appeal*, unpacking Titus 2. That was followed by *Girl Talk* and *True Beauty* which helped us define our complementarian values and envisioned women in their walk with Jesus.

Our Music and Pastors College

And then the music! From the very beginning God has gifted us with song-writers and musicians that led worship served us with songs that were great musically and also rich theologically. Songs became another means to get biblical truth into our minds and hearts. Thanks to the gift of Bob Kauflin and others, we have been able to write and produce many songs and albums to serve not only our churches but also the body of Christ, nationally and internationally. Our first album, *The Nations Are Waiting*, was released in 1986. Since then, we have produced 56 albums and 650 songs including albums for kids and albums in languages other than English.

In the early 90s we began the School of Ministry to help train pastors and church planters, which in 1997 became a permanent, full-time program called the Pastors College (PC). In 1998 Jeff Purswell began leading the PC, which offered a new generation of our pastors and planters a theological and pastoral education that many of the founding generation only imagined. Initially most of the ten months of weekly classes were taught by our pastors who brought a rich pastoral focus to their biblical/theological content, helping the

students to connect theology to everyday pastoral ministry. These courses were supplemented by a variety of world-class visiting instructors whose expertise further enriched the PC experience.

Oh yeah—there was also another name change in 2002 that better captured who we truly were: Sovereign Grace Ministries (SGM). We landed upon a name that reflected our greatest passion: the grace of God that has come freely to us in the gospel.

Difficult Years and Lessons Learned

Our first 29 years were not without troubles and mistakes—after all we remain justified sinners—but for the most part they were happy and prosperous years. But in June 2011 things took a turn, when false accusations from a former leader in Sovereign Grace ushered us into several years of trouble and turmoil. The reputations of good men were damaged, and some churches left Sovereign Grace.

Then in 2012 a group brought a civil lawsuit against parties in Sovereign Grace. Though we rightly denied the accusations and fought to clear our name, again suspicion was sown, damage was done, and churches and members left.

But crisis wasn't the end of the story; indeed we can look back and see God using it for our good. While those events were painful, they were instructive. They awakened us to the enemy's strategies to work through the evil of slander and false accusation. They taught us that leadership requires courage and the need to defend those under attack. They reminded us of the importance of creating a church culture of genuine humility, a quickness to forgive, a commitment to justice for the vulnerable, theological discernment, relational unity, and more. They reminded us that suffering, though painful and often mysterious, is one of God's intended means to mature his people.

Structures for Future Growth

The trials we faced also reinforced the need to establish a polity that clarifies authority and accountability, and provides just processes to handle charges against pastors and potential division. Just prior to the start of those difficult years, Sovereign Grace was rethinking our polity—our understanding of

church government, and how to define the relationships among our churches and pastors to better serve our mission. That process continued into those difficult years.

In 2013 we adopted our *Book of Church Order* (BCO) that did several important things:

- It established a Council of Elders whereby every Sovereign Grace church was represented in our decision making processes.
- It established an Executive Director who, along with a Leadership Team, would seek to serve our churches and lead us in our overall mission.
- It established an Executive Committee that would serve as a liaison between the Council of Elders and the Leadership Team to facilitate and coordinate responsibilities.
- It created a formal process for adjudicating charges within Sovereign Grace churches.
- We changed our name to Sovereign Grace Churches to better reflect our ecclesiastical identity.

In short, our new polity honored the integrity of our local churches, and formalized structures of shared governance that would protect us theologically, ethically, and missionally.

It was also in 2013 that we elected Mark Prater as our first Executive Director. Mark brought the perfect mix of character, courage, vision, and administration to lead us into our future. The Leadership Team he appointed has served our denomination well. (Yes, we accept that we are a denomination, but we are still a family!)

Our BCO called for creation of a Theology Committee composed of men uniquely gifted to define and protect our biblical and theological understanding. In 2013 this committee began to review and reformulate our *Statement of Faith*, which was a seven year process that involved our elderships as well. Very importantly, this was all a part of SGC becoming formally confessional; each SGC elder would affirm the new *Statement of Faith* and agree to be accountable to it. In 2020, the Council of Elders ratified a statement that will richly serve

and, Lord willing, protect our churches for years to come.

In this process we also formalized our “Seven Shared Values,” key convictions that apply our doctrine and shape our practices as churches (see June 2022 Sovereign Grace Journal): (1) reformed theology; (2) gospel-centered doctrine and preaching; (3) continuationist pneumatology; (4) complementarian leadership in the home and church; (5) elder governed and led local churches; (6) church planting, outreach and global mission; and (7) our unity in mission, fellowship, and governance. Defining those biblically-derived values is key to our partnering together on gospel mission.

Recently we featured “Seven Shaping Virtues” (see October 2022 Sovereign Grace Journal): (1) humility; (2) joy; (3) gratitude; (4) encouragement; (5) generosity; (6) servanthood; and (7) grace-motivated godliness. These character qualities are specific fruits of the gospel we want to cultivate in believers and churches throughout Sovereign Grace. Our *Statement of Faith*, shared values, and shaping virtues work together to define us for others and help our pastors and churches stay on track with our key convictions when they are challenged with an avalanche of information and ideas that, if not guarded against, can distract and derail our gospel mission.

Even with all of these changes, Sovereign Grace Music continues to produce songs and albums. WorshipGod conferences served not only our churches but also a broad spectrum of churches, musicians, and songwriters in thinking musically theologically to better serve their congregations. And our Pastors College continued to be blessed with class after class of fine young men to pastor churches and plant with us.

One of the most encouraging things we’ve seen are answers to our early prayers. A second generation of Sovereign Grace pastors are being raised up and taking over key pastoral and leadership positions in local churches as well as extra-locally throughout Sovereign Grace.

Global Fruit

Among the many ways God has been at work in us is a happy expansion of our global reach. Back in the day when we called ourselves People of Destiny

International, except a wonderful partnership in Mexico, there wasn't much "international" about us. But by God's grace we increasingly have the privilege of working with churches throughout the world who share our doctrine, values, and, above all, our passion for the gospel. Here are some highlights.

- We are presently serving in 46 countries on every continent except Antarctica.
- In 2002 Covenant Mercies was birthed in one of our churches to care for young men and women in Africa through individual sponsorships and public works projects.
- In 2016 we sent our first missionaries to an unreached people group in Asia.
- In 2021 we created a clear process for partnering with churches throughout the world in a way that maintains both theological and ecclesiological unity. In the last two years this process has allowed us to plant 8 churches and adopt another 14.
- We had pastors from global churches go through the Sovereign Grace ordination process and we officially adopted them and their churches into Sovereign Grace.
- We have started or supported Pastors Colleges in several countries.

Grateful Beyond Words

Throughout writing this article, tears were never far from my eyes. It's hard to review this history without being overwhelmed by all kinds of emotions. Despite our weakness and shortcomings, I'm amazed at "what God hath wrought" in and through our small denomination. I'm filled with joy in seeing local churches experiencing daily grace. I overflow with gratitude for deep and genuine partnership and friendships. I love and respect our faithful members—men and women who have sacrificed and served, often unnoticed, and yet without whom there would be no Sovereign Grace. Most of all, I am filled with wonder and awe that God would save a sinner like me and let me join together with fellow imperfect, yet sincere and godly saints, to play a small part in what God is doing in the world today.

Psalm 115:1 says, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory." In the early 1990s we sang that truth together. Looking back on 40 years of Sovereign Grace, the hope expressed in that verse remains our hope today.

And it remains our testimony. Our story is one of ordinary men and women, ordinary pastors and teachers who, by God's abundant and lavish grace have tried to plant and care for local churches in keeping with God's will and for God's glory.

What does the future hold? Who knows? God has kindly strengthened, shifted, and surprised us over the years. He has strengthened the theology, practices, and values that, by his great grace, we got right. He has shifted those things needing refining or changing. He has surprised us with new directions and opportunities along the way. One thing is sure: we have been the recipients of God's sovereign grace for 40 years, and all because of his faithfulness. Therefore, we have a firm hope for his continued grace in the future.

PARTNERSHIP STORY

INTERNATIONAL

Roberto Estupinian

Lead Pastor, Gracia Soberana de Guadalajara (Guadalajara, Mexico)

PASTORS WHO WALK ALONE are vulnerable, sometimes struggling in solitude, carrying the burdens of the church and personal life on their own. I have seen my own need over the years for fellowship and friendship in ministry. Praise God, my story is not one of loneliness but one of fellowship, friendship, and ministry support from our family of churches.

Years of Calling and Equipping

I was born in El Salvador, and I was introduced to Sovereign Grace Churches almost 15 years ago, thanks to men like Carlos Contreras and Steve Shank who visited my church in El Salvador. I was deeply impacted by the centrality of the gospel, among other things. After a few years, Carlos invited me to explore a potential call to pastoral ministry, and to move from El Salvador to Ciudad Juárez, the Sovereign Grace Church in Juárez, Mexico. There I had the privilege of receiving pastoral training, and being a part of Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville, strengthening friendships and learning from men like Bob Kauflin, Jeff Purswell, and being exposed to C.J. Mahaney's ministry, among others.

Upon returning to Juárez, the Lord made it clear that he had called me and my family into ministry. Although at that time I did not know where, the Lord confirmed that he had a plan for us in the city of Guadalajara.

Partnership in Guadalajara

Gracia Soberana de Guadalajara, the Sovereign Grace Church in Guadalajara, Mexico, was planted thirty years ago by a man name Luis Bermea, who served faithfully as the only pastor. Because of this, he endured quite a lot. He needed association, friendship, counseling, and ministerial support.

By God's providence in 2012 Luis met Carlos Contrearras and requested that his church be adopted into our family of churches, which occurred in 2014. The Lord's provision in this was clear in two ways. First, the Mexico and Latin America region prayed for the opportunity to plant a church in Guadalajara, since it is the second largest city in Mexico, with nearly 6 million people in the metropolitan area. Secondly, Luis for the first time received the partnership he needed. Through this partnership, Luis and the church in Guadalajara were reinvigorated, and our family of churches was a blessing to his life and ministry.

Luis saw the need for plurality of elders, so he asked the region of Mexico for another pastor. The pastoral team of Gracia Soberana in Ciudad Juárez, which I was now a part of, invited me to consider whether I should go to Guadalajara and join this newly adopted church as one of its pastors. My wife and I prayed about it, and felt it was God's call, so we moved there in 2018. After two years, Luis led through a transition placing me into the senior pastor role.

Blessings of Partnership

From the moment I was sent from Juárez, I have been able to see the blessing of partnership in my life. However, since May 2021 when the regional elders laid hands upon me as the new senior pastor of this church, I have grown even more aware of the gift of partnership in our denomination.

I felt more than ever the need for a true companionship in the faith. I did not want to walk alone in this new city. As a new pastor, I had many doubts about how to do ministry, but there have been many evidences of grace that God has given me through our family of churches, confirming that I do not walk alone.

Throughout this process I have been accompanied by faithful friends. It really feels like being a part of a natural family. I have always had the support of the pastors of the Mexico region as well as Sovereign Grace globally. They were of great comfort in all my ministerial doubts, in much support, prayer, visits of various men to preach, serving as true friends for the needs of the church, and also for my spiritual, personal, and family needs.

We have received so much of our fellowship in the faith. Thanks to the Latin American Fund, I received a scholarship so that I can finish my M.Div. at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Through that time we were able to partially support Andrés Contreras for two years, a current pastor in training in our local church.

Hosting our Partnership

As part of the partnership, this church has hosted different events in the region. For the fifth consecutive year we have hosted Simeon Trust preaching workshops where almost 60 pastors come per year. We have been able to serve them and at the same time we have been enriched by their fellowship. It has been a blessing to our family of churches, because from these workshops, some pastors have sought partnership with Sovereign Grace.

We have hosted training events for current pastors of Sovereign Grace around Latin America, from all over Mexico, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Bolivia, and the United States. The first year, 2021, Joselo Mercado, Carlos Contreras, Hellman Ávila, and Rich Richardson served us very well. Last spring Bob Kauflin, Rich Richardson, Joselo Mercado, and Carlos Contreras taught us with the focus on the Sunday gathering. It was enriching and rewarding being positioned to serve and equip these pastors.

We also have been enriched by our annual conference, Fieles a Su Llamado, which is hosted in Gracia Soberana Ciudad Juárez. Even beyond the conference, we benefit from time to be refreshed, encouraged, and be together as friends.

Grateful to God for Fruit and Partners

We remain dedicated to the gospel in the pulpit and in all other areas of ministry as a church. As a result, many have joined our church. We are humbled at testimonies we hear from them such as, “We were praying for a church with sound doctrine and practice in our city, and Sovereign Grace has been the answer.”

We are overwhelmed by the grace we've received in partnership. And we are filled with gratitude for the many men and churches throughout Sovereign Grace as they each have shared their love and support. I feel proud to be part of Sovereign Grace Churches. Most of all, I thank God because this is not by our merits, or for our own glory. As Psalm 115:1 reads: "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!"

OF FRUIT TREES AND HEALTHY REGIONS

Jon Payne

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

For 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.

PLANTING CHURCHES TOGETHER

Ricky Alcantar

Senior Pastor, Cross of Grace Church (El Paso, TX)

I still remember the night of prayer at the lodge. We had gathered as men to pray for and send out our pastor, Tony Walsh who was leaving to help plant and establish another church halfway across the continent. I remember the tears—both of sadness and joy—that night. I was a young teenager so I didn't fully understand. All I knew was that some of my parents' best friends (and some of mine) were being sent out. And with them, it felt like we were sending our very hearts.

This night of emotion was surprising because the Walsh family hadn't always been with us in El Paso. In fact, Tony had come to our church from another church in our denomination. His family had been sent by another church to our church. Now, years later, it was our turn to do the sending. That night I watched grown men laugh and cry and pray. I watched them tell stories of God's past faithfulness and dream of what God could do in the future. I felt the joy and sacrifice of the moment.

I may not have understood what "missiology" or "ecclesiology" meant, but I did understand a fundamental truth: partnership in our family of churches meant not only receiving, but generously sending.

Often pastors at my church would talk about desiring to build "New Testament churches." We wanted to build churches in the pattern of the book of Acts and the letters of the New Testament. We wanted God's Word to guide us. And I believe we still do.

Forged in Partnership

If we were to drop into the book of Acts in chapter 11, we'd find a church planted not by one person or even one sending church. Believers fleeing persecution in Jerusalem arrived in Antioch and simply told others about Jesus and the number of believers grew. Hearing about this, Jerusalem sent Barnabas—a crucial contribution. Barnabas is described as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (v. 24). He skillfully exhorted the church and many were added as the church was built. Barnabas was the kind of man any church would want to retain, but Jerusalem’s generosity with him helped establish this church.

Then Barnabas, seeing a need for further help, went to Tarsus specifically looking for Saul (v. 25). Presumably Paul’s unique position as a highly trained Jewish scholar and a Roman citizen meant he could help build a diverse church in a Gentile context. Barnabas brought Paul to Antioch (v. 26). Now, it seems there was a group of believers in Tarsus that Paul had to leave behind. But this investment paid off in gospel fruit as we learn that in Antioch “for a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people” (v. 26). The church in Antioch was forged in partnership.

We in Sovereign Grace must be careful to thank God for the legacy of gospel partnership that formed so many of our churches. In my own church, there are inextricable links between our church and churches like Gracia Soberana in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico and Center Church in Gilbert, Arizona from our earliest days. We would not be who we are without them, but neither would they be who they are without us.

If we are to be a family of churches that plants churches, we must remember that just as we were forged in partnership we are called to help build other new works.

Formed by Partnership

The partnership that forged Antioch didn’t dissolve once the church was established. One of the things that is immediately unique and apparent about Antioch is that the believers there had a strong presence in their own city, while having a heart for other churches beyond their city as well. It is in

Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians (v. 26). Clearly they were known in their city and, encouragingly, they were known primarily for following Christ. But when they received insight that a famine would soon afflict the area of Judea, they sprang into action. They not only sent financial aid to Judea, they sent Paul and Barnabas themselves to carry the offering. As the church grew in maturity and numbers, they continued to be formed by their partnership with the other New Testament churches.

Unfortunately, as I've interacted with church planters across various networks and denominations, partnership in mission gets lost after a church is planted. Follow-up and connection fade. Not so in Antioch. This was a church that continued to carry other churches and places on its heart.

If we are to be a family of churches that plants churches, we must continue to be formed by partnership even when no specific plant is on the horizon. That's the way to keep envisioning new churches into the future.

Forward in Partnership

When we return to Antioch in Acts 13, we find an encouraging sight: gifted leaders from every background are serving in the church. Perhaps we expect Paul and Barnabas to settle in for a long and successful ministry in Antioch. Instead, we find something unexpected. In a time of prayer and fasting, the Holy Spirit calls the leaders to set apart Paul and Barnabas "for the work to which I have called them" (v. 2). But what was that work?

Evidently, that was left to the church leaders to help determine. If I were an elder there I would have wanted to convince Paul and Barnabas that their gifts could be best used "set apart" to build our church in Antioch! Who wouldn't want a scholar and teacher like Paul and a tremendous encourager like Barnabas present every Sunday? But instead we read: "after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off" (13:3).

It's hard to overstate the significance of this moment in the book of Acts. Up until this point new churches had been planted nearly by accident, circumstance, or persecution. But here we find, for the first time recorded, a church intentionally sending leaders to plant and establish other churches in other

places. And as a result of sending Paul and Barnabas out from among them, there is amazing gospel fruit—churches in Cyprus, Psidia, Iconium, Lystra, and beyond. In fact, most of the churches we find in the New Testament letters exist as a result of Antioch sending Paul and Barnabas out to do the work of church planting.

When you read that Antioch was forged in partnership and when you watch them continue to grow and mature because of partnership, it's no surprise they were the first church to send mission workers forward in partnership. It was simply part of who they were.

The church at Antioch did not simply send Paul and Barnabas out, and turn their attention back to Antioch. Far from it. In Acts 14:24-27 we find Paul and Barnabas have returned to Antioch “and when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them...and they remained no little time with the disciples.” This was a church that kept Paul's and Barnabas' work on their hearts. There is yet another visit recorded in Acts 18:22 as well.

If we are to be a family of churches that plants churches, we must each lean forward to sow generously and sacrificially in gospel partnership beyond our own contexts.

Tying Our Values Together

If you haven't studied it in depth, I highly commend a study of Acts 11-13 for every pastor and church. It provides both inspiration and challenge for each of us. You will find a beautiful blend of mission and partnership that we should emulate.

Indeed, this is what we've committed to in our sixth and seventh Shared Values in Sovereign Grace:

6. Church Planting, Outreach, and Global Mission. Our gospel-centrality entails not only treasuring the gospel personally but sharing it passionately. The risen Christ commissioned His church to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20). We believe that commission falls to us

and to all believers and that it is fulfilled in a primary way through church planting, whereby the gospel is proclaimed and converts are formed into communities of disciples (Acts 2:21–47; 14:23). We are eager to pursue this mission, relying fully on the Holy Spirit, to see the gospel proclaimed and churches planted throughout the world, that God may be glorified among every tribe, language, people, and nation (Rev. 7:9–12).

7. United in Fellowship, Mission, and Governance. We believe that the unity for which Jesus prayed among His people should find concrete expression among believers and churches. Indeed, the New Testament testifies to a vibrant interdependence among churches in the first century (John 17:20–21; Acts 16:4–5; 1 Cor. 11:16; Gal. 2:7–10). We seek to express a similar interdependence through our common fellowship, mission, and governance. Our fellowship extends beyond mere denominational affiliation; we are committed to applying the gospel together in relationships that foster mutual encouragement, care, and a glad pursuit of Christlikeness. Our shared governance and mission protects our churches doctrinally and ethically, and enables our individual churches to do far more together than we could ever do separately.

I hope you can see from examining the example of Antioch that these two values can't be separated from each other; they are vitally linked. Mission without interdependence and partnership is not only less effective, but less biblical. And interdependence without mission results in stagnant and ingrown churches. We must keep mission and partnership together.

Implications for Our Partnership

In that spirit, here are a few key implications for our mission in partnership together:

Mission in partnership keeps each of us healthy.

During the pandemic we had our hands full with challenges in our own local context. But we had formed a strong partnership with our friend Jaya Prakash Ravuri, a Sovereign Grace pastor in India. And as bad as things seemed in the US, they were far worse in Pastor JP's area of India. The lockdown there meant no one could work, and therefore no one could buy food. Some were literally starving.

So our church partnered with JP to purchase food supplies for everyone in his village that needed food. The thousands of dollars our church contributed resulted in thousands of meals through the ministry of one local church. JP would say that was a key turning point for the work of the gospel in his village and resulted in an openness to him and his church he'd never experienced even after years of faithful ministry.

As significantly as this partnership affected JP's church, I think it had just as important an effect on our church. Where we were tempted to withdraw inward and stop caring about our world and neighbors, partnering with JP reminded us of what God was doing around the world and pulled us outward toward mission. That was a powerful gift to our church in that season.

So in this case, through mission in partnership, a church both in Gundugolanu, Andhra Pradesh and a church in El Paso, Texas were both strengthened and built up. When we pursue mission in partnership we may be aiming beyond ourselves, but counterintuitively, it actually strengthens us as well.

Mission in partnership allows more churches to partner in planting.

Many times a church thinks they can't plant because they don't believe they have everything they need to send a church plant. Perhaps they have targeted a good location and a possible core group but no church planter, or perhaps a man with a burden to plant but no team to send with him. This is where our unique polity and partnership come in.

One of my favorite examples of this is our church in San Antonio, Texas. Mission City Fellowship was planted in an urban area with nearly every church in the region sending people on the church planting team. Our church in Seguin, Texas invested one of their pastors. The church in Round Rock, Texas contributed a worship leader. The whole region contributed financially. Truly, the entire region owned and supported and sent this plant when perhaps none of them could have sent the plant alone. This is what's possible through our interdependent partnership in Sovereign Grace.

Mission in partnership results in churches that last not just years but decades.

A number of years ago I happened to be at a gathering of church planting leaders from across the US. One of the interesting side conversations I had was that in one particular case the leader had ambitious targets for the number of churches planted, but no particular goals for how many of those churches would still exist 5-10 years later. When questioned about this by another church planting leader they sheepishly admitted that perhaps that would be a good statistic to track as well.

In Sovereign Grace we care not only about helping churches start, but also helping them to thrive over the long haul. That means that in a given region, perhaps two or three churches will take the lead in a plant, but very quickly that new church plant will need help from the Regional Ordination Committee as they appoint new elders, and may well need help from the Regional Judicial Review Committee to protect and preserve the church. So over time, every church and pastor will play some role in helping churches not only make it through their first year but their first decade.

Mission in partnership must be carried by the many, not the few.

Last fall all the Senior Pastors in our West region gathered together as has become our annual tradition. We get away to pray, discuss, dream, and plan together. (Being near the beach doesn't hurt either.) When we gather there are lots of differences in temperament and personality, and lots of differences in church size and situation. Despite all of that, one thing that always strikes me is that each man carries the whole region on his heart. When one church presents a mission opportunity or a potential exploratory work, everyone is leaning in. Even for us, as the furthest-flung church in our region, I truly believe these brothers will be behind us when we plant our next church.

Within our polity, it's only when local churches are taking initiative and pursuing mission that mission moves forward in Sovereign Grace. We are so grateful for our global leaders and those among us with skill in planting and we are happy to learn from them and follow their example. But within our polity church planting only happens effectively if regions and local churches take up the work of planting and carry it forward.

Antioch Churches in Every City

One of the joys of partnership in Sovereign Grace is that the Tony we sent out from our church so many years ago is still someone I know well. He's now in the Denver area at one of our churches there (Grace Community Church) and his desire has been to spend this stretch of his ministry helping his church be on mission, preparing to plant other churches in the Denver area.

Last summer my family and I stayed with Tony and his wife, Mary for a few days. One night in particular we stayed up late talking and dreaming about mission opportunities in Denver and our West region. Tony has been in ministry for decades but he's still seeking to build New Testament churches. Even in a later phase of his ministry, he wants to be part of establishing the next church like Antioch so that the gospel might continue to move forward. And I want to grow up to be just like him.

When we finally packed up and headed home, one of our sons cried because he loved our time with the Walshes so much. He didn't understand much but he understood that we love them and that they live far away so we won't see them as often as we would like. He is just beginning to see what I saw so many years ago: partnership in our family of churches means not only receiving but generously sending. And it is glorious.

May our legacy be our future as we partner together to plant churches and advance the mission.

PARTNERSHIP STORY

CHURCH PLANTING

Bart Lipscomb

Senior Pastor, Christ Church (Conroe, TX)

REVITALIZING A CHURCH DURING a global pandemic doesn't sound like a recipe for success. And it wouldn't be successful outside of deep, committed partnership. Let me back up and explain how Christ Church became revitalized.

The Backstory of Partnership

Our family was blessed to be a part of Redemption Hill Church (Round Rock, TX) when it was planted in 2013. And after attending the Pastors College a few years later, it was a godsend to serve on staff alongside two brothers I love and respect, Jon Payne and Aaron Mayfield. Redemption Hill Church was a great spiritual home for me and my family.

Ironically, it was our love for our local church family which stirred a passion in our hearts to see that same gospel-centered life we enjoyed together spread to other areas. So, when Jon talked with me about an adoption opportunity that our region was exploring, I immediately sensed we may have a role to play.

He described a local church which has been faithfully served by their founding pastor. But, given his health and their independent status, their future was very much in jeopardy. The pressing question was who from our churches should be put forward as a potential elder candidate to lead that adoption process, were it to move forward.

The Build Up to Partnership

In the following months, Jessica and I began to pray and to seek counsel about whether or not this was what God would have for us. The word "opportunity" was something I couldn't shake. Certainly, we knew about the thousands of new homes slated to be built in the shadows of this church and we saw its prime location. But, most importantly, we got to know the precious

group of saints in this church who had journeyed together for decades.

While we knew there would be significant hurdles to overcome for this to work, the thought of a faithful pulpit going silent and a church community fading away weighed on our hearts. We knew we had to try. In the end, the deciding factor for us is that we knew we wouldn't be doing it alone. We would be doing this in partnership with Redemption Hill and with Sovereign Grace.

The Process of Partnership

The process that followed has brought together so many of the things that I cherish about being in Sovereign Grace. Here I'll mention a few of them.

First, our *Statement of Faith* made an immediate impact. We had a chance to share the sound doctrine that we cherish with this church as we preached through it. That document resonated so deeply that it eventually became a major reason why the members of this church wanted to pursue adoption. Several folks in the church remarked how they had never read a *Statement of Faith* as worship-inducing as ours. This document played a significant role in forging this new relationship.

Second, our relationship-driven pastors are a gift. The founding pastor of Christ Church was Dan Schiel, whose son Darrel is our Regional Leader. Darrel's local team of pastors in Pearland, on the southside of Houston, was integral in those early conversations making us and our region aware of this need for church leadership.

And it just so happened that Billy Raies (Sovereign Grace Church of Midland, Midland, TX) knew Dan when Dan was serving in Midland in the early 90's. So their connection, formed years ago, bore significant fruit in the adoption. Years ago Billy built that friendship solely as the means of encouraging another pastor in gospel ministry, never dreaming what it would turn into. This is yet another clear example of how our relationship-driven value, lived out so faithfully throughout Sovereign Grace, is a wonderful legacy.

Third, our polity brings functional value. Far from being a dusty binder on the shelf, our Book of Church Order enabled us to lay out our convictions on church governance along with a step-by-step roadmap to adoption. Clear polity helped the church to evaluate things and then make a faith-filled decision about which direction they thought was best. The three men who historically served as lay elders to this church are to be highly commended. They happily set aside their positions as elders to see the gospel go forward. Our polity helped plot a clear course when this church needed it most.

Fourth and finally, local churches sacrifice for the planting and strengthening of other churches. Even though it was difficult timing for Redemption Hill, that church, with Jon and Aaron leading the charge, sent some of their best to come with us. We had four families uproot their lives and leave jobs to come roll up their sleeves and link arms with the people of Christ Church. Redemption Hill gave us a life-saving transplant, and we can't ever thank God enough for their sacrifice!

The Fruit of Partnership

In these expressions of our partnership with Sovereign Grace many more, I'm pleased to report that God is still moving! In a few short months, we've witnessed miraculous financial provisions (like having our entire facility renovated inside and out for almost nothing out of pocket!), baptized a lady in her 80s (who's working on her Master's Degree), heard testimonies from people who are experiencing a new-found freedom and joy in Christ, welcomed families from the community, resurrected a basketball hoop for neighborhood games, and countless other moments. These have left us shaking our heads in wonder at a God who uses our small efforts to accomplish large things.

Christ loves the church. He's done more than just say that. he has demonstrated it again and again. What a privilege it is to join him in that mission! And what a gift it is to do that alongside other faithful, gospel-loving churches! I don't think I could put it any better than what one member recently shared with me. *"We were so sad here because we thought we were going to have to close the doors. You've brought us hope."* Sovereign Grace was the primary means of grace that God used to help me and Christ Church, even in the midst of a pandemic. This pastor and a church full of saints are grateful.

THE VALUE OF PARTNERSHIP IN GLOBAL MISSIONS

Leo Parris

Elder, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

Michael Jordan is the GOAT of basketball—he’s the Greatest Of All Time. Not the longest career, and thus not the highest stats, but regardless, he was the best player. Case closed. Full stop.

I’m tempted to spend the rest of this article proving this undeniable fact (which really is common sense), but I know I’m already testing the patience of some of you.

Why do I bring up Jordan in an article about partnership in global missions—besides my obvious sports obsession? He was the consummate competitor, “poetry in motion”—a walking bucket, as the kids say. But did you know that it took him 6 years to win his first championship? In his first 5 seasons he increased his scoring to 37.1 points per game, but still couldn’t accomplish his mission. It wasn’t until he realized that he needed to work with his team that he was able to achieve his dream. He needed Pippen and Grant, and later Rodman and Kerr to win it all.

Not many of us are Jordans of the faith. If you’re a pastor, you have probably never preached a Pentecost sermon that led to the salvation of thousands. You’ve likely never single-handedly penetrated an unreached people group with the gospel. In fact, there might be a good number of people in your church who don’t even know your name. But the Bible strikes an encouraging note for weak and faltering people: we are stronger together.

God gave his church a collective mission that *will* be accomplished by his grace and in partnership: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” (Matt. 28:19) This mission is in the plural—the command “make disciples” and accompanying participles, “go”, “baptizing”, and “teaching” are all directed towards a plural recipient. No Christian superman is going to get the job done alone. Like Jordan, it’s only when we work through our local churches and with other local churches that God will spread his gospel to the ends of the earth. So, let’s examine the blessing of extra-local partnership by asking a series of questions.

Is extra-local partnership vital to global missions?

Is extra-local partnership just like a nice bonus package on a luxury car, or do we need it in global missions? ¹ Partnership in the New Testament is more like tires than a heated seat. You simply can’t find a model without them! When we see churches in the Bible, they exist in partnership.

Paul’s missionary journeys are a snapshot of the initial expansion of the gospel that God captured for our benefit today (Acts 13-20). When we read about his ministry, we might expect him to do his own thing—he was an Apostle after all. But this couldn’t be further from the truth. Paul submitted to the sending process of Antioch (Acts 13:3), worked from several different church bases (Antioch, Corinth, and Ephesus at least), and collaborated with an astonishing diversity of people (38 different people that we know of, 18% of whom were women). Clearly, he did not want to walk alone!

This same partnership DNA was also evident in the New Testament churches. Among many forms it was displayed in correction (1 Corinthians and Galatians), encouragement (Philippians) disaster relief (Rom. 15:25-26; 1 Cor. 16:1-4), church planting (Acts 13-20), and the sending and raising of support

1. The definition of missions is hotly contested in church circles, but as we consider global missions here, we are specifically referring to the work of making disciples across barriers. These barriers are sometimes geographic, ethnic, or cultural. A church’s disciple-making efforts in its local community are crucially important, but they are distinct from those that require us to take the gospel to the nations by partnering with existing churches and sending missionaries. See Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison, *When Everything is Missions*, (Pioneers USA, 2017), 37.

for missionaries (Rom. 15:24; 3 John 5-8). In the New Testament, partnership between churches was diverse and beautiful, as they depended on one another for their shared global mission. Weak and fledgling churches were stronger because they were united together.

What are the benefits of partnership in global missions?

There are many rich and wonderful benefits to partnership as we consider global missions. Here are just a few.

Greater Impact

Just like Christians are stronger together, thriving in interdependence (1 Cor. 12:12-26), so churches greatly benefit when they share their mission. One of the main benefits of global partnership is our greater impact. It's interesting that Paul never directs churches to initiate work outside of their region in the New Testament.² Instead, churches sent the apostles and teams of missionaries to nurture other churches and begin new works. It was through partnership with the Roman church that Paul hoped to extend the boundaries of the gospel into Spain (Rom. 15:18-24).

The progress of the gospel in Acts is the shared progress of the gospel through all of the churches where Paul labored. Because the churches were partnered together in Syria (Antioch), Galatia, Macedonia (e.g., Philippi), Achaia (e.g., Corinth), and Jerusalem, they were able to share in their mission to reach the ends of the earth with the gospel. Paul calls the Philippians to rejoice in his imprisonment because of the progress it had caused for the gospel (Phil. 1:12-18). This progress was not merely a result of his labors; it was their shared joy in partnership.

When churches work in partnership to reach their communities, plant new churches, and send missionary teams, their labors are greatly multiplied. Churches are stronger together.

2. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, Vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1452.

We've experienced this in radical ways in Covenant Fellowship Church. By God's grace, we've planted 15 churches in our near 40-year history. Though sadly a few have closed, others are thriving and planting their own churches. Together, we are reaching neighborhoods we never could have reached alone.

You and I as individual church members also experience this through our partnership in Sovereign Grace Churches. By God's grace we are witnessing a watershed moment in our denomination's history, as dozens of global churches are seeking partnership into our family. As Mark Prater and Dave Taylor have led us through the adoption of churches, we are seeing our impact spread in ways it never has before. The gospel is advancing among the unreached, among the Latin Reformed World, in Europe, and in Southeast Asia.

Shared Resources

Another way that churches benefit through partnership is in access to shared resources. Antioch was a church that had many prophets and teachers (Acts 14:23), but they didn't hold onto their best and brightest men. They generously sent Paul and Barnabas so that other churches could benefit from them. This resulted in the birth of new churches and the installation of a new generation of pastors to lead them (Acts 13:23).

In Lystra, Paul recruited Timothy to join him in his labors among the churches (Acts 16:1-3). Lystra was a small town and far less culturally advanced than many of the other places where Paul had planted churches (Acts 14:8-18). Surely this was a place sorely in need of someone like Timothy. Yet, they sent him with Paul to be discipled and to bless the churches. Timothy went on to be Paul's dearest companion (2 Tim. 4:9) and his apostolic representative in Ephesus. Titus, Apollos, Tychicus, and Epaphroditus are among those who traveled between churches to strengthen their partnership. All were gifted men, sacrificed for the global mission by their local congregations.

Churches also benefit from partnership in financial ways. In the Bible, no church more dramatically displayed this than Philippi, despite their poverty (2 Cor. 8:2; Phil. 1:5, 4:10-20). This giving allowed Paul to withhold his right of payment in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 4:12, 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6-12; 2 Cor. 9:1-25, 12:15), and use the Philippians' example to challenge the Corinthians

to participate in the relief effort for Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:1-7). Paul challenges the more wealthy Corinthians that their “abundance at the present time should supply [Jerusalem’s] need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness” (2 Cor. 8:14). We see in these verses that God intends to bless certain churches financially with the expressed purpose of caring for the needs of other churches. How kind of God!

Fellowship and Accountability

Two final benefits of our global partnership are fellowship and accountability. The joy and partnership between Paul and his churches is remarkable. He opens nearly all of his letters with a warm thanksgiving (1 Thess. 1:2-10), and concludes most of them with personal greetings (Rom. 16:1-16; Col. 4:7-18). It’s tempting to skim over these sections because of the strange sounding names, but don’t do this! Paul lingers to address people by name to show the depth of their love and fellowship. As visitors traveled with reports and letters to the churches, they gave updates on the progress of the mission and the health of the churches. All of this enhanced the awareness of each member that they were not alone.

We also benefit from greater care and accountability. Early in the church, Gentiles and Jews were clashing over cultural norms. It was only through the leadership of key members of the Jerusalem Council that the clarity of the gospel was preserved (Acts 15:1-35). In Paul’s letters to Corinth, we also often see a strong degree of accountability when he admonishes them as a loving father (1 Cor. 4:14-21). Peter, Jude, and John joined Paul in calling churches to denounce false teaching and remain steadfast to orthodoxy. (See 2 Pet. 2; Jude 3-16; Rev. 2-3. For examples from Paul’s letters, see Rom. 16:17-18; 2 Cor. 11:1-15; Gal. 5:1-15; Phil. 3:2, 18-19; 1 Tim. 1:3-11; 6:2-20; 2 Tim. 3:1-9.) Though this extra-local accountability has necessary limits, it remains

a vital help to churches.³

How can I engage in partnership in global missions?

This beautiful partnership is not only biblical; it's meant to be experienced by you, too. How? Here are a few ways you can do this.

Connect your local mission with the Church's global mission.

In John 17, Jesus prays to his father, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18; John 20:21-22). Sometimes this can be misconstrued to mean that everyone is a missionary. Though the Bible doesn't specifically use the term missionary, the missionary concept in Scripture is sufficient to help us define how we use the term today. The need for individuals to physically cross boundaries to deliver the gospel is a necessary and valuable role in the New Testament (Matt. 28:19; Rom. 10:14-17; 15:18-29). Yet, while not every Christian will be a cross-cultural missionary, every believer is sent by Jesus into their community. Every believer should live *missionally*, even if they spend their whole life living in one neighborhood.

For most of us, engaging with what God is doing globally happens as we pursue mission locally. What evangelistic opportunities surround you where you live? Our international partners are not merely partnering with us to reach their neighborhoods; they partner with us to reach our neighborhoods as well. You and I have access to people in ways that our sister churches in other countries could never dream of on their own!

3. There is a balance in the New Testament between the autonomy of local churches and the accountability of their partnership that our own partnership must be careful to protect. The Jerusalem Council illustrates this. It was initiated by a local church (Antioch), and a number of different voices contributed to the decision that was ultimately most influenced by Peter and James. Paul also strongly urged Corinth to handle internal matters of church discipline, despite his apostolic authority (1 Cor. 5). This is one of the many reasons we should be immensely grateful for our partnership in Sovereign Grace Churches. Our *Book of Church Order* is a wonderful example of guidelines to maintain this balance so that partnership between churches can thrive without an overreach of authority.

When you faithfully engage with evangelism locally, you are the tool of the gospel in the hands of your global Christian family to reach your community.

Pray globally.

In a world of “thoughts and prayers,” prayer can feel like the easy way out of helping someone in need. But prayer fuels the fire of global missions. Without it we will accomplish nothing. Prayer was pivotal to the growth of the early church (Acts 1:14, 3:1, 4:31, 6:4-7), and prayer permeated Paul’s letters. He often asked churches to pray for him (e.g., 1 Thess. 5:25) and expected them to pray for other churches (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:13-14). Our God hears our prayers and uses them as his means to accomplish his sovereign ends. Prayer is the most powerful way that you can partner with missionaries and churches globally.

There are many ways you can encourage global prayer in your life. One way is simply to forge friendships with specific global partners. Perhaps through a mission trip or a church visit, you’ve begun a friendship with a global partner. Pray for them! Ask for updates or sign up for their newsletter to keep your prayers current.

You can also sign up for the monthly Sovereign Grace Missions Newsletter for broader updates.⁴ Pastors, we can also lead in cultivating global prayer by leveraging pastoral prayers towards global needs. Our church prays for our global partners once a month, and holds a few corporate times of global prayer each year in our Sunday service. Churches can also invite global partners to visit or show a video before praying for partners.

Give locally and globally.

As those saved by the incredible generosity of Jesus, we are called to give cheerfully. When Paul reflects on the radically generous financial support of the Philippians, he says that they were collaborators in his travels and mission. They weren’t just supporting his work; they were working with him! When you and I give to our churches, we too are actively participating in our local and global mission. We should be eager to participate in opportunities to

4. This newsletter gives a wider update of our global partnership and provides you with specific prayer requests. You can sign up at www.sgcmissions.org/blog.

support missionaries, compassion ministries, and other projects, but we must be careful that this giving doesn't detract from our giving to the local church. Our global giving should first seek to enable our local church to give globally, and then give beyond this as our hearts are led towards opportunities.

In the United States, SG churches have a goal of giving 10% annually towards our shared mission. Pastors, if your church is not currently doing this, seeking to reach that goal is a great first step in growing your global engagement as a church. Consider ways you can take sacrificial steps and call your church to grow in giving as well. If your budget is tight, you might consider holding specific global offerings to allow your members to direct their giving more specifically toward our shared partnership across the world. Sovereign Grace Development Funds are also great places to direct global offerings.

Consider your own calling.⁵

At this point I'd like to challenge those who feel settled into their current circumstances, or who wonder if the Lord might have something quite different for their lives.

Do you get excited when you hear updates about our global partnership? It may be that God is calling you to take the initial steps of exploring a missionary calling. Desire is not everything in calling. Character, need, and especially gifting are all factors that a church must consider in vetting potential missionaries. The best way to steward your desire faithfully is by asking your church leaders to evaluate you. Ask your church leaders what global opportunities might be available for you. Missionaries are sent from local churches and nurtured by local churches with the goal of planting new local churches. So, as an initial step you should really get plugged into your church.

5. Biblically, "calling" is typically a term reserved for salvation. We are called "out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9); we are admonished to "consider our calling" (1 Cor. 1:26). But in missions circles "calling" typically refers to the specific vocation and life direction of an individual. This is how I'm using this term here. See Mack Stiles chapter "The Call of God: Inspired, Informed, Confirmed" in *Cross: Unrivaled Christ, Unstoppable Gospel, Unreached Peoples, Unending Joy* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2015). A digital copy is available for free at <https://www.desiringgod.org/books/cross>.

Maybe you're not yet ready to take formal steps toward this. That's okay! Consider participating in short term mission trips and engaging with local church ministries that are global in focus. If God is calling you, he will faithfully increase your desire and bring confirmation from your church.

Not every Christian is called to be a missionary, but every Christian is called to think, pray, give, and partner globally. (In large part, this will often occur through your involvement in your local church.) Any time you spend exploring a missionary calling is time well spent, helping you think like a global Christian.

No missionary is a Michael Jordan, but Christ died for us while we were still weak and loves to use us—even with our many insufficiencies. Thanks be to God, he has called us to make disciples in partnership! Our mission is global in scope, but we don't do it alone. Christians, pastors, and churches are stronger together.

TRAINING FUTURE PASTORS

Jeff Purswell

Elder, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville (Louisville, KY)

Pastors are among the last people who need to be reminded that there's more for them to do than they're currently getting to. If the normal demands of ministry weren't enough, unplanned pastoral emergencies are sure to intrude upon our best-laid plans.

Biblical directives for the pastor, however, are not meant to be burdensome, but illuminating. They clarify the most important priorities and direct us into the most consequential labors. They protect us from the pull of the pragmatic, from paradigms of leadership adopted from the world, and even from well-meaning activities that give the illusion of productivity but bear little long-term fruit. Ultimately, they give the pastor *hope*, guiding him into paths that God promises to accompany with his saving, sanctifying, life-giving power.

A Neglected Imperative

One of those directives that is most easily neglected—that *feels* unproductive in the moment but holds unmatched promise for the future—is the mandate to replenish oneself in ministry. Paul's familiar words to Timothy are meant to land upon every pastor and pastoral team with a grace-filled weight that holds strategic promise: “and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

As warmly personal as Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus are (including even medicinal advice for Timothy's heartburn), Paul looks beyond his protégés and their immediate challenges. It will not be enough for Timothy simply to “guard the good deposit” personally (2 Tim. 1:14). Six verses later he expands Timothy's imagination, envisioning three generations of leaders who will descend from the great apostle. The conclusion is inescapable: *the pastor bears*

a responsibility not only to his own church, but to future leaders he will not see.

This command is no optional extra on an already lengthy to-do list. To be sure, pastors must keep a laser focus on their own souls and on the flock entrusted to their care, with all this entails (Acts 20:28). But we don't have the luxury of merely minding our little corner of God's pasture, dutifully attending to daily chores with little thought of the future. It is part of our inspired job description to ensure that new shepherds emerge who are equipped to feed, care for, and protect future flocks in future fields for generations to come.

For the perceptive pastor, this added vocational imperative is explosive with implications. As we invest in future leaders who themselves can train others, we're leveraging our personal, finite pastoral capacity so as to exponentially multiply kingdom labors in the future.

Training in Partnership

Each pastor and pastoral team must devise their own ways to obey the imperative of 2 Timothy 2:2. However, in Sovereign Grace this is also a command our churches have pursued together. For the past 24 years, a primary way SGC has sought to fulfill this mandate is through our Pastors College.

The Pastors College exists for a very specific purpose: *to equip men for pastoral ministry in the churches of Sovereign Grace*. In other words, we seek to provide pastoral training that is calibrated to our partnership. From a student's application and admission, to the content of his training, on through to his deployment after graduation, the entire program is informed by our ecclesiology.

This mission calls for a particular kind of program. First of all, we're ever cognizant that we're training *pastors*. We are not training academics who merely master information, or professionals who master techniques, or administrators who master processes. We exist to help form men into pastors who cherish Christ and Christ-likeness, who relish and faithfully transmit the gospel and God's Word, who diligently oversee and care for the church of God, and who wisely and courageously lead the church in gospel mission.

We're also cognizant that we're training men for ministry *within Sovereign Grace*. We're not a free-standing academic institution, with self-determined goals and standards. We exist to serve our churches, and we are accountable to the churches we serve.

Training for Partnership

This raises a question that we in the Pastors College never assume and never tire reflecting upon:

What kind of pastoral training will best serve our churches and strengthen our partnership? How can the PC affirm, embody, and instill the things that unite us as churches—the doctrine that defines us, the values that inform us, the virtues we aspire to?

For the purposes of this article (and not a catchy slogan for a website), here is an admittedly cumbersome attempt to capture the type of training we strive for:

“The Pastors College seeks to provide pastoral training that is Scripturally rooted, theologically faithful, gospel centered, local church connected, relationally nourished, and life and doctrine focused.”

Each of these values is precious to us in Sovereign Grace, and we're convinced that applying them in our training will not only prepare faithful pastors, but will serve to nourish, strengthen, and protect our partnership as a family of churches. A brief examination suggests why.

Scripturally Rooted

Everything begins here. The pastors we train will scatter to serve in various locales and different settings. We can't begin to predict the cultural issues they will face in the future. But we can—we *must*—ground them in God's authoritative, never-changing, all-powerful and always relevant Word. All genuine pastoral ministry rests upon the abiding truth of holy Scripture, the Word by which God reveals himself, the Word through which he speaks, the Word by which he accomplishes his purposes in the world. As such, the Pastors College aspires to be, to use John Sailhamer's term, a “textual community” in which all instruction, reflection, application, and fellowship emerges from a

rigorous and devout engagement with Holy Scripture.¹ In a famous essay, J. Gresham Machen affirmed “...the Bible is unique; it is not merely one of the sources of the preacher’s inspiration, but the very sum and substance of what he has to say. But, if so, then whatever else the preacher need not know, *he must know the Bible...*”²

Theologically Faithful

Beyond the obvious desire for theological integrity, the Pastors College is, by definition, a confessional institution. Our charge entails that SGC’s biblical and theological convictions undergird all of our instruction. These convictions are crystallized in our *Statement of Faith* (SoF), which functions for the college as a clarifying and mission-strengthening document. Indeed, we consider the SoF a solemn pact between the Pastors College and our churches—simultaneously a standard for our instructors, a pledge to our students, and an assurance to our churches that a Pastors College education is designed to match, not the current fashions of our cultural moment, but the biblical and theological character of our partnership.

Gospel Centered

More than a slogan (who in the reformed world *doesn’t* claim to be “gospel-centered”?), this is first and foremost a recognition of the primacy of “Christ and him crucified” in Scripture (Luke 24:25-27, 44; John 5:39), in pastoral ministry (1 Cor. 2:2; 15:3ff.; Col. 1:28), and in the Christian life (John 15:5; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 1:17-23; Phil. 1:21; 3:7-11; *et al.*). As expressed in SGC’s second Shared Value: “We believe that the gospel—the good news of God’s saving activity in Jesus Christ—is the pinnacle of his redemptive acts ... the center of the Bible’s story ... and the essential message for our faith, life, and witness.” A Pastors College education seeks to honor these realities by training men to build their

1. John H. Sailhamer, “The Nature, Purpose, and Task of a Theological Seminary,” in *The Seminary as a Textual Community: Exploring John Sailhamer’s Vision for Theological Education*, ed. Ched Spellman and Jason K. Lee (Dallas: Fontes, 2021), 14-15. Quoted in Jason S. DeRouchie, “A Biblical Vision for Theological Higher Education,” *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2022), 90.

2. J. Gresham Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” in *Studying the New Testament Today, vol 1.*, ed. John H. Skilton (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 154 (emphasis added).

lives, families, and churches upon the life-transforming gospel of Jesus Christ.

Local Church Connected

Unlike many educational institutions, it's especially here that our ecclesiology intersects with our program. Because our students are being trained to serve the local church, we don't want their education isolated from the very context for which they're being equipped. This isn't simply education within a church's physical walls, but training that is informed and illustrated by a shared church context. Like medical students trained in connection with a teaching hospital, our students benefit from the powerful combination of instructional expertise and contextual application. Every day, in every course, we intentionally make connections between the content of lectures and the life and ministry of the host church where our students worship, serve, and receive pastoral care. We self-consciously train our students to do what we call "theological ministry"—ministry in which methodology is not incidental, but where all methodology is informed and shaped by theological conviction.

Relationally Nourished

One of the unique aspects of the college is that students aren't just passing one another in the halls, or pursuing a similar curriculum on-line. Rather, a *community* is formed. The students learn together, laugh together, and grow together, experiencing the entire year together in a way that leverages every aspect of the program, making each component—academic, pastoral, and personal—more effective. Moreover, these relationships extend beyond the Pastors College year, connecting graduates over the miles and over the years. The roots of these relationships, nourished by cherished memories and shared experiences, run deep in Sovereign Grace and help stabilize the soil of our partnership.

Life and Doctrine Focused

The phrase echoes a Bible verse that encapsulates all we seek to do in the Pastors College. It's a verse that we exposit on Day 1 of orientation and that is embossed on the diplomas at graduation: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16). Every aspect of the Pastors College seeks to cultivate these two priorities, both of which are imperative for a pastor, and neither of

which is meant to be pursued in isolation from the other. Just as there will be no Christ-exalting ministry without the faithful wielding of God's Word and the transfer of sound doctrine, neither will there be Christ-exalting ministry unless the pastor's character testifies to the reality of the gospel and serves as a faithful example to those he serves.

It's for this reason that so much of a student's PC year—weekly men's groups, monthly couples' groups, one-on-one meetings with a Director of Student Care devoted to the students' care, bi-weekly meetings with C.J. Mahaney, *Tischreden* ("Table Talk") lunches with instructors—involves *discipleship*. As a band of brothers, our students, along with their wives, link arms throughout the year to encourage one another, pray for one another, help each other grow in godliness and battle sin and rely upon grace. Paul's training regimen for Timothy inspires our own: "You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness..." (2 Tim. 3:10).

An Urgent Priority

Denominations around the world are grappling with a crisis in formal theological education. Christian colleges are closing their doors, a number of once illustrious seminaries are on life support, and students are flocking to online educational options. Virtual education has a number of benefits, especially for those with limited access to training. However, it also raises searching questions for every church leader. Can pastoral training be reduced largely to information transfer? How effective is virtual instruction in the absence of personal investment? Is online education really sufficient to *shape a pastor*?

In light of such challenges, I believe that the urgency of the Pastors College for our partnership has only increased. Here are a few examples:

As our family of churches expands and diversifies, having a common mechanism of pastoral training protects our partnership against the erosion of our shared doctrine, convictions, and values.

In our increasingly diffuse family of churches, the Pastors College has a galvanizing, unifying effect on SGC. PC students interact with a wide range

of SG pastors, as well as with our Leadership Team and other key leaders. This exposes students to our history and breadth of mission, reinforces our shared values, cultivates relational networks, and strengthens our bonds of partnership as graduates return to their home churches.

As we plant more churches, the Pastors College affords a robust and theologically consistent education vital for a man who will lead a church in Sovereign Grace. Here are some more examples:

Time and again we've seen the Pastors College powerfully shape men from other nations who return home to lead and strengthen gospel efforts in their own countries. Of course, this is not always possible, and our long-term vision involves the multiplication of global PCs. Still, the US PC has sown strategic seeds in SGC work in other nations, including Mexico, Bolivia, Brazil, the UK, Germany, the Philippines, South Korea, and, just this past year, Italy.

Our long-term health requires the development of leaders who cannot only thrive locally but eventually serve our partnership extra-locally. Such men greatly benefit from the immersive experience of the PC which, while never separated from pastoral concerns and the context of church life, nevertheless affords the luxury of concentrated study and formation without the burdens of pastoral responsibility.

Wherever one serves as a pastor or whatever the specifics of one's call, the complexities of our increasingly cosmopolitan world call for leaders deeply rooted in Scripture, in the great tradition of biblical orthodoxy, and in the gospel values of our churches. Although not every pastor may be able to attend the PC, we desire as many as possible to gain the foundational, whole-life training it affords, to the end that a man might run a durable, life-long pastoral race.

For such reasons and more, the Pastors College seems to present a particularly strategic opportunity for the future of SGC. This article wouldn't be complete, however, without acknowledging something precious to us in the Pastors College. We do not simply exist to serve our churches; *we exist because*

of our churches. It is the pastors of SGC who disciple and identify men called to pastoral ministry. The training we provide simply builds upon and reinforces the investment our current pastors make into future leaders, day in and day out, with no fanfare. The doctrine we teach, the values we instill, the virtues we cultivate, the mission we prepare for—this constitutes the substance of the faithful labors of SGC pastors around the world. It’s an unspeakable privilege for the Pastors College to partner with such pastors and the churches they lead.

