

**Exploring  
Membership  
at Sovereign Grace Church**



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Loving God  
Loving One Another  
Loving Our Neighbor

Sovereign Grace Church  
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*Exploring Membership at Sovereign Grace Church*  
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## Why Church Membership?

It's a big deal to join a church. It's a statement that we need others and that we are not alone as we live our Christian life. It's a commitment to partner with a group of Christians as we love God and love the fallen world around us. It is a declaration that when the Bible says to "love one another," these are the particular "one anothers" we will love. It is a willingness to give our time, energy, financial resources, prayer, and heart to a specific community of the people of God. Further, since we know we aren't the only Bible-believing church in the area, we know it's a big deal for you to join *this church*.

This is why we want you to know what we mean by *membership*. In any kind of long-term commitment, it's important we define our terms so everyone's expectations are the same.

### Does the Bible Teach Church Membership?

Now perhaps it's not a given to you that we should even practice church membership. For this reason, we should say a few things about it. The truth is, we believe in church membership because the Bible teaches church membership. Let's look at the New Testament to see it.

(1) *First, when the church was initially formed at Pentecost, the thousands came together to form a church. They did not*

scatter back to their own homes and continue in their own personal spiritual journeys. Luke describes it this way:

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:41-42)

They "were added" to the church in Jerusalem and dedicated their lives to all that this apostolic community included. We should follow this example.

(2) *Second, God speaks of church leaders as "shepherds."* Shepherds watch over a particular group of sheep. This is why Peter commands pastors (the same Greek word as "shepherd") to "shepherd the flock of God that is among you" (1 Peter 5:2). The sheep belong to God, but they gather in a particular flock at a particular place and time, and it is the elders who are to "shepherd" them (cf. Acts 20:28). So, pastors have a particular flock they shepherd, and people are to know who their particular shepherd is. To us this implies church membership.

(3) *Third, related to that, God says to "obey your leaders and submit to them" (Heb. 13:17).* As Christians we don't submit to all leaders everywhere, but only the ones we can call *our* leaders. This implies the leaders know who their people are and the people know who their leaders are, neither of which is possible without church membership.

(4) *Fourth, Paul's letters imply church membership.* As Paul writes letters to different churches in the New Testament he often includes messages like this one in Colossians: "Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house" (4:15). He doesn't speak of "Christians" that meet at Nympha's house, but an actual "church." This implies some areas will have multiple churches that are clearly identifiable. People belong to one church and not another. Thus, people in the New Testament were members of specific churches and not merely Christians at-large.

(5) *Fifth, the teaching about church discipline in the Bible implies church membership.* When the Corinthians are told to remove the unrepentant sinner from their church (1 Cor. 5:1-13) and when Jesus says to remove the person who "refuses to listen even to the church" (Matt. 18:15-20), this shows there is a clear line between those who are inside the church and those who are outside.

(6) *Finally, the New Testament is filled with what we call the "one another" commands.* These are the commands to "love one another" (1 John 4:7), "serve one another" (1 Peter 4:10), "bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:1), and "build one another up" (1 Thess. 5:11). There are about fifty of these commands. But the question for us is, *how can we obey these commands without church membership?* I can love others without a church, but the picture in Scripture is one of reciprocal love: I love you and you love me in return. Being part of a church gives us a way to fulfill these commands.

We believe the New Testament is clear on this point: *Churches should have some form of membership.* That's why we do it.

## **The Benefits of Joining a Church**

But not only is joining a church important for obeying the New Testament, we also need it. A passage that shows us at least some of the benefits is Ephesians 4:11-16. Here Paul begins with a list of the God-given leaders and then describes their key task. Then we read about the overall goal of God's people in the church. He closes with a vivid picture of the loving connectedness we are to experience as members of the body of Christ. Listen to these words, and then we'll unpack some of the benefits of church membership we find in them:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,<sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,<sup>13</sup> until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature

of the fullness of Christ,<sup>14</sup> so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.<sup>15</sup> Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,<sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph. 4:11-16)

This is a passage we'll return to many times in this book, but for now, let's pick out a few benefits of church membership that it identifies.

(1) *We are built up for ministry when we join a church.* God has placed leaders, especially those "shepherds and teachers," to equip us for ministry (v. 12). We are the ones who do the "work of ministry," and it is leaders who enable us to do it better.

(2) *We also grow up in our faith when we join a church.* We are all to become mature in our faith, character, and knowledge, and it is the church that helps us achieve this (v. 13).

(3) *Membership in a church also provides protection for us.* Every generation is filled with "waves and...every wind of doctrine" that threaten to derail our walk with Christ and sideline us in the church (v. 14). The church is there to remind us of truth, expose lies, and save us from such destructiveness.

(4) *Finally, being a part of a church connects us to others in love and unity in a powerful way.* God's ideal is that our church would be a picture of "the body of Christ"—unified, loving and being loved, serving and being served (vv. 15-16). We link arms with brothers and sisters from a variety of backgrounds and gifts and abilities and experiences. It is not just that we now show up at the same meeting on a weekly basis, but God wants us to walk in love, unity, and truth as we each act as a particular part of the body of Christ.

Of course, sin exists. Thirty seconds in any church will remind you of that fact. So at times the benefits above aren't quite as obvious. But a local church is still the place to go for

them. God help us to be a church that benefits us and benefits others.

## **Membership Requirements and Expectations**

If you're still with us, there's one question we need to discuss, namely, *what do we expect of members at Sovereign Grace Church?* We divide this issue into two categories, requirements and expectations.

### **Requirements for Membership<sup>1</sup>**

To join Sovereign Grace Church a person must be:

- (1) A believer;
- (2) Baptized in water as a believer;
- (3) An adult;
- (4) In general agreement with our Statement of Faith; and
- (5) Willing to support the values, mission, and policies of the church.

In our next chapter we'll look at (1) and (2). Here we'll look at (3) through (5).

*(3) Adult Membership:* Membership at Sovereign Grace Church is for adults only. While we certainly believe that children can be converted and vital participants in the church (almost half of our church is under the age of 18), the responsibilities and service expected of members imply that it is something best reserved for adulthood. As one example, a member is at times required to participate in the church discipline of another member. The wisdom and responsibility this entails mean that it is best if adults are the ones who perform such an action. Further, a child is still under the authority of their parents, and at times the interaction between the authority of the church and parental authority makes it challenging to treat a child as a typical member. For this reason, we regard the children of members as "members" because of their parents, but not as having their own independent membership. Once they graduate from high school and are at

least seventeen years old, they are eligible for church membership.

(4) *General Agreement with our Statement of Faith*<sup>2</sup>: To join Sovereign Grace Church a person must also generally affirm our Statement of Faith. Complete agreement in all details of our doctrine isn't practical or necessary, but to be a unified church there must be a basic commonality of doctrine. Otherwise, we will have a hard time working together and growing together as disciples. This "unity of the faith" (Eph. 4:13f.) will be in flux until we all have perfect knowledge, but we expect at least a basic unity.

There are core doctrines where there must be unity. These include essential issues like the Trinity, the Bible as the Word of God, or the necessity of salvation. But we can allow for differences of opinion on doctrines like the precise definition and practice of spiritual gifts or some of the nuances of church officers (elders and deacons). This is what we mean by a *general agreement* with our Statement of Faith.

(5) *Willingness to support the values, mission, and policies of Sovereign Grace Church*: A person who joins our church must also be willing to support the direction of the church as it is reflected in our values, mission, and policies. Our values are common to all the Sovereign Grace churches and include (1) Reformed soteriology, (2) gospel-centered expository preaching, (3) Continuationist pneumatology, (4) complementarian leadership in the home and church, (5) elder-governed and elder-led churches, (6) national and international outreach and church planting, and (7) interdependent churches united in fellowship, mission, and governance.<sup>3</sup>

Our mission is to *love God, love one another, and love our neighbor*. This captures the broad categories of our life together. To *love God* includes both our worship and our personal growth as disciples of Christ. To *love one another* includes our fellowship, mutual love, care, and service to our brothers and sisters in this church. To *love our neighbor* involves our service, mercy ministry, and evangelism to those outside the church.

Our church policies include those detailed in *The Sovereign Grace Book of Church Order* as well as our *Member Handbook*.<sup>4</sup>

## Expectations for Membership

There are also expectations we have for members. The reason we list out these expectations is that we want you to see what a typical member does in our church. If any of them jumps out as offensive or strange, please talk to us. They might simply be new to you, and we would love to talk with you more about them. There are times when a difference of opinion on these issues becomes an important tipoff that our church isn't for you. Likewise, if you can see the biblical basis for these and are excited to be part of such a church, then maybe this is a sign we are indeed a church you should consider. Finally, one thing you'll notice about these expectations is that they are applications of what God commands.

There are five basic expectations for church members:

- (1) Regularly attend Sunday morning worship
- (2) Actively participate in our home group ministry
- (3) Serve on a ministry team
- (4) Support the church financially
- (5) Submit to the leadership of the elders

(1) *Regularly attend Sunday morning worship*: The most important meeting of our church takes place as we gather corporately on Sunday mornings. We understand missing because of things like vacation, sickness, work conflicts, etc., but we expect that schedule- and situation-permitting, members will attend on Sundays. Hebrews 10:25 says not to neglect "to meet together," and the most important meeting we have is the Sunday service.

(2) *Actively participate in our home group ministry*: We also expect members to regularly attend *home group meetings*, again schedule- and situation-permitting. Once a church hits a couple hundred people it becomes impossible to know, love, and serve *everyone*. So if we are going to live out the "one

another" commands we mentioned, then we are going to need another context in which to do this. For us this is the goal of our home groups. These bi-weekly meetings take place in someone's home and are a key place for building relationships and living life together as the body of Christ.

(3) *Serve on a ministry team*: Members are also expected to serve on a *ministry team*, which are teams throughout the church dedicated to a particular area of ministry. Some are more visible like serving on the worship team, and some are less visible like those who serve as part of our Financial Advisory Board (deacons who help the elders with the financial management of the church). Yet, all of these are ways that we can take the gifts that God has given us and invest them into the growth of others.

(4) *Support the church financially*: We give our money as an act of worship, an expression of gratitude to God, to support church ministers, for the sake of the poor, and to support other churches nationally and internationally.<sup>5</sup> When we give our money we are giving ourselves, and when we invest our finances in the church we are investing our very heart in God's church (Matt. 6:21). We recommend that you prayerfully consider giving a tithe (a tenth) to the church as a starting point for your giving. Offerings can be given beyond this amount as God so leads you.

(5) *Submit to the leadership of the elders*: Another expectation is that church members submit to the elders. The New Testament says to "obey your leaders and submit to them" (Heb. 13:17). This is not a categorical submission like a child to a parent (so long as the parent is not asking the child to sin). This is a specific submission to the specific leadership of the elders. An elder's authority concerns a person's life in the church, not his life as a family member, citizen, worker, or in other contexts in which he might have other authorities. The teaching of the church might impact how we live in those contexts, but the elder's authority does not extend that far. There is a practical side to this as well, like when we decide to start church at 10:00 a.m. on Sundays. While we all understand

showing up late on occasion, it is an act of submission to show up when the elders set the service time to begin. Further, there should be a basic receptivity to their teaching and input. The elders of a church are the God-given officers to teach and govern and protect the church (Acts 20:28f; 1 Tim. 5:17f.), so it is right to recognize their place in your life if you decide to join this church.

### **But Should You Join Our Church?**

All that we say in this class is to help you decide if Sovereign Grace Church is the church for you. We know we're not the only church, so we want you to be informed in your decision. Our hope is that this class will allow you to see if what we do and believe is biblical, and if we are the kind of church you would like to be a part of.

### **Some Details About the Class**

Before we go further, we should give you a sense of what this class will be like. First, you'll hear a lot about what we believe and practice at Sovereign Grace Church. This is to help you get to know our church so you can make an informed decision about joining our fellowship (or not). We hope this material is more than just informative, however. We hope it's also inspiring to hear these teachings from God's Word.

Classes begin at 8:30am on Sunday morning, and we'll try and end right at 9:30am. As much as possible try to attend every class. There is a minimum number of classes to attend in order for you to join our church. We'll let you know about make-up classes and how that works, if needed.

Please read the class lesson before each class. This will make the class discussions more meaningful to you. Some classes have accompanying teachings to listen to, which can be found on the Exploring Membership page of the website.<sup>6</sup> Thank you in advance for doing your homework!

Finally, childcare is provided through the sixth grade, so let us know if you need that service.

May God bless you and give you wisdom as you work through the class materials.

### To Prepare for the Next Class

- Read chapter two, *Things We Can't Take for Granted*.
- Listen to the "Church Vision 1: What are We?" and "Church Vision 2: Worship the Lord" sermons. All audios are available at <http://sgcapex.org/news-events/membership-class/>.
- Recommended reading:
  - Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What is a Healthy Church Member?*
  - Wayne A. Mack, *Life in the Father's House*

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<sup>1</sup> The practical requirements for joining our church include attending this membership class and those detailed in the section at the end of chapter eight, "What are the Next Steps for Church Membership?"

<sup>2</sup> To see our Statement of Faith please go to <http://sovereigngrace.com/statement-of-faith>.

<sup>3</sup> You can find out more about these seven shared values at <http://sovereigngrace.com/our-seven-shared-values>.

<sup>4</sup> *Book of Church Order* is available at <http://sovereigngrace.com/polity>, and our *Member Handbook* is available upon request.

<sup>5</sup> Scriptures that support these truths: Lev. 27:30; Num. 18:25-32; Malachi 3:10; Acts 2:45; 4:34-35; 1 Cor. 16:1-3; 2 Cor. 8-9; Gal. 6:6; Phil. 4:10-19; 1 Tim. 5:3-16; etc.

<sup>6</sup> Go to <http://sgcapex.org/news-events/membership-class/> to find the relevant teachings.

## **Things We Can't Take For Granted: The Bible and the Gospel**

As a Christian, it's critical to know where we should flex and where we should be immovable. What is it we should "guard" (1 Tim. 6:20), and what is it we can disagree about easily? Two truths we must guard with vigilance are the conviction that the Bible is the Word of God and the message of the gospel. To lose our grip on either of these will mean disaster for us.

### **The Bible is the Word of God**

The most critical question to ask about the Bible is, *who wrote it?* If it is only the work of human authors, impressive as they are, then we can choose to listen to it or ignore it without any real consequence. But if it is the work of God himself using these human authors as his instruments, then to fail to listen to it is to fail to listen to God himself. On this issue, the Bible is clear: It is the work of God. Here is the consistent teaching of the Bible on this from beginning to end:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in

righteousness, <sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

When the Bible speaks of itself in this way it is called being "self-attesting." It is describing itself in exactly the right terms, and it says that it is "breathed out by God." The author of Hebrews says similarly that what is recorded in Psalm 95:7 is actually what "the Holy Spirit says" (Heb. 3:7). In other words, *the Bible is God speaking to us.*

Because the Bible is the Word of God there are six things we can say about it. This is part of our doctrine of the Bible (a "doctrine" is a teaching on a particular topic).

First, the Bible is inerrant. This means it is without error in all that it teaches. This is why at times what the Bible teaches in the New Testament will hang on a specific word of the Old Testament. Jesus cites Psalm 110:1 in such an instance:

David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet." <sup>37</sup> David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?" And the great throng heard him gladly. (Mark 12:36-37)

Jesus is pointing out the specific use of "Lord" in Psalm 110:1 and saying that one of these refers to himself, the Son of God. Thus, it isn't the general ideas that are inspired, but the actual and individual words.

Second, the Bible is clear. Not everything in the Bible is equally clear, but its teaching is clear enough that God's people can discern what is needed for life and godliness. A child may be won by the gospel it teaches and a PhD may never plumb its depths, but the Bible is clear in presenting to us what we need to know about God, our world, and ourselves.

Third, because God wrote the Bible, it is also authoritative. We obey the Bible as we would God himself if he were standing in the room with us. Because in fact, that's exactly what the Bible is: God speaking to us. This means the Bible is our final authority in all matters of belief and practice. It

commands and we obey. It points the way and we follow its path.

Fourth, the Bible is sufficient. Sometimes we are tempted to think of the Bible as important for "spiritual" things, but then we look to science or medicine or psychology or sociology to figure out "other" things. But the Bible is sufficient for all that we need to be "equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17) and for "life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). Other disciplines of study can provide great insight into our knowledge of ourselves and our condition, but the Bible gives us ultimate understanding about God, humanity, our fundamental problem, and the final solution in Jesus Christ. In all areas, the best approach is to start with the Bible and define all we can know. Then other areas of study can complement this knowledge in various ways.

This is one of the reasons we commend what is called *biblical* or *nouthetic counseling*. Such an approach to counseling bases its convictions, diagnoses, and analyses on biblical paradigms instead of medical ones.

Of course, we commend the use of psychology and psychiatry and medicine as a helpful partner to the skillful application of biblical teaching. When these oppose each other we must side with the Bible, but often they do not. We'll say more on this in chapter seven.<sup>1</sup>

Fifth, the Bible is an organic unity. This phrase means the Bible is a single piece of work. It is one book by one Author, even though it has been given to us as many books by many human authors. The marvel of inspiration is that all of them using their own experiences, insights, and personalities have nonetheless been used by the Lord to create a single, unified, coherent work.

Calling it an "organic unity" means that it isn't unified like the water in a glass can be—all looking exactly the same with no ability to tell where a piece of it starts or stops. Instead, it has a living, active unity like that of a tree. The roots of a tree, its trunk, and its leaves are all part of the same living being. Yet, if you saw them separate from each other it might take a long time to figure out whether they had any connection at all. But, once

they are joined in an actual tree you realize they function together in the most efficient and perfect manner—an organic unity. This is a picture of the unity of the Bible.

An important aspect of this unity is that the Bible tells one grand story, not a bunch of disconnected small ones. This has been called the "history of redemption," because this grand narrative begins with the creation of the world, records the disastrous fall of humanity, and then unveils for us how God will redeem his people and establish his kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth. Fittingly, our Bible gives us the first days of creation in its opening two chapters (Gen. 1-2), and then in its last two chapters it presents the new heavens and new earth where God's people are forever before him in sinless, joyful, unending worship (Rev. 21-22).

Further, while the fall of mankind took only a moment (Gen. 2), the redemption of humanity will take thousands of years. This redemption involved the calling of Abraham (Gen. 12), the Law of Moses (Ex. 20-24), the promises to King David (2 Sam. 7), the gospel events of Jesus Christ (Matt.-John), the inauguration of the church age (Acts 2), and the ongoing proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ until he returns (Matt. 28:16-20). This great epic is centered in the person of Jesus Christ who is the fulfillment of all the promises of the Old Testament (2 Cor. 1:20) and the means by which all of God's plans will be accomplished.

Finally, because all of the above are true, the Bible is essential to our growth and health as a Christian. Like grass does not grow without good soil, sun, and water, so Christians do not grow without a healthy amount of the Bible in their lives. This is true for new believers and seasoned ones, for pastors and plumbers, for doctors and deacons, for CEO's and children's ministry volunteers. In every season of our Christian lives, we need to make the Bible a priority for us.

Three ways to do this are through reading, memorization, and prayer. If you are new to the faith, start out by reading through the New Testament one chapter at a time. If you have the time, add a daily Psalm. Once the habit of daily reading is in

place, you can add a chapter of the Old Testament. Three chapters a day will get you through the whole Bible before you know it.

We also memorize the Bible to let it sink deeply into our hearts: "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11). Start out by memorizing passages like John 3:16; Romans 5:8; Romans 8:1; Psalm 23:1; John 10:14-15; and Philippians 4:19. Then choose your own. Write out the verse on an index card (old school), or get a Bible app for your phone and bookmark the verses (new school). Do it in the car, at the gym, or around the house. Memorizing the Bible helps us think godly thoughts, battle sin, and cultivate a spiritual mindset.

Related to memorization is meditation. This is when we take a verse or a short passage of Scripture and prayerfully think through it. The point here is less about study and analysis and more about how the verse should change our thinking or living.

One simple way to do this is to accent each word of the verse and consider how that accent changes it. Above we mentioned memorizing John 3:16. This is a great text for meditation as well. Using this method we first think about what it means that "**God** so loved the world." Then we think about what it means that "God so **loved** the world." Then, "God so loved **the world**." As we work through the rest of the verse it will allow the verse to sink deeply into us. Meditation is a powerful means of grace.

So, the Bible is the Word of God. Because of this we want all we believe and practice to either be tied directly to the Bible or to be a wise practice consistent with principles we find in the Bible. This is the first truth we cannot trifle with. The second truth where we cannot compromise is the gospel itself.

## The Gospel: The Good News that Is the Greatest News

The word *gospel* means "good news." It is the news at the center of the Christian life and the center of all life and hope and truth in our universe. We often hear it dismissed as one truth among myriad, but it is actually the one unchanging certainty in a world of chaos and confusion. There are a lot of false gospels out there, ones that either make God too small or man too big or ignore Jesus altogether. This is a big deal, because life and death depend on whether we get this straight.

Here is the true gospel message: *The gospel is the good news that God saves us from the punishment for and power of sin by faith in Jesus Christ.* This summarizes many New Testament Scriptures, but to explain it we'll look at the New Testament epistle (letter) called Romans.

### Two Important Facts About the Gospel

When Paul introduces the gospel in Romans he tells us two important things to orient us:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,<sup>2</sup> which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures,<sup>3</sup> concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh<sup>4</sup> and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 1:1-4)

The first thing we learn is that the gospel is not new with Paul or even Jesus. It is actually "promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures." In other words, the Old Testament prophesies every facet of the salvation offered in Jesus Christ. When Paul speaks of our sin he quotes from the Psalms (Rom. 3:10-12; Ps. 14:1-3). When he speaks of Jesus' shed blood he refers to him as "our Passover lamb" (1 Cor. 5:7; Ex. 12-13). When he teaches on the faith that responds to the gospel message, he cites Genesis 15:7 and Habakkuk 2:4 (Rom.

1:17; 4:3). There are hundreds more references we could add here.

The second thing we learn in this opening to Romans is who this Jesus is who is at the center of the gospel. He is both a man and the Son of God. Importantly as a man he is "descended from David according to the flesh." God promised David he would have a son that would reign forever, and that Son is Jesus (Matt. 1:1-17). But Jesus is also the Son of God, something proved by his "resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). This is why only after the resurrection does Thomas come to Jesus and say, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

So, the gospel is prophesied in the Old Testament and is rooted in Jesus Christ who is both God and man. Now we can turn to what the gospel accomplishes.

### The Gospel Saves Sinners

Most people could tell you Christians think the gospel brings salvation—not that they believe it or could tell you what the gospel is. What is less often felt is that *we need to be saved*. As to the first point, Paul makes it crystal clear that salvation comes through the gospel:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Rom. 1:16)

"Salvation" means deliverance from the wrath and judgment of God. Ultimately, it means escaping the eternal fires of hell, for their will come a day

when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels<sup>8</sup> in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.<sup>9</sup> They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,<sup>10</sup> when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who

have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thess. 1:7-10)

Now this wouldn't be a big deal if we weren't sinners. But that is the great problem: we are. Here is the inarguable truth:

It is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; <sup>11</sup> no one understands; no one seeks for God. <sup>12</sup> All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one"....All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:10-12, 23)

Do you see the absoluteness of this truth? How many of us are righteous? "None...not one." How many of us have done well enough to be accepted by God? "Not even one." How many of us have sinned—sin being thoughts, actions, and words that are opposed to God and his righteousness—and thus forfeited all rights to God's blessings and eternal life? "All." We need the salvation the gospel offers *because we are all sinners*.

### The Gospel Saves Us Because of the Blood of Jesus

But how does this work? How does the gospel save sinners like us? Paul explains it by saying that we

are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (Rom. 3:24-25)

This passage tells us three things we need to hear. First, we are "justified by his grace as a gift." To be justified means to be declared righteous. "Justified" is a term used in the courtrooms of the ancient world. When the judge declared you innocent, you were justified—or *righteous*. Paul is saying that God, the Judge of all, has declared that we are righteous in his sight if we are in Christ. This didn't happen because of our obedience but "by his grace as a gift." It was given to us like we receive a Christmas present—undeserved and not because of any work

that we did. We earn a paycheck; we receive a present. As Paul says later in Romans, God "justifies the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5).

Buried here is the idea of Christ being our substitute. He took our sins away and endured the punishment that they deserve. He gave us his own righteousness instead: "For as by one man's disobedience [i.e., the sin of Adam] the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19). The credit for our sin fell on Christ so that the credit for his righteousness could be given to us. How much is this indeed "grace"—undeserved favor for those who deserve nothing but unending judgment!

The second truth in Romans 3:24 concerns our redemption: We have received "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (v. 24). Now we go from the courtroom to the marketplace. To redeem something was to buy it, especially to buy slaves out of captivity through the payment of a ransom. That is exactly what Jesus' death is for us: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Sin brings judgment, but it also brings captivity. Christ delivers us from both.

The third idea here is that Christ was "put forward as a propitiation by his blood" (v. 25). This is the least familiar term in the passage, but it refers to offering a sacrifice to satisfy (propitiate) the wrath of God (Ezek. 5:13). Something of this idea is captured in the offering of the Passover lamb during the Exodus:

The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt. (Ex. 12:13)

God was judging Egypt for their opposition to him. On this particular night he was going to bring the terrifying judgment of the death of the firstborn. Yet, when blood was offered in just the right way, he would "pass over" that household and they would escape his wrath.

Jesus' blood is just that kind of propitiation for us. When his blood is offered on our behalf, then God's wrath against us is satisfied (propitiated) and we receive God's favor and blessing.

So we see that in each case what saves us is the work of Christ. His life and death result in our being declared righteous. His shed blood is the payment (ransom) that brings us redemption. And his blood is the offering that satisfies the wrath of God. Christ receives the agonies of the cross; we receive the blessings of salvation. That is amazing grace!

### The Gospel Saves Us Only If We Believe It

We have seen that the gospel offers what is needed (salvation) to those who need it most (sinners). But how does it work? Is it automatic for everyone? No, it is not. To receive the blessings of the gospel we must respond in a particular way. Paul says

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Rom. 1:16)

Rather than being a reward to those who work hard and obey perfectly, the salvation offered in the gospel is given "to everyone who believes."

A passage a bit later in Romans unpacks what this faith looks like:

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom 10:9).

To confess that Jesus is Lord is not simply parroting three words. It is the outward expression of an internal commitment to bow before him as our King, our Lord, our Master. It is to say that our will is to do his will.

And to believe that God "raised him from the dead" is to put our trust—our confidence, our hope—in the historical realities we find in the Bible: Jesus was born to Mary, lived a life of

perfect obedience, died on a cross for sinners, was buried in a tomb, rose three days later, and is now at the right hand of God.

Thus, saving faith includes seeing Jesus as both our Lord and our Savior. We cannot have one without the other. Our obedience in this life will always be imperfect, but we can still embrace him as the Lord of our life. And all who embrace him as Lord will find him to be a Savior that covers our disobedience perfectly and forever.

### Sanctification: The Gospel Saves Us from Sin's Punishment and Also from Its Power

The gospel saves us from the judgment our sins deserve. But it also does something else. It saves us from the suffocating grip that sin once had on us. Jesus said, "Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34); Christ saves us from this captivity. Listen to these words of Paul:

How can we who died to sin still live in it? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. <sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup> For one who has died has been set free from sin. (Rom. 6:2-7)

The shocking truth here is that our union with Christ means we are free from sin. Paul isn't saying we will never be tempted to sin, for sin and righteousness will war within us until we are glorified (Gal. 5:17; 1 John 3:2). But he is saying that we can choose not to sin. Sin can feel impossible to avoid and involuntary and almost a physical compulsion. But the gospel has broken that stranglehold. As tempting as sin can be, we can choose not to sin.

This is not the power of positive thinking or 12-steps or any other trick to avoid temptation. Such things can bring some relief, but in the end the gospel gives us what none of these provide: power. We are weak before the temptations around us, and we need power to overcome them. The gospel is where we get that power.

Armed with this kind of power we can live the life of holiness and obedience a Christian is called to embrace:

Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. (Rom. 6:12-13)

This aspect of sanctification—our freedom from the stranglehold of sin—means that now we can grow and change as Christians. For the first time we have the ability to fight sin and pursue God. This leads to our growth in holiness (sanctification).

Our pursuit of God includes things like making the Bible a priority in our life (see above) and developing the habit of daily prayer. If the Bible is God speaking to us, prayer is us speaking to God. We lift to him our needs, desires, temptations, sicknesses, trials, confusion, and whatever else concerns us. There is no topic that is off-limits for prayer (the Psalms reveal that!). 1 Peter 5:14 says to "cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you."

If daily prayer is a new habit for you, start with five to ten minutes. Make a list of things you should pray for and work through your list. Some people use the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) as a way to organize their prayers. Using the Lord's Prayer, they begin with worship and submission to God and then lift up the daily needs they have.

It's important to be natural when we pray. We are talking to a loving Father, not a distant monarch in some golden palace. God wants to hear our cries in the language of our hearts. He doesn't want us to try and imitate others in our prayers. Over time he will change our prayers as we grow and mature and our

perspective conforms to what the Bible reveals. For now, just pray.

### Baptism: A Christian's Response to His Salvation

We have one more thing to add in this chapter. Once we believe the gospel we enter into a life of obedience. Calling Jesus "Lord" does have implications, after all. A critical early step we want to take in our obedience is to be baptized in water by immersion.

We see this vividly in Acts 16:30-34 when the Philippian jailer is saved. After a miraculous earthquake the jailer realizes Paul and Silas have not fled. He is stunned and asks them immediately, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (v. 30). The apostles respond, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (v. 31). But notice what happens next: "He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once" (v. 33).

It doesn't often work out to be baptized "at once" after believing in Jesus, but that is the ideal. As soon as we know we are Christians we ought to be baptized.

We say that a Christian should be baptized in water by immersion because that's what the word means, to put something into water. And we also see this in the examples of baptism in the New Testament. Jesus goes down into the Jordan River and then comes up out of the water (Mark 1:10). The Ethiopian goes down into water as soon as he believes the gospel Philip preaches to him (Acts 8:36-38).

This is an appropriate action to represent our new life in Christ because it pictures so vividly going down into death and being raised to new life:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:3-4)

Baptism is also a vivid picture of the cleansing we have received by faith in the blood of Christ. Just as water cleanses our physical bodies, so we have been cleansed of the filth of sin:

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:21)

However, it's important we see baptism as part of our Christian *obedience*, not our salvation. The thief who died next to Jesus was not baptized, but Jesus gave him this bold promise: "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). His faith saved him, baptized or not.

### Eternity is Not Long Enough

The gospel is like a diamond with an infinite number of facets. There is always another angle that reveals another staggering dimension. In fact, eternity itself won't be long enough for us to plumb its depths and give God the full glory he is due. Surely we can join with Paul who lifts up this outburst of praise after giving us the fullest description of the gospel in the New Testament:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! <sup>34</sup> "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" <sup>35</sup> "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" <sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33-36)

Yes, indeed. To God be glory forever. Amen.

### To Prepare for the Next Class

- Read chapter three, *What is it to be Reformed?*
- Listen to the messages *Sovereign Grace* by C.J. Mahaney and *Water Baptism* by Phil Sasser (on the Exploring Membership page of the website).
- Recommended reading on the Bible:
  - Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*
- Recommended reading on the Gospel:
  - Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?*
  - Jerry Bridges, *The Gospel for Real Life*
  - C.J. Mahaney, *Living the Cross-Centered Life*

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<sup>1</sup> Check out [www.ccef.org](http://www.ccef.org) and [www.nanc.org](http://www.nanc.org) to learn more about counseling from this perspective. There are several counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists we can recommend in our area, though we do think it wise to begin by seeing one of the pastors at SGC first and even throughout the process.



## What is it to be Reformed?

At Sovereign Grace Church we call ourselves "Reformed-Charismatics." This phrase captures two distinctives of our church (and of Sovereign Grace Churches, our denomination). In this chapter we will look at the first distinctive, "Reformed," and in the next chapter we'll explore what we mean by "Charismatic."

In each of these chapters we'll start with a look at the history of the two positions and then dive into theology and practice of each. It's helpful to get a historical perspective, because when we know where a people come from we know better who they are. We'll also show you where we disagree with other Reformed and Charismatic traditions.

To say that we are Reformed means that we align ourselves in many important ways with the Protestant Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These men include Martin Luther (Germany), John Calvin (France and Switzerland), Ulrich Zwingli (Switzerland), John Knox (Scotland), and Thomas Cranmer (England). Their overarching battle cry was *sola Scriptura*—"Scripture alone"! This meant that the final arbiter in all theological controversy was the Bible. The great need in the church was to preach, teach, understand, and apply the Bible.

This is why so much of their time and energy was given to translating the Bible into the vernacular languages of the day.

Martin Luther changed the world by translating the New Testament from the Greek into the German of his day. Others like William Tyndale would give their lives to get the Bible into English. In Tyndale's case, this would be literal because he was strangled and then burned at the stake—all for the so-called crime of translating the Bible into a language the people could read.

As the Reformers studied their Bibles a set of doctrines came to the surface that would characterize many of them. They taught that the Bible is inspired, inerrant, sufficient, and authoritative. They believed in the Triune God as described in places like the Apostles and Nicene Creeds. They held to the two natures of Christ as the church had taught in places like the Chalcedonian Creed. This unites them to a large part of Protestant Christendom.

Yet, the Reformers also taught the absolute sovereignty of God. They saw in the Bible that God is the prime mover in all things at all times. There is no speck of dust or fall of a nation that doesn't exist and move by the hand of God. He doesn't just know all that happens; he makes it all happen. He is the God "who works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). In their minds there was no exception to this truth. We feel the same.

One area where this becomes controversial for some is with an individual's salvation. This is called *Soteriology* or the Doctrine of Salvation. They believed, and we do also, that salvation is by faith alone (*sola fide*), by Christ alone (*solo Christo*), by grace alone (*sola gratia*), and for the glory of God alone (*soli deo gloria*). In other words, God—and God alone—saves sinners.

In this chapter we will explore two ideas that connect us with Reformed thinking, namely, God's sovereignty and God's salvation.<sup>1</sup> The first flows right into the second, so after making two caveats we will look at the sovereignty of God.

## Two Important Caveats

As we explore the areas below we need to say two things. One is that there is much mystery here. While we can confidently affirm that God is absolutely sovereign because the Bible teaches it so clearly, it is mysterious how God works his sovereign plans through the decisions and sins and weaknesses of humanity. As we live life it *feels* like we are making decisions freely and doing exactly what we want all the time—because we are! And yet, all of this is contained within God's sovereign plans. We think we are accomplishing our plans, but really we are part of God's unfolding design.

A second important caveat is that God is not the author of sin: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one" (James 1:13). God will work through the sinful actions and choices of humanity to accomplish his ends—think of sinful, betraying Judas as he helps to bring about the cross of Christ—but God is not the author of sin.

So, knowing that there is much mystery in what we say below and that God is not the author of sin, let's look at God's sovereignty more fully.

## The Sovereignty of God

To say that God is sovereign means everything happens exactly according to his design. From the way a falling leaf blows in the wind to the collapse of nations and corporations, everything is unfolding as God pleases. Romans 11:36 gives us the summary view: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

## From Him Are All Things

All things come from God. He is the creator of all that is—whether we see it or not. In the third verse of our Bibles we read the first of several thundering "Let there be" statements:

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. (Gen. 1:3)

How did everything get here? God sovereignly spoke. Why is everything made precisely as it is made? God sovereignly spoke. Is there any exception to this truth? Absolutely not:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. (Ps. 33:6)

And, of course, this is not simply true for the galaxies and suns of our universe. It is true down to the level of your DNA and mine: "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb" (Ps. 139:13).

### Through Him Are All Things

God's sovereignty did not simply start the whole machine and then sit back to watch it run—the Deist view. God is actively involved in everything that unfolds in our lives and in his creation. Listen to these Scriptures and recognize the massive importance they hold for how we interpret the events and circumstances and triumphs and challenges of our lives:

Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. (Ps. 115:3)

Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and bad come? (Lam. 3:38)

I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me,<sup>6</sup> that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other.<sup>7</sup> I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things. (Isa. 45:5-7)

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. (Matt. 10:29)

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

The Biblical witness about God's sovereignty is that *everything happens exactly as God intends*. That can be a sobering truth, but it is ultimately meant to inspire us to worship and trust him. Life is not an unpredictable assortment of disconnected hardships. Instead, "all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Sometimes it takes a while to see that "good," but we can rest in the fact that this is unfailingly true. Of course, there are times when we must rest in this being true even if we can't identify specific blessings that result from a hardship.

### To Him Are All Things

The third aspect of God's sovereignty is that everything is also "to him." This means the final destiny of...everything depends upon God's plans and purposes. And while we don't always know the intricacies of his plans and purposes, we do know that the ultimate end of all things is "the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:12). That is, when history has reached its culmination and God's kingdom has triumphed definitively over all of his enemies, God's glory shall receive the praises of everyone and everything (Rev. 5:8-14).

So God is the source, sustainer, and final goal of all things. And this is true in our salvation as well. Your salvation and mine are not an exception to God's sovereignty, but are an integral part of what God is doing in this world. Listen to these words of Paul as he lands our predestined salvation within God's overall purposes who made

known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. <sup>11</sup> In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will. (Eph. 1:9-11)

God's big-picture plan is to "unite all things in" Christ (v. 10). That is the final end of all things. But included here is our predestination. This, too, is part of God's "purpose" and the work of a God "who works all things according to the counsel of his will." There is a lot to this idea, and we'll use the Reformed acronym TULIP to see just how glorious it is.

### **The Salvation of God - TULIP**

Is the final determiner of our salvation our choice or is it God's prior choice of us? Is my salvation ultimately dependent on me or God? That is the question on the table as we think about God's sovereignty in salvation. To get us to the answer, we'll look at the history first and then look at the acronym TULIP.

The Reformers spent a lot of their energy opposing the view of salvation held by the Roman Catholic Church, a view called "Semi-Pelagianism." The name comes from Pelagius, a British monk who lived around the year A.D. 400, who taught that man's nature was not fallen, that man had complete freedom of will, and that God elects people "on the basis of their personal righteousness."<sup>2</sup> In 412 A.D., noted North African theologian Augustine of Hippo refuted Pelagius' teachings and put forth the great biblical doctrines of grace.

Pelagius' teachings survived, however, and soon the medieval Roman Catholic Church adopted a "semi-Pelagian" position. They held that while we are ultimately saved by grace, grace saves us by giving us the ability to do works of righteousness. These works of righteousness are what actually save us in the end. The Reformers saw this as a veiled way of saying that we are saved by works and passionately rejected it. The Reformers' cries of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* were in protest of a salvation by works and salvation through the church or the sacraments.

A new face in this controversy appeared in the 1600s, Jacob Arminius, a theologian from the Netherlands. He began to teach a kind of semi-Pelagianism at the University of Leiden. After his death his followers summarized his teachings in five points

of remonstrance<sup>3</sup> at a meeting of church leaders, pastors, and theologians in the city of Dordrecht (Dort) in 1618. The Synod of Dort, as it is now called, rejected the Remonstrants.<sup>4</sup> They did so in what we now call the "five points of Calvinism," even though John Calvin never said things in quite this way and had been dead for 50 years! These five points are often expressed using the acronym TULIP:

**T**otal Depravity  
**U**nconditional Election  
**L**imited Atonement  
**I**rresistible Grace  
**P**erseverance of the Saints

But if we think that Dort was an historically distant counsel dealing with mere abstractions, J.I. Packer corrects our notion: "The question which...the Dort divines...[are] really concerned to answer is just this: what is the gospel?"<sup>5</sup> Therefore, as we work through these five points of Calvinism, remember that we are really exploring the gospel itself.

### T—Total Depravity

The first point of TULIP really sets the stage for the next four. If "total depravity" exists in the human heart, then there is no other way for a person to be saved than by the exclusive work of God.

The key to total depravity is the fall. All would grant that Adam and Eve were initially created with a free will to either choose or not choose obedience to God. Yet, we need to understand the human heart *after the fall of man*. We believe that after the fall, man is not only unwilling to choose faith and obedience, but he is unable. It is both a matter of desire and a matter of ability.

Remember the sober events of the fall. Adam and Eve are living in harmony with each other, with creation, and with their God (Gen. 2:7-25). As soon as Adam eats of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:1-6), their lives are characterized by sin. They hide,

blame shift, accuse God, and deceive—all within the first hours (minutes?) after their sin. They then have children that murder each other (Gen. 4:8), and before long God describes humanity in this way: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5).

This is echoed throughout the Bible in words like: "None is righteous, no, not one...no one does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:10, 12; cf. Ps. 14:1-3). This depravity means we are both unwilling and unable to choose God apart from his grace. Some would argue that we are depraved, but not so much that we can't choose God. The Bible, however, says otherwise:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1)

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:14)

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:44)

This would leave us in a horrible and helpless situation if God did not intervene. The next three points capture what God has done in mercy and grace to save us.

## U—Unconditional Election

"Election" in the Bible refers to a decision on the part of God that is made before creation, but different parts of the body of Christ define this election in almost opposite terms. The Arminian will say that what God is really deciding in eternity past is to redeem all who believe in Christ. *If* they believe, he will redeem them. In other words, God wasn't electing people, but a possibility.

But when the Bible speaks of election, it never speaks in such terms. It is always people who are chosen. Thus, we say that the biblical doctrine of election goes much further than

what the Arminian holds. Election is a decision of God to actually save some and not others. God elected people, not just a possibility. Those he chose for salvation *will be saved*. In a sense, then, for the Arminian I am elect because I chose Christ. For us, I chose Christ because I am elect.

For the Reformed (and for us), then, God chose me to be saved in a particular, personal, and unconditional manner. I did not satisfy the 'condition' of faith, but was chosen in a completely 'unconditional' manner. I had nothing of distinction to offer God. I had no merit, no faith, no repentance, no intrinsic worth that would motivate him to save me. He simply chose me because he chose me.

And God's decision to choose me was a powerful force that orchestrated historical details in my life and caused seismic shifts in my soul, so that I was actually saved. God's decision to elect a person means it is 100% certain that person will be saved.

Such a view is obviously controversial and even offensive to many people. But two passages make it clear that this is indeed the biblical view, Ephesians 1:4-6 and Romans 9:6-26, which we'll look at in turn.

The key thing we learn in Ephesians 1:4-6 is that our election occurred before creation. In eternity past we were chosen to be saved: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (v. 4). Being before time, there was no condition that we met, no hurdle we jumped, no obedience we performed, no faith we demonstrated. We were chosen only "according to the purpose of his will" (v. 5). Note also that Paul says, "he chose us" (v. 4). Actual people were elected, not just a nameless group of those who might believe in Jesus. This is why the glory of our election belongs entirely to God. Paul says that it was "to the praise of his glorious grace" (v. 6). Grace and grace alone is what saved us.

Romans 9 strengthens this idea by walking us through the implications of it. In this chapter Paul is wrestling with the question, *why are the Jews not all saved?* If they are God's

people, why are they not all saved? His answer comes in two parts. Romans chapter nine is the first. It tells us that they are not all chosen. That is, it was God's design. The second part comes in chapter ten where Paul explains that though they heard the gospel they did not respond to it.

Paul looks at several Old Testament examples to defend his view that God's election is the definitive issue. He points us to the way God chose Jacob and not Esau: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (9:13, citing Malachi 1:2-3). The difference between them was God's choice, not their good works: "though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger'" (9:11-12). Paul is adamant that "works" and obedience and even any observed faith had nothing to do with it.<sup>6</sup> The distinguishing mark was "God's purpose of election." God chose Jacob simply because he did.<sup>7</sup>

To many, this is simply unjust. Why would God give people such different destinies? Yet, Paul anticipates this question: "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!" (9:14). He then reminds us of something critical to grasp: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (9:15, citing Ex. 33:19).

The point in this statement is that no one receives injustice. It is true that Jacob received "mercy" and "compassion," as God did not treat him as his sins deserved. But Esau did not receive injustice. Quite the opposite. He received what his sins deserved. That is justice, not injustice. Some receive mercy, and some receive justice, but no one receives injustice from God.<sup>8</sup> That is a crucial truth to grasp.

But maybe our response is to ask how someone could be judged if the ultimate reason for his or her destiny is God's design. Paul anticipates this question also, "You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?'" (9:19). Now he uses a different approach: Instead of a logical

argument, he reminds us who we are and who God is. He wants us to recognize that we cannot pry accusingly into the motives of God: "Who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'" (9:20).

We can inquire into the ways and mind of God, but we can never accuse him of wrongdoing. He is not unjust, and he does not owe us an explanation for all things or for anything at all (though he is gracious in the Bible to give us many answers).

But this is not all Paul has to say on the matter. He does want us to know the *ultimate* reason for the mercy that saves some and the justice that condemns others. The great reason for all that God does is his glory. And this is true when it comes to predestination as well:

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,<sup>23</sup> in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory? (Rom. 9:22-23)

Part of God doing all that he does for his glory is his desire to demonstrate who he is before the universe, to "make known" his attributes through judgment and salvation. This includes "his wrath" and "his power" on "vessels of wrath," as well as his grace on "vessels of mercy."

## L—Limited Atonement

The next letter of TULIP often causes people to do a double take until they understand it. The doctrine in view here addresses the extent of the atonement. It answers the question, *for whom did Christ die?* Did he die "for all" or did he die "for his people"? No one questions whether his death was *able* to save everyone. Of course it could have! The only question is whether it was *intended* to do that.

People often make the mistake of thinking that if we say Christ died for his people only, there is no gospel left to share with others. To them, the gospel message is this: "Jesus died for

you, and if you turn to him you will be saved!" But this is not the right way to present the good news.

The best place to see this is the book of Acts. Throughout the book of Acts we find the apostles preaching the gospel to those who are not saved, appealing for them to repent and believe. In each case they do what Peter does in the opening sermon of Acts (2:14-36). He simply gives the facts about Jesus, describing vividly who he was and what he did. Then he calls his audience to believe in him. He never says, "Jesus died for you! Believe in him!" He only says in essence, "Jesus died for sinners! Believe in him!" The difference is subtle but important.

So, to believe that Christ's blood was for *his* people in no way means we stop preaching the gospel or don't have a gospel to preach. We continue to preach the same gospel we find the saints preaching throughout the New Testament.

The key defense for a "limited atonement" is the way the New Testament typically speaks of Christ's redemption as being "for us" or "for his people" or "for his sheep" or "for his church." Here are several examples of what we mean (emphasis mine in each):

"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matt. 1:21)

Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (Titus 2:13-14)

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. (1 Peter 3:18)

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.<sup>9</sup> Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.<sup>10</sup> For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more,

now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. (Rom. 5:8-10)

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Eph. 2:14-16)

The "us" in these passages refers to Christians because in each case you have a Christian author writing to a Christian audience. It is "us" in the sense of all humanity, but us in this more restricted sense.

There are places where it sounds like Christ died for "the world" and not just "the elect." The most famous gospel message of all has such a suggestion: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The key here is to remember how radical it was for the early Jews that God would desire to save the Gentiles (non-Jews) as well as the Jews. That God would save the Jews was assumed. That he would save non-Jews was considered blasphemous and wicked. This is why in Luke chapter four, Jesus' listeners were fine with him speaking of himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1-2 (relatively fine, anyway), but as soon as he hinted at God blessing the Gentiles, they took him to a cliff to throw him off (4:29). This is also why it took a vision from God in triplicate before Peter would even eat in the home of a Gentile (Acts 10-11).

So the glory of God's salvation is that in shedding his blood, Christ "ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). Every nation and tribe and tongue will have their representative in the worship before the throne of God. This is because Christ died for "the world" and not just for the Jews.

You might even say that far from being a "limited" atonement, the atonement we proclaim will achieve its purpose.

It was intended to save God's chosen and it will! It was intended to redeem God's elect and it will! One of the great evangelists of all time, Charles Spurgeon, vividly describes how such a view is a glory to the cross of Christ, not a limitation at all:

We are often told that we limit the atonement of Christ, because we say that Christ has not made a satisfaction for all men, or all men would be saved. Now, our reply to this is, that, on the other hand, our opponents limit it: we do not. The Arminians say, Christ died for all men. Ask them what they mean by it. Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of all men? They say, "No, certainly not." We ask them the next question – Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of any man in particular? They answer, "No." They are obliged to admit this, if they are consistent. They say, "No. Christ has died that any man may be saved if" – and then follow certain conditions of salvation. Now, who is it that limits the death of Christ? Why, you. You say that Christ did not die so as infallibly to secure the salvation of anybody. We beg your pardon, when you say we limit Christ's death; we say, "No, my dear sir, it is you that do it." We say Christ so died that he infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ's death not only may be saved, but are saved, must be saved, and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved. You are welcome to your atonement; you may keep it. We will never renounce ours for the sake of it.<sup>9</sup>

### I—Irresistible Grace

We come now to a look at the moment of our salvation. What is happening in me when I am saved? Is it that I have weighed the evidence and made a good decision? When I heard someone preach the gospel did I simply agree with them and choose to follow Christ? While there is some truth here at a superficial level, more importantly what was happening in that moment was the grace of God working upon me in an irresistible manner. It was not just an offer of grace if I would receive it, rather it was God's efficacious calling on my soul. My physical ears may have heard the evangelist speaking, but far more

critically my soul heard the Holy Spirit calling me to salvation. This is *irresistible grace*.

We can start this discussion with a look at how we know God calls in a special way those who are saved. Paul tells us that "those whom [God] predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Rom. 8:30). The inescapable logic of the verse is that not all are "called," but only those who are also predestined, justified, and glorified.

Of course, this is a special internal calling God does through the Holy Spirit, not like in Matthew 22:14, "Many are called, but few are chosen." Jesus in the Matthew text is referring to the general "call" that might go out to anyone and everyone. But within this larger audience, there are some who will also hear a spiritual calling that will unfailingly result in their salvation.

This is exactly why throughout the book of Acts when the evangelists give their external, verbal call to faith, it is God who determines whether a person will respond. Paul preached to many in Pisidian Antioch, but only "as many as were appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). Paul in Philippi preached to Lydia and "the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (16:14). In Achaia, Apollos "greatly helped those who through grace had believed" (18:27). The conclusion reached by the New Testament is that "God is the author, not merely of justification, but also of faith."<sup>10</sup>

This aspect of God's work highlights the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Throughout the New Testament we see him identified as particularly in focus in our spiritual rebirth.

Paul says, "No one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). John echoes the same idea:

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (John 3:5-6; cp. 1:12-13)

And elsewhere in Paul we read that

He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5)

"Regeneration" means spiritual re-birth (cf. John 3:1-8). I was born once in a physical way, but when I am saved I am born *again* in a spiritual way.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 prophesied this centuries before in vivid language:

"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

How true it is that "by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). Not only is my salvation and the grace that caused it "the gift of God," but through passages like Romans 9 and the excerpts from Acts and John 1:12, I realize that faith itself is also "the gift of God."

We have gone from death to life, from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, from dead in our sins to alive in Christ. This is because God irresistibly called us to him. We heard his voice because he chose us to hear it. We responded because he appointed us to respond. We are his because he predestined us to be his.

## P—Perseverance of the Saints

We have seen dramatically that salvation is all of grace and all of God. It follows, then, that we are sustained in this salvation and grace also by the work of God as well. This is the issue of our perseverance. Having become God's children, is it possible for us to fall away from this adoption? Having received grace for salvation, can we lose that same grace? Having begun this race, can we drop out? The answer of the New Testament is a

joyful, calming, "No! Once we become his, we are his forever!"  
In other words,

Those whom God has accepted in his beloved Son, called to faith and sanctified by his Holy Spirit, can neither totally nor finally sever themselves from God's gracious love. The gift of faith endures to the end of life, eternally saving the believer. (Westminster Confession of Faith 17:1)

We can look at this from several angles. One is by seeing that God's covenant of salvation is an everlasting covenant:

"For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed," says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (Isa. 54:10)

I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. (Jer. 32:40)

Another is by hearing the powerful words of our Savior who tells us that once we are his, he will never let us be removed from him:

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. <sup>36</sup> But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. <sup>37</sup> All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. <sup>38</sup> For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup> And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup> For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:35-40)

For good reason, then, the apostles will echo these sentiments throughout their writings:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom. 8:29-30)

So that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor. 1:7-9)

The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Tim. 4:18)

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 1:24-25)

So we see that from beginning to end, salvation is all of God. Here as in all things, God is the Alpha and the Omega. This is why we call him "the founder *and* perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2, emphasis mine). This is why Paul can so confidently say to us that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). While this life will be one of temptation, effort, and trials, we can know that those who are his will always and forever be his—no matter how dark or bleak or insurmountable the days may seem.

### **Where Do We Differ From Those Who Are Traditionally Reformed?**

Before we close we should clarify where we differ from other Reformed denominations. The largest group of Reformed

churches belongs to the various branches of the Presbyterian community, those who subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith. We love our Presbyterian brothers and sisters and align with them on many doctrines. But we differ on two major points with them. The first is that they baptize infants (paedobaptism) instead of baptizing only those who make a profession of faith.

The second difference with Presbyterians is the understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. We are charismatic and believe in the ongoing practice of *all* the gifts we find in the New Testament. They are cessationist and so believe that some of these gifts have ceased. This, too, is a significant difference that impacts many areas of our church life.

Another growing section of the Reformed community is the Reformed Baptists (e.g., Al Mohler, Mark Dever, etc.). With them we share the Reformed doctrines above, and we also share their view of baptism. The two significant differences with them are with the gifts of the Holy Spirit (they are cessationists; we are charismatic) and church government (they are typically independent congregationalists; we are modified presbyterians, as we'll look at in chapter five).

These differences mean that it is wisest to build separate denominations and churches, but we passionately affirm our common bonds in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We also covet opportunities to support one another as we glorify the name of Jesus in this lost and dark world.

### **To Prepare for the Next Class**

- Read chapter four, *What is it to be Charismatic?*
- Listen to the message, *Church Vision 3: Spiritual Gifts in Corporate Gathering* (available on the Exploring Membership page of the website).
- Recommended reading:
  - R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God, Chosen by God*
  - Sam Storms, *Chosen for Life: The Case for Divine Election*

- J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*; "Introduction" in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, much that we say throughout this class aligns us with Reformed denominations, but these are two doctrines that uniquely join us to the Reformed community and not to some other evangelical movements.

<sup>2</sup> Joel R. Beeke, *Living for God's Glory* (Fla: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2008) 61.

<sup>3</sup> "Remonstrance" means "reasons for opposition or grievance."

<sup>4</sup> Name given to those Dutch Protestants who adhered to the ideas of Jacobus Arminius. Arminianism, a liberal reaction to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, asserts that man chooses if he will be saved, thus God responds to man's choice, rather than man responding to God via the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>5</sup> J.I. Packer, "Introductory Essay," *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (The Banner of Truth Trust, rep. 1995), 11.

<sup>6</sup> We have faith because we were predestined. We are not predestined because we have faith.

<sup>7</sup> As Paul says in Romans 9:16, 18: "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy... He has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."

<sup>8</sup> Of course, the marvel of our redemption is that we have received justice as well, only we have received it through the sacrifice of Christ. He took the punishment that our sins deserved. So, our sins are justly condemned, but we are mercifully redeemed! That is why Paul says God is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

<sup>9</sup> Charles Spurgeon, qtd. by J. I. Packer, "Introductory Essay," in John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1959), 14.

<sup>10</sup> J.I. Packer, cited by David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (P&R Publishing Company, 1963), 21).

<sup>11</sup> Also available here:

[http://www.johnowen.org/media/packer\\_quest\\_for\\_godliness\\_ch\\_8.pdf](http://www.johnowen.org/media/packer_quest_for_godliness_ch_8.pdf).

## What is it to be Charismatic?

Centuries ago a group of bishops crafted a document to articulate for churches everywhere what was essential to believe about God. We call it the Nicene Creed because it was written in the city of Nicaea, located in what is now northwest Turkey. As with all such creeds, they were surprisingly brief because they were not trying to answer all questions, only the ones most essential at the time. Along these lines they crafted a few lines about the Holy Spirit:

And I believe in the Holy [Spirit], the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

Their words give us a helpful overview of the Bible's teaching about the person of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Remember, "the Trinity" is shorthand for our belief in one God who is three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Like the Father and the Son, the Creed tells us that Spirit is "the Lord" (God) and he is thus to be "worshipped and glorified" (cf. Matt. 28:20; Eph. 4:30; Acts 5:3-4). He is the "Giver of Life," which means he is the agent who brings life to our dead hearts and enables us to respond in faith to God's offer of salvation (John 1:12-13; 3:1-8; Ezek. 36:25-27). As Paul says, "no one

can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). The Creed says the Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son," which means he was poured out on the church by the Father and the Son (Acts 2:33; John 14:16), and he lives in every Christian to teach us, convict us, guide us, and even change us (John 14:17, 26; Gal. 5:1-17). This is why we call the Christian virtues God is working in us the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-23). Lastly, the Nicene Creed says the Spirit "spoke by the prophets," which is to say that God through the Holy Spirit spoke all the words of the Old and New Testament. We can see this in places like Hebrews 3:7 where the author cites Psalm 95:7 and calls it what "the Holy Spirit says."

Everything above is part of a basic Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit. Any truly Christian tradition will affirm these truths regardless of their denomination or affiliation. On a topic like the Holy Spirit and his work in our lives, it is helpful to start with our points of agreement and then move to our areas of disagreement with some Christians.

So where exactly is our point of disagreement with other Christians on the issue of the Holy Spirit? Well certainly it is not about matters related to the Spirit being God or his work in the Christian in the area of the application of redemption (calling, regeneration, sanctification, etc.). We can summarize our disagreement by saying that we are *charismatic*. This is to say that we are charismatic and not cessationist. Charismatics believe all the spiritual gifts (*charismata*, Rom. 12:6) listed in the New Testament have not 'ceased' but continue throughout the church age. Some people prefer the term "continuationist" over charismatic for this reason. To be charismatic also means that we identify in many ways with the Charismatic Renewal and the Third Wave of the Spirit, but we are not largely Pentecostal. The issues here have to do with the baptism of the Spirit and speaking in tongues. It's possible I've now confused you more than helped you, so let's look more closely at some of these terms using the lens of history. After the historical overview we'll explore the New Testament's teaching on the Holy Spirit and then some specific areas of our church life.

## **The Three Waves of the Spirit**

As a Charismatic church we are part of something that has continued from the New Testament saints until the present, but it is also a special move of God that escalated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since Peter Wagner in the 1980s, theologians and historians have seen in this work of the Spirit three "waves."<sup>1</sup>

The first of these waves began in 1901 as William Joseph Seymour heard about speaking in tongues from another preacher named Charles Parham. In 1906 Seymour began to hold meetings in Los Angeles that went on for years, turning into a revival that spread throughout the United States. This was the birth of the Pentecostal movement, a movement that now includes hundreds of millions of believers worldwide. It is distinctive by its emphasis on speaking in tongues and the pursuit of a "baptism of the Spirit" subsequent to conversion.

The second wave of the Spirit impacted a very different group of people. In 1960 an Episcopal minister named Dennis Bennett was filled with the Spirit and began to speak in tongues. This turned into a revival of the Spirit that spread throughout mainline denominations and even into the Roman Catholic Church. It created some new denominations, but it was also distinctive because it brought renewal to existing denominations. This wave of the Spirit is often called the Charismatic Renewal. There was slightly less emphasis on speaking in tongues in these groups, but still the pursuit of a distinctive "baptism of the Spirit." Many of the early leaders in the Sovereign Grace churches were converted during this revival, and many movements that called themselves "non-denominational" grew out of this era (e.g., Calvary Chapel, Maranatha, New Frontiers International, etc.).

The third wave of the Spirit began with John Wimber in Fuller Seminary (Anaheim, CA). He became theologically and exegetically convinced the miraculous gifts were for today and began to pastor and teach out of that conviction. He soon took over leadership of the Vineyard churches, a movement that now has 1500 churches worldwide. What was distinctive about this "third wave" of the Spirit was it emphasized the kingdom of

God as being present in power now, had little emphasis on speaking in tongues, does not believe in a "baptism of the Spirit" separate from regeneration, and tends to emphasize more being "filled with the Spirit" throughout our Christian life. It had particular impact on evangelicals, and even theologians like Wayne Grudem identify with it. Authors like D.A. Carson and Sam Storms are theologically aligned here as well.

The background of Sovereign Grace (Churches) intersects both the second and third waves of the Spirit. Many of our early leaders and pastors were converted in the 70s as the Charismatic Renewal spread throughout the U.S. Others came up in the 80s and 90s when the Third Wave Movement was becoming more prominent.

This changing makeup of the denomination is reflected in the fact that the Statement of Faith was changed in 2002 to embrace both 'Charismatic' and Third Wave positions (it was originally more a 'Charismatic' statement). The decision was made to emphasize the practice and pursuit of the gifts of the Spirit (including speaking in tongues and prophecy), and to allow room for belief in the baptism of the Spirit as an event subsequent to conversion (Pentecostal-Charismatic) or something that is functionally equivalent to conversion (Third Wave).

Thus, Sovereign Grace Church and the Sovereign Grace churches did not spring up in a vacuum. They are part of an international, historical move of God that has captured scholars, pastors, denominations, congregations, and leaders on all parts of the globe.

But this is not to say we identify with all doctrines and practices of everyone who calls himself "Charismatic." In the rest of the chapter we will explain what we mean when we say we are Reformed-*Charismatic*.

## **Acts 2: A Redemptive-Historical Look at the Gifts of the Spirit**

The book of Acts is the key starting point for a proper look at the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer and the church. This is because Luke in this book attempts not only to explain a particular aspect of the Spirit's work in this or that area of life (e.g., 1 Cor. 12-14), but he also presents the work of the Spirit in a broader redemptive-historical context.

Acts 2 is not our first introduction to the Holy Spirit, of course, for he is at work at every point of the Old Testament's history. We get a shadowy hint at his future prominence in the first moments of creation itself: "the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters" (Gen. 1:2). Then near the close of the Old Testament's revelation we read, "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts" (Zech. 4:6). David will famously pray, "take not your Holy Spirit from me" (Ps. 51:11), and the coming Messiah will be identified by his unique ability to say, "The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me" (Isa. 61:1). We could add dozens more references to these.

But even if we can find prophecies, anticipations, foreshadows, and foretastes of the Spirit's work in the Old Testament, Acts 2 is nonetheless the beginning of a new epoch in the history of the people of God. Something happened here which changed the nature of God's people for the rest of human history. Pentecost began something revolutionary, something dynamic, something explosive, and the shock waves of its blast will be felt until the return of Christ. Let's take a closer look at it to see just how true this is.

As the book of Acts opens, Jesus is in his last days on earth. In one of his last statements to the apostles he tells them, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (1:8). This orients us to what will happen (the outpouring of the Spirit) and one of the chief reasons for it (to be witnesses).

On the day of Pentecost, one of the annual Jewish feasts that fittingly celebrates the coming harvest, the fledgling group of

disciples is gathered together in Jerusalem. Suddenly the Spirit is poured out upon them in a noisy wind and as tongues of fire (vv. 2-3). Being "filled with the Spirit," they "began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" (v. 4). These "tongues" are apparently known languages, because internationals gathered in Jerusalem for the feast heard them speaking in their "own native language" (v. 8).

The event is marvelous and miraculous, but it is the explanation that is crucial for us to hear. When Peter stands to address the gathered crowd he doesn't begin a miracle exhibition, he preaches a sermon. In the sermon he takes what just happened and places it in the context of God's work of redemption. Much of the confusion and misunderstanding of this Pentecost miracle is because many have missed the significance of Peter's sermon.

He opens by stating the obvious: "We're not drunk" (v. 15, my paraphrase). More importantly he quotes the prophet Joel, who centuries before had indicated this day would come: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh" (Acts 2:17). There is a "last day" coming when Christ shall descend through the clouds (Rev. 19:11-16) and all the world shall be judged (20:11-15). But Peter is speaking of the "last days," which is all the days leading up to "the last day" (cf. 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; James 5:3). What is the indication "the last days" are here? It is this: The Spirit has been poured out "on all flesh." We know we're in "the last days" because the Spirit has been poured out, and one implication is that as long as the last days endure, the Spirit will be "on all flesh."

But what does it mean that God will pour out his Spirit on "*all* flesh"? It does not mean every individual alive on earth. It means that no longer will there be a special gift of the Spirit to kings, prophets, and priests (e.g., Num. 27:18; 1 Sam. 10:6; etc.). Instead, men and women, young and old, the rich and poor, Jews and Gentiles, will all have God's Spirit. All barriers are shattered. This is the significance of the next words of Joel/Peter: "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and

your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my spirit, and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17b-18). The emphasis on prophecy in the passage is not a statement of the supremacy of this gift above all others. Rather, this gift is a symbol that God's Spirit has been poured out, and all the gifts of the Spirit are now here.

Thus, the first key point to grasp in Peter's sermon is that *the last days are characterized by the Holy Spirit being poured out on all people*. As long as the last days endure, the Holy Spirit will be poured out on his people.

The next part of Peter's sermon ties this event to the essential work of Christ itself. He retells the story of Christ from his earthly ministry (v. 22) to his crucifixion (v. 23) to his resurrection where he spends the most time (vv. 24-32). But where he goes next is essential to see, for the work of Christ does not end with his resurrection. Listen to Peter's words:

"Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing....Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2:33, 36)

The redemptive work of Christ includes his ascension to the right hand of the Father, but it also includes the pouring out of the Spirit. The whole picture of his redemption, then, includes his life, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and pouring out of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is thus a key part of the foundational work of Christ that we believe.

So, the second great element of Pentecost is to see that *the outpouring of the Spirit is a key part of the redemption that Jesus accomplished and the message that the apostles preached*. The Spirit is one of the chief markers of the last days, and it is an integral part of the apostolic message we preach in these last days. There is a priority on the gospel, but the gospel

is seen as inseparable from the power and ministry of the Spirit. We see this Pentecost pattern throughout the New Testament.

In Acts, Philip will go to Samaria and preach "to them the Christ" (8:5). They respond in faith and are baptized. When the apostles visit, they pray "for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (vv. 15-16). The apostles in no way questioned the salvation of these saints, but they did pray for the Spirit to fall on them since his empowerment and work was not evident in them at that time. The gospel was prioritized and the means of these saints being saved, but the ministry of the Spirit was seen as inseparable from it. So immediately after the preaching of the gospel they prayed for the Spirit to fall on them.

We find something similar in Acts 10 where Peter preaches the gospel to a Gentile audience. In verses 34-43 Peter preaches Jesus and explains his call to "preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead" (v. 42). Thus, the priority at this moment was on the gospel itself, but immediately "while Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word" (v. 44). God sovereignly did what Peter likely would not have even prayed for. The point for us is that while the gospel was the priority, the Spirit and his work were (and remain) connected to the gospel.

Paul's epistles confirm this Pentecost pattern (the priority of the gospel/Spirit inseparable from the gospel). Romans 1-5 provides the most elevated reflection on the gospel in the New Testament, but as he turns his attention to how we are to live this new life he emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit. We are not to walk "according to the flesh but according to the Spirit," and we are to be "led by the Spirit" (8:4, 14). Galatians 1-4 fiercely defends the gospel revealed to Paul, but then in chapter 5 he says we must "walk by the Spirit" so that we can bear "the fruit of the Spirit" (5:16, 22-23). Ephesians 1-3 presents the gospel of God's eternal election and his redemption through Christ, and then in 5:18 he will command us to "be filled with

the Spirit" (a command that is a present imperative, meaning we are to do it and then continue doing it!). 1 Corinthians also begins with a look at the gospel as "the foolishness of the cross" (1:17-31) and the centrality of Paul's message (2:1-5; cf. 15:1-4), but this book has the most extensive treatment on spiritual gifts in the Bible (chaps. 12-14). It is clear that Paul prioritizes the gospel proper—the life, death, and resurrection of Christ—but it is also clear that he views the Holy Spirit as an essential part of his message and the work of the Spirit as an essential part of Christian maturity. We might summarize his view by saying, "believe the gospel and be filled with the Spirit," or, "believe the gospel and walk in the Spirit."

All of this clearly demonstrates that Paul's epistles model the same Pentecost pattern that we find in the book of Acts. He doesn't always emphasize the same aspect of the Spirit's life, just as he doesn't always emphasize the same aspect of the gospel, but the gospel-Spirit connection is clear.

Before we continue we should think further about how the gospel and the gifts of the Spirit are to be connected. First, the gifts of the Spirit we witness in the Bible are not *primarily* to validate the gospel as some would say. The gifts do that, of course, but this is by no means their exclusive purpose. Second, while spiritual gifts are distinct from the gospel, they are to be inseparable from the gospel. While we might prioritize the work of Christ in our preaching, we are to see this as incomplete without the Bible's teaching on the Holy Spirit. Third, the gifts were not merely to sustain the church until the Bible was written as some would say. Rather they are part of the essence of the church as the people of the Spirit and of the truth the Bible reveals. Fourth, the gospel, the gifts, and the Bible are a kind of three-legged stool meant to be kept together throughout the church age. There is to be no separation between the gifts and the gospel (though they are certainly distinguishable), and there is to be no separation between the gifts and the Bible. God intends for the church to keep these three—the gospel, the Bible, spiritual gifts—together for its full growth and life to reflect his glory. This is not to say spiritual gifts are more

important than the gospel itself, but only that the biblical picture is for these to be held together in the life of the church and in the life of the individual believer.

Most arguments for cessationism depend on a false division between the gifts and the gospel or the gifts and the Bible. They typically state that since the gospel and the Bible are now complete, there is no need for the miraculous gifts to continue. These were only to sustain the church *until* that day arrived. But this is to misunderstand the role of the gifts, the connection between the gospel and the gifts as demonstrated in Acts 2, and to miss the prominence of the gifts of the Spirit within the Bible itself.

The one passage that speaks of the cessation of the gifts actually supports what we are saying here:

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.<sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part,<sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. (1 Cor. 13:8-10)

There will indeed be a final, glorious day when prophecy, tongues, and gifts of knowledge cease, but this is not when there is a completed New Testament canon. It is "when the perfect comes," who is Jesus. This is the great day of Jesus' return. Why will gifts of healing be necessary when there is no death, pain, or disease? Why will gifts of teaching be necessary when "I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (13:12). Why will tongues be necessary when we will speak directly to God himself?

But until this "last day," we live in "the last days" when God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh and all Old Testament barriers are destroyed between those with special gifts of the Spirit and the normal people of God (Acts 2:17). All will prophesy in the last *days*. On the last *day* none will, because we will know all we need to know.

## Four Key Convictions to Have about the Gifts of the Spirit

The subject of spiritual gifts in the life of the believer and the church is a massive topic. You can look at the resources at the end of the chapter if you want to study the topic further—and we recommend it! At this point we want simply to survey some key convictions we ought to have about the gifts.

First, the point of spiritual gifts is not to showcase a particular person, but to build up the church: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7); "Let all things be done for building up" (14:26). So, if I am gifted in a particular way, then God intends for that gift to be used to build up the church around me.

Second, there are more gifts than are described in the New Testament, but the ones described there are always to be pursued in our church. Paul emphasizes the "varieties of gifts" (1 Cor. 12:4), and then he lists some of the gifts in operation (vv. 8-11). But the list here is different from Romans 12:3-8 and Ephesians 4:7-16 and 1 Peter 4:10-11, other places where the gifts are listed. This tells us these passages are not meant to be outer boundaries for the gifts, but instead they are suggestions for how the gifts might look in our church. Peter uses two helpful categories. He mentions gifts of speech and gifts of service (1 Peter 4:10-11). Remembering our first point, we can ask, *what is something I do in church where, when I do it, others seem to be built up?* Often this points us toward our area of gifting.

Having said that, the fact that these gifts are mentioned tells us they are significant ones we should pursue in our churches. If we have no one who prophesies, we should pursue it. If we have no one who speaks in tongues, we should pursue it. This seems to be the point of Acts 8 when the apostles visit the converts in Samaria. The young church had yet to experience any visible manifestations of the Spirit so the apostles pray for the Spirit to fall on them. He does and the gifts are seen and heard.

A third point to see is that much of the Spirit's work in our lives has to do with making us Christians in the first place and

then making us more like Christ in the second place. Paul says that "no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). Further, "anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom. 8:9). We are, in fact, "born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

But the work of the Spirit then begins to change, convict, transform, sanctify, and purify us. We are growing in holiness as Christians because the Spirit is at work in our lives: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Gal. 5:22-23).

There is more we could say there, but this needs to be said so we keep some sense of balance about the spiritual gifts. We can be tempted to think we have the Spirit and someone else does not, because we have some obvious spiritual gift like prophecy. This is simply wrong. The truth is, anyone who says "Jesus is Lord" has the Spirit as much as the apostle Paul himself. Paul obviously did things in the Spirit I *may* never do (raising the dead, for instance), but I have the same Holy Spirit he does. He might have more of the power of the Spirit, but we both have the same Spirit.

A fourth point is that we are to sincerely and consistently pursue spiritual gifts. Sometimes in our attempts to stay "balanced" or be wise or not offend or focus on our growth in holiness, we can think of it as optional to pursue spiritual gifts. The Bible says it much differently: "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts" (1 Cor. 14:1). Yes, love is greater than the gifts, but Paul's takeaway from that is not to forget about the gifts. It's to pursue both. Don't choose between love and the gifts: Go hard after both of them! In our human limitation we might need to focus on one over the other in a particular season, but we are nonetheless to be Christians and churches that pursue spiritual gifts. Further, we saw above that we are to "be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18), a command that is imperative (urgent), present tense (to be ongoing), and passive (done by God's power in us, not manufactured by us). This continual

filling with the Spirit is how we walk in the power of the Spirit in all situations. It is how we speak the gospel of Christ effectively in a fallen world. It is even how we walk in the power of God and see "signs and wonders" in our lives. The Bible's charge is to do more than merely be open to this; we are to pursue it energetically.

### **Spiritual Gifts at Sovereign Grace Church**

Now that we've provided an historical and biblical foundation for the ongoing pursuit of spiritual gifts, we need to see how this looks at Sovereign Grace Church.

Since the most important gathering of the church is the Sunday meeting, that is also the most important place for the practice and pursuit of spiritual gifts. This is one reason we sing longer at the front-end of our service than many churches. We build in time to both sing and wait on the Lord. It takes time to listen to God's voice and then respond, so we make room for that in our liturgy.

We use a microphone in front of the stage as a way for people to speak prayers, prophecies, encouragements, tongues, and interpretations of tongues. This enables what people say to be heard by the whole congregation. It also creates a way to preserve the order God demands: "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said....For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged" (1 Cor. 14:29, 31).

There is no getting around the risk and unpredictability of spiritual gifts. Anytime you allow for spontaneous words to be spoken you invite potential difficulty. But with spiritual gifts also comes the potential for great blessings. We see in Proverbs 14:4 something of the mess/reward idea: "Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox." If you want a clean manger, get rid of your ox. But if you want "abundant crops," you'll have to put up with some mess. That's a bit earthy, but it captures something of what we're pursuing on Sunday mornings.

Home groups are a second place where we pursue spiritual gifts. In fact, home groups allow for an even greater variety of spiritual gifts to be displayed. If my spiritual gift is mercy or hospitality, my opportunities will be limited on a Sunday morning. But in a home group I have an unlimited ability to put these into practice. Home groups also allow a less threatening place to do things I've never done before. To prophesy on a Sunday might seem daunting, but maybe I can pray in a home group meeting.

The last place to pursue spiritual gifts is in my private walk with Christ. This is where I can pray for them, study them, reflect on my use (or non-use) of them, and grow in my confidence that they are for the church today and for me. Some gifts can even be active during my private prayer times. As I intercede for a person I might have a thought about him God intends for me to share. This is one aspect of the gift of prophecy.

## Conclusion

We recognize a charismatic view of spiritual gifts might be new to many of you. That is fine. Study the Scriptures we mentioned and pray about it. We hope you arrive where we are, but we understand that not everyone will. Also, please know that any of the pastors are more than happy to talk to you about this. Each pastor has had his own journey in this area with no two alike. Likely they've wrestled with similar issues to you.

## To Prepare for the Next Class

- Read chapter five, *How is our Church Governed?*
- Listen to the following messages (links on the Exploring Membership website):
  - Wayne Grudem, *Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*
  - Daniel Baker, *True Beauty: A Vision of Biblical Womanhood*
- Recommended reading:

- D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*. One of the foremost New Testament evangelical scholars today tackles 1 Corinthians 12-14. We don't affirm everything he says, but it is an excellent defense of a continuationist position—i.e., the gifts *continue* in the church today and have not ceased.
- Sam Storms, *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Gifts*. A former professor of Dallas Theological Seminary explains in accessible, clear language what different spiritual gifts look like in the church today.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit: Encountering the Power of Signs and Wonders Today* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications Vine Books, 1988). See also Wayne Grudem's "Preface" in *Are Spiritual Gifts for Today?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 11-12; <http://www.vineyardusa.org/site/about/vineyard-history>, obtained on July 3, 2013.



## How is our Church Governed?

If you and I want to meet for coffee, we don't need to decide who's in charge. But if we want to start a coffee ministry for fifty businessmen a week, we might need to work out some details. The truth is, once a group gets beyond a certain size you need leadership, and once those leaders are in place, you need to define their roles.

Sometimes it's obvious. When we were kids, the captains in kick-ball were there to pick the teams. Then everyone went and played. Most of the time it's not that simple. Corporations and city governments need a clearly defined leadership structure so each person knows exactly what his job is *and isn't*. Without such clarity, people can get frustrated or worse.

A church is not a city government, but it's big enough that everyone needs to know who the leaders are and what exactly their role is. In some churches the pastor is a virtual monarch, while in others he is almost a spokesperson for a deacon board. Some churches place final authority in the hands of a regional bishop, but others see the congregation as having final authority for decisions and judgments.

So what about Sovereign Grace Church? How is our church governed? That's what we want to look at in this lesson.

## Who has the Authority?

The central question when it comes to governing the church is, *who has the authority?* That is, in the final analysis, who really has the final say in a given decision? Historically, the church has given four answers to this question.

Some church traditions feel final authority rests with the *bishop*, a person in a given denomination who has authority over a number of other churches. This is called an *episcopal* form of government and is perhaps the oldest form. The Episcopal, Anglican, and Roman Catholic Church all adopt this church government. Local pastors have authority, but the bishop has a greater authority.

Other churches feel final authority is in the hands of the *congregation* itself, and historically they are called *congregational* churches. This authority is typically exercised through all-member votes. In these churches there are differences about which matters are voting matters and which ones are worked out through other means, but they all affirm that the congregation is the highest level of authority in the church. Baptist and Anabaptist churches of various kinds adopt this understanding.

A smaller segment of the church has said authority rests in the hands of *apostles*. This is actually the history of the Sovereign Grace churches until 2013, at least officially. Apostles in this government are not at all equated with the original Twelve or Paul, but would be similar to men like Timothy, Titus, and Silas in the Bible. There is some similarity with an episcopal government, but it is only a superficial likeness. The role of bishop and that of an apostle in this type of government are quite different. Some Charismatic and Pentecostal denominations adopt the office of apostle in this qualified sense.

The fourth type of government, and the one we adopted in April of 2013, sees the *elder* as having the primary place of authority within the church. Such churches are called *presbyterian* after the Greek word *presbuteros* for "elder" (cf. Acts 15:6).

This doesn't mean we are identical with traditional Presbyterian denominations. Those churches are generally cessationist, affirm the complete Westminster Confession of Faith, practice paedobaptism (baptizing infants instead of exclusively believers), and have a strong division between teaching and ruling elders. We are charismatic, affirm only parts (though large parts) of the Westminster Confession of Faith, practice credobaptism (the baptism of believers), and see all elders as having an equivalent office.

Our common ground with Presbyterians is our belief in a church government built around the office of elder. Because of its importance in our church and denomination we need to explain what we mean by "elder."

### **The Office of Elder**

There are three terms the New Testament uses to describe the role of "elder." Sometimes people divide these into at least two different positions in the church, but they are really three ways of describing the same office.

An elder is most often called by that name, "elder" (Grk. *presbuteros*). Titus was told to "appoint elders in every town" (1:5) and is then given specific prerequisites for those elders (vv. 6-9). Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders...in every church" in their first missionary journey (Acts 14:23).

The title "elder" speaks to the wisdom and character of the leader of God's church. It refers more to the caliber of the man than his precise age, though age can *sometimes* be a factor in whether to choose a man or not. The role was a critical one in the Old Testament, though it was never fully defined (Ex. 3:16; Jer. 26:17; 29:1; etc.).

Elders are also called by the name of "overseer" (Grk., *episkopos*). In fact, in Titus 1:5-9 where Titus is told to "appoint elders," Paul then says "an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach" (v. 7). Similarly in 1 Timothy 3:1, Paul uses the title "overseer" instead of "elder." This title speaks to the way an elder is to lead Christ's church. In fact, the Bible says

they are to "rule well" (1 Tim. 5:17), and the church is to "submit to them" (Heb. 13:17).

Another title of great importance for the elder is that of "pastor" (Grk., *poimēn*). The word really means a "shepherd," something captured in the ESV in Ephesians 4:11: "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers." A shepherd cares for, protects, feeds, knows, and provides for his sheep, and this accurately captures the kind of concerned leadership an elder is to provide in his church. Thus, the elders are commanded to "shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (NASB, Acts 20:28).

We know these three titles and roles are synonymous from passages like Acts 20. In verse 17 Luke tells us that Paul "called the elders of the church to come to him, and then in verse 28 he exhorts them, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for [shepherd] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." These elders are overseers who shepherd their flock. Thus, a pastor is an elder is an overseer.

Elders in the New Testament are given four basic responsibilities in the church. They are to teach (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17), lead or rule (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4), protect (Acts 20:28-31), and love (1 Peter 5:1-4) the church. As Paul makes very clear, the church does not belong to the elders, though they exercise leadership in the church. The church belongs to God himself: "shepherd the church *of God*, which He purchased with His own blood" (NASB Acts 20:28).

One point of confusion is to think that since elders are the official leaders in the church, they do most or even all of the ministry in the church. This is simply not true! In fact, God says a healthy church is filled with ministers. Notice in the following passage how God gives gifted men for certain roles, but the point of these men is to equip others to do the ministry:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,<sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,<sup>13</sup> until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the

Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Eph. 4:11-13)

This vision of a healthy church body has captured our imagination and our ministry philosophy. It means that while elders are vital to a healthy church, they are by no means the primary workers in the ministry of that church. All are required if the body is to grow up to full maturity.

Now what kind of person is to be an elder? Can anyone sign up for this role? Not exactly. We learn from the New Testament an elder is to be a man of character, gifting, and leadership. That he is to be a man is affirmed in places like 1 Timothy 2:12; 3:1-7; and Titus 1:5-9. The need for gifting and leadership flows out of what he does—teach, lead, protect, and love the church.

The need for character we learn from two clear passages, 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9:

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.<sup>2</sup> Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,<sup>3</sup> not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.<sup>4</sup> He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,<sup>5</sup> for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?<sup>6</sup> He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (1 Tim. 3:1-7)

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--<sup>6</sup> if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.<sup>7</sup> For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain,<sup>8</sup> but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.<sup>9</sup> He must hold firm to the

trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1:5-9)

This is a sobering picture because it creates a number of ways a man will either not qualify for the office or can be removed from the office. Yet, here as in all things, we dare not be smarter than God. He has told us clearly what we are to look for in our elders, and we need to rest in his revelation.

### **The Office of Deacon**

The second office in a local church is that of deacon. As with elders, there is a wide difference of opinion on what a deacon is. In some churches he only oversees the mercy ministries—to the poor, the elderly, the widows, etc. In other churches they are appointed to a governing body almost like a board of directors. Our church defines them differently.

Motivated by Acts 6:1-7, we understand deacons to be men who oversee a certain aspect of a church's life and ministry under the general leadership of the elders. Their ministry complements that of the elder. Where the elder is given "to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (v. 4), the deacon is "to serve tables" (v. 2). There is no sense whatsoever of a greater and a lesser ministry in Acts 6. They are simply different. Both ministries are essential to the life and health and strength of a church, but one is entrusted to elders primarily and one is entrusted to the deacons.

Of course, this doesn't mean that at times an elder won't serve tables or that a deacon won't give himself to the word and prayer in a given church (Philip and Stephen were deacons after all, Stephen preaching the Acts 7 sermon and Philip taking the gospel to Samaria in Acts 8). But this passage does speak to the *primary* ministry of each role.

The ministry of deacons differs from the elders, but it also differs from that of the typical church member. All are called to serve sacrificially in the church, so we expect all members to be engaged in ministry according to their spiritual gifting. Acts 6 is

a helpful picture for this as well. It is likely that to complete the task of feeding the Hellenist widows, a great number of volunteers was required to collect food, set up the distribution, and assess how it was actually working. But it was these seven men who were in charge of the overall management of the task. The management of the ministry required unusual gifting, character, and leadership, and this is why a new office was forged in the church.

So, a deacon's ministry enables the elders to be devoted to the word and prayer, and is more significant—in size, not fundamental importance—than the typical service asked of all members of a local church. Those two sides of it help us to know what ministry can be called diaconal, and it also gives us a large amount of flexibility in defining how it will look in a given church at a given time.

At Sovereign Grace Church diaconal ministry currently includes our home group leaders, church administrator, various leaders in our children and youth ministries, a deacon of benevolence who helps the church to meet significant financial needs among the members, several deacons of finance, and a deacon of worship. As the needs of the church change, we adjust the deacons who are commissioned accordingly. Right now these men serve one-year terms from September to August.

Now just as elders are given specific qualifications, so are deacons. In two passages, Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13, we see deacons are to be men of godliness, gifting, and leadership:

Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. (Acts 6:3)

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.<sup>9</sup> They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.<sup>10</sup> And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.<sup>11</sup> Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.<sup>12</sup> Let deacons each be the husband of

one wife, managing their children and their own households well. <sup>13</sup> For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. (1 Tim. 3:8-13)

God has been kind to raise up a number of men in our church who meet these qualifications and who serve in heroic ways. We praise God for them and see the fruitfulness of our church as directly tied to their sacrifices.

### **A Note on Women in Ministry**

A section like this inevitably invites the question, "What about women in ministry?" That is, if deacons and elders are both male roles, does this mean our church minimizes the contributions of women or thinks of them as fundamentally less gifted? Not at all. The truth is, we believe God's Word when it says, "Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Eph. 4:7). There is no distinction made in this verse between men and women—or educated and uneducated, or rich and poor, or Jew and Gentile, or any other superficial and human division. God has gifted every person in the body of Christ, and he intends us to walk in those giftings. Thus, while it might be true that the handful of elders and the two-dozen deacons in our church are men, there are many leadership and teaching and volunteer roles throughout the church that can be filled by either men or women.

There are a variety of ways that women can exercise their ministry gifts at Sovereign Grace Church. For example, there are numerous ministry teams throughout the church that are not led by deacons and thus open to a woman leading them (e.g. children's ministry teams, bookstore, Keepers, greeters, etc.). Also, much of the organized and informal mercy ministry that happens in the church is done through the leadership of women (e.g. our involvement with crisis pregnancy centers, the poor, etc.). Further, women are often responsible for the planning, coordination, and execution of special events in the life of the church. They also lead various book and Bible studies, and they

pray and prophesy on Sunday mornings. And finally, there is the women's ministry itself. This includes overall strategic leadership, event coordination, teaching, and all that occurs in this context.

We hope you sense our heart in what we are saying here. We affirm male leadership in certain contexts (elders, deacons, husbands/fathers), but we see the gifting and service of our women as essential to the life and health of our church.

## **The Sovereign Grace Churches**

One of the dimensions of New Testament church life that provokes us is how connected the different churches were. There was no sense of scattered, independent churches doing the best they could away from all other Christians. Instead we see a picture of interconnected churches giving and receiving people, prayers, money, and resources as God provided for them. This undeniable aspect of the early church is one of the reasons we have partnered with Sovereign Grace Churches.

This movement (or denomination) has been around since the 80s, and has taken many detours and turns to become what it is today. As a movement grows this often becomes inevitable, because what works with a dozen churches often breaks down when you get to a hundred.

In April 2013, the movement made a dramatic change as it adopted a new *Book of Church Order*, which significantly altered our governing structure and how exactly the churches are joined together. Phil Sasser was one of the primary authors of this document, and our church contributed in many ways toward seeing it completed. We can't look at it exhaustively here, but we can give an overview of how it approaches our union of churches.

When we look at the New Testament we see churches connected to do certain things. They link arms to share financial resources in places like Acts 11:27-30 where the church in Antioch sends money to Jerusalem. They partner together in mission as men are sent out to plant churches and to support

existing churches (Acts 13:1ff; 15:36ff.). We see them come together to settle doctrinal disputes and judicial matters and for accountability (Acts 15:1-16:4; 1 Tim. 5:19-21). And we also see them unite for prayer and fellowship (Rom. 16:1-24).

All of this is reflected in the Sovereign Grace churches. This happens first regionally. The elders in a given region partner to plant churches, ordain qualified elders, provide accountability and a place of appeal for judicial matters, and unite in fellowship, prayer, and worship. Our region is comprised of a dozen or so churches in the Carolinas, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky.

Then our churches are joined at a national level. One elder from each church is part of the Council of Elders, the highest place of authority in our denomination. The Council discusses and votes on a number of things, and provides the final voice of approval (or disapproval) on all key issues.

There are also different committees that serve the regions and the Council of Elders. A key group of men is the Leadership Team, a group led by the Executive Director who serves the Council in our national initiatives. The Leadership Team organizes our conferences, pastors college (one-year pastoral training program in Louisville, KY), national and international church-planting, and other high-level activities. These men are elders in their local churches and yet have the opportunity to significantly impact the movement with their leadership gifts.

We are encouraged by the sweeping changes introduced by the new *Book of Church Order* and look forward to fruitful days ahead as a church and a denomination.

## **Conclusion**

How a church and a denomination are governed is a big deal. People can be very hurt if sinful leaders are given responsibility and there is no clear way to address their deficiencies. Further, when a church is governed poorly it hurts how healthy and fruitful that church can become. For these reasons, we need to

think through the best way to organize our church and denomination.

But having said that, there is no constitution or blueprint which can guarantee God's blessing. Our final confidence is in God himself. It is his church. We are his people. We might have elders who are shepherds, but he is the "Good Shepherd" (John 10:14) and the "Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4). We might have leaders with a church entrusted to their care, but it is "the church of God, which he obtained *with his own blood*" (Acts 20:28). We need to work hard with all the diligence and skill we can bring, but the Master Builder of this church is Christ himself: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Thus, as God told the Israelites: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit" (Zech. 4:6).

Our final boast and hope is in the grace of God. With his grace alone we will grow and endure. Without his grace we are doomed to a quick failure. Praise God that his grace is endlessly available in Jesus Christ!

### **To Prepare for the Next Class**

- Read chapter six, *Our Life Together Part 1*.
- Recommended reading:
  - The Sovereign Grace *Book of Church Order*<sup>1</sup>
  - Our own resource: *Deacons: Serving God, Serving God's People*
  - Benjamin Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*
  - Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership and The New Testament Deacon*.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://sovereigngrace.com/polity>.



## **Our Life Together Part 1**

### ***A Life of Community***

Part of what made the Lone Ranger a legend was the fact he didn't bring a posse. He came with Tonto and that was it. Add a gun and a horse and you've got the makings of a force for good that could conquer any evil.

This might work on TV (or now in the Disney movie), but it doesn't work in the Christian life. And not only does it not work, but it's actually sinful. God's design is that Christians would come together in a church and know a life of community. Lone Rangers are to join together into a spiritual posse, overcoming evil *together*, serving and encouraging *one another* as we follow hard after Christ. That's what we'll look at in this lesson.

#### **All Things in Common**

In the first lesson we looked at how God brings Christians into a church when they are converted. This is exactly what we find in Acts 2:42-47, the first moments of the church following Pentecost. Notice the picture we get of their shared life. They shared their financial resources, their time, their spiritual gifts, and they came together to pray and hear the Scriptures taught. The result was a thriving community that made the gospel

contagious. Read this passage and notice all the activity it represents:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.<sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.<sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common.<sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.<sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,<sup>47</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

The rest of the New Testament will explain in more detail the community we find here, but even at this early stage we can see hints of powerful truths. We can see the church functioning as "the body of Christ," with each of us being a gifted part that contributes to the whole (1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:11-16). We can see we are "individually members one of another" (Rom. 12:5). There is also a vivid sense here of the "fellowship" (*koinōnia*) God demands. "Fellowship" is a strong, dynamic word that implies partnership, mutual commitment, a shared life, and even deep affection (Phil. 1:5; Heb. 13:16; 1 John 1:3-7). This is the kind of community life we are building at Sovereign Grace Church.

Another part of church life we see in Acts 2:42-47 is the "one another" side of it. There are over fifty places in the New Testament where we are commanded to do something "to one another." These are the commands to "love one another" (1 John 4:7), "serve one another" (1 Peter 4:10), "bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:1), and "build one another up" (1 Thess. 5:11). Notice the call is to do these things to *one another*. I might be able to love someone else without a church, but God is calling for more. He is calling for me to be part of a reciprocal love: I love you; you love me in return. This is what it means to "love another" in the church.

All of this demonstrates that God is calling us to a special kind of shared life. This includes a lot, but for this chapter we will address four topics: the Sunday meeting, home groups, an every-member ministry, and financial stewardship.

## **The Sunday Meeting**

The high point of our week is the Sunday gathering. It is like a weekly family reunion where all of our brothers and sisters in Christ gather and where everyone brings their gifts to praise our God. We meet first and foremost to worship and glorify God and even to encounter him (1 Cor. 10:31; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Ps. 100). But this vertical side to our worship is joined to a horizontal dimension: We also gather to build up our brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Cor. 14:26). A third reason to gather is to preach the gospel to those outside of the kingdom of God (Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 2:22ff.).

But what is it we actually do in our meetings? What can we expect in most of our gatherings, if not all of them? We can't explore each of these topics in any detail, but we can at least provide a list of what we do.

Like many church traditions, the preaching of God's Word is a preeminent value and goal in our meetings (2 Tim. 3:16-4:2). Corporate and individual prayer is included (1 Tim. 2:1-2, 8). Singing and musical instruments are part of our services (Eph. 5:18-21; Ps. 150). We allow room for prophecy, tongues with interpretation, and other spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 14:26-30). We take time to collect tithes and offerings (see more on this below). The Lord's Supper is celebrated monthly, and we include baptisms in our Sunday services as needed (1 Cor. 11:17-30; Matt. 28:16-20).

Occasionally we read confessions of faith, celebrate the ordination of church officers, and in extremely rare occasions it can be necessary to perform one of the steps of church discipline in a Sunday meeting.

A final part of our services we can call simply "expressions of fellowship" (Rom. 16:16). Sundays are times where we

gather with the people we love and with whom we have joined together to run this race. Greeting them and sharing brief conversations is thus far more than being polite. It is a chance to reconnect after the space of a week and see how God is working in people's lives.

How much we need to hear the exhortation from Hebrews:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,<sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Heb. 10:24-25)

## Home Groups

In Acts 2:46 we read that the early disciples were "day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes." This rhythm of large and small gatherings is important for us. God works in each of these meetings differently, and some things possible in one meeting are impossible in the other. Sundays are a time for our most gifted musicians to lead us in worship, and where we hear God's Word taught for close to an hour. There is also a special sense of his presence and the power of his Spirit in the corporate worship of the church. This kind of ministry is ideal in a larger gathering.

Yet, home groups allow us to really know each other and to link arms in the normal-life stuff of moving, going to the hospital, facing sickness and unemployment, getting married or walking through a divorce, putting kids through college, having babies, and a hundred other things. All of these times are opportunities for us to love and serve one another in real, daily, gritty ways.

Further, I can hide on a Sunday morning. My life might be a complete disaster, but I can put on a clean set of clothes and drive a nice car to church and look like I've got it all together. In a home group the lie becomes much harder. Week-in, week-out, my lies begin to crumble, and eventually the group is aware I need help. This is God's rescuing grace. It so often comes to me through someone in my home group asking how I'm doing—

and really wanting to know the answer. John Stott echoes these ideas:

The value of the small group is that it can become a community of related persons; and in it the benefit of relatedness cannot be missed, nor its challenge evaded....I do not think it is an exaggeration to say, therefore, that small groups...are indispensable for our growth into spiritual maturity.<sup>1</sup>

For all these reasons we put regular attendance in a home group on the list of expectations for members. Home group attendance is not a command in Scripture, but many commands are impossible to obey without some vehicle like this. Most of the "one anothers" are only good intentions without a small group of people I see regularly in which I can practice them. Likewise, while those with gifts of mercy and compassion and hospitality can find other outlets for them, a home group is an ideal place to express such relational gifts.

The importance we place on home group is one of the reasons we make this a part of the discussion when someone wants to join our church. If they see small group participation as a value they want to practice, this is a sign our church may be for them. If they don't see the benefit of it or lack a desire to participate, that is usually a good sign another church will likely serve them better.

### **Every-Member Ministry**

A third part of our life together is something we call "every-member ministry." Every member in our church has been gifted by God to function in a particular ministry. The Bible makes this crystal-clear: "But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Eph. 4:7); "but to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7).

This idea is likely not new to you. What might be a bit novel is what Paul says in Ephesians 4:11-13. In this passage we see that God gives gifted men to help all of these gifted members

minister according to those gifts. In fact, as we'll see below, elders and teachers in the church are not the ones with the ministries; they are there to prepare the saints to do the ministry of the church. Listen to these words:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,<sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,<sup>13</sup> until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Eph. 4:11-13, emphasis mine)

It is easy to fall into the mentality that says there are professional ministers in a church and then there are the rest of us. Paul says exactly the opposite. There are a few professional equippers in a church, and then there are all the ministers.

This means we place a high value on members stepping forward with ministry ideas and initiative and leadership. In fact, the health, vitality, and strength of our church depends on it. The "body of Christ" is built up as equipped members do "the work of ministry." That is the picture we get in Ephesians 4:11-13.

So, if you have a picture of the Christian life that allows you to coast until heaven, you need to read your New Testament again. We are, in fact, saved to serve. Jesus is the preeminent example for us:

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.<sup>43</sup> But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,<sup>44</sup> and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.<sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

One of the key ways to step into ministry at SGC is through our ministry teams. If you look over our website or look around on a Sunday morning, you'll see dozens of people serving in a variety of ways. When someone is doing something you'd like

to try, ask them who to talk to about getting involved. Or if you see a gap in our ministries, a place where someone isn't serving in a way you think would be helpful, talk to a pastor or home group leader about how we might change something. We might even ask you to lead a new ministry!

Here is a list of questions to ask yourself if you really have no idea how you'd like to serve:

- What do I have a passion for?
- What spiritual gifts and talents has God given me?
- Where do others see God's grace in my life?
- How much time do I have available to serve?
- Where in my schedule can I make room for opportunities to serve?

Questions like these can help you find the place where your gifting and interest meets the church's needs. That's always the best place for you to serve. Until then, start somewhere. Find out what the needs are and jump in to meet them. As you do that, God will reveal your gifts to others and you'll likely be asked to serve in just the right spot. Serving others with the gifts God has given us brings God pleasure and glory: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another...in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:10, 11).

## **Financial Stewardship**

A fourth expression of our life together is financial stewardship. This means taking a portion of our income and investing it into the church. Few areas are as controversial and fraught with temptations as money, but it is also an area where God has spoken extensively in the Bible. And if God is not ashamed to discuss something, we shouldn't be either. Here are a few principles we learn from the Scriptures.

First, all giving to the church is first and foremost a gift to the Lord. When Paul thanks the Philippians for their gift to him, he doesn't see it as a mere financial transaction or a contractual obligation. Instead he uses the language of worship. Their gift

to him was really a gift to the Lord: "I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:18).

Second, all giving should be done from a sincere and grateful and even cheerful heart: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). We don't give to impress people or out of dry duty. Instead, we see it as a welcome opportunity to give to the God who has given so much to us.

Third, there is great blessing in giving sacrificially. Throughout the Bible, God blesses those who give sacrificially to him. As 2 Corinthians 9:6 says, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." God even promises to meet us if our giving creates a real need in our lives: "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).

Fourth, understanding the three principles above, we can also affirm the ongoing importance of tithing. To tithe means to give 10%. In fact, that's what the word means, a tenth. In the Old Testament and New, it is a unit of measure commonly associated with our giving to the Lord. It refers to giving a tenth of our income to the Lord at various times and in various ways.

Giving tithes in the Old Testament was to support the temple and its ministers (Num. 18:25-32; Neh. 10, 13), to express worship and gratitude (Lev. 27:39; Deut. 12:10-12), and to provide for the poor (Deut. 26:12-15). This is why God calls it "robbing" him if Israel withheld the tithe—or offered to him a sacrifice that was clearly not in keeping with the spirit of the tithe (Malachi 3:8-12).

These same categories of giving are in the New Testament. We give to support God's ministers of the gospel (1 Cor. 9), to feed the poor (Gal. 2:10), and to express our worship to God (Matt. 6:19-21; Phil. 4:18).

Thus, we speak of the ongoing importance of the tithe because nowhere does the New Testament give the impression we are to give *less* than 10% to the Lord for these purposes. If anything, the expectation is to give *more*. Nor does the New Testament give us any text which would imply we no longer tithe to the Lord. Certainly, the New Testament does not emphasize a specific amount, but focuses on the heart of the giver and the sacrifice of the gift. But the tithe remains a good reference point to evaluate our level of giving.

When we give we make it tangible that we are committed to the Lord and affectionate toward him—in the same way that giving gifts to our spouses communicates these same things. We feel it when we give. It is as if we are taking a piece of ourselves and actually giving it away. But as we do so, we will find incalculable blessings. We will realize that though we have given 10% of what we thought was ours, in actuality it all belonged to God. We will experience his provision. We will taste the joy of investing in the church and realize that what we are doing here we helped to build.

## **Two are Better than One**

Lone Rangers can be very successful on TV, but in real life it can be a hard road. Ecclesiastes shows us a practical side of this. When you have two people, there is much more work that can be done. There is someone to help the other up. There is comfort instead of coldness. And there is strength instead of weakness:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. <sup>10</sup> 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! <sup>11</sup> Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? <sup>12</sup> And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him-- a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Eccl. 4:9-12)

This gives us a snapshot of God's design for the church. He has created a way for Christians to thrive, to be protected, to grow,

to be encouraged, and to run their race with endurance and focus. This way is called the church. So, regardless of whether you join Sovereign Grace Church, we hope the Lord leads you to a church where you can experience the power of a shared life.

### **To Prepare for the Next Class**

- Read chapter seven, *Our Life Together Part 2*.
- Listen to the message *Church Discipline* by Ken Sande (available on the Exploring Membership page of the website).
- Recommended reading:
  - Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What is a Healthy Church Member?*
  - Wayne Mack, *Life in the Father's House*
  - Kevin Deyoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We Love the Church*
  - Kevin Deyoung, *What is the Mission of the Church*
  - Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle*

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *One People* (London: Falcon Books, 1969), 70-71.

## **Our Life Together Part 2**

### ***A Life of Holiness***

In our last lesson we explored some of the ways we live in community together. Our life together is to be a shared one that brings life and support to all who come into our fellowship. Yet, we are also called to be holy, both individually and as a church: "You shall be holy, for I am holy"; "you are...a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Peter 1:16; 2:9).

This call to holiness has several implications we will address in this lesson. One implication is that we respond biblically to the sin (or perceived sins) of others. Related to this, we will look at church discipline and then at conflict and resolution. Another implication is that we think rightly about the personal ministry of counseling. Finally, we will look at two areas where sin can sometimes play a part, namely, divorce and remarriage and then at our commitment to the safety of our children.

#### **Church Discipline**

The Bible describes two kinds of discipline, which are often called "informal" and "formal." Informal discipline is the way God disciplines us for our good (Heb. 12:3-11) and the way one believer helps another believer to grow through encouragement,

rebuke, and instruction (Heb. 3:13). This occurs through the normal give-and-take of our life together. We speak into each other's lives constantly, and this is an enormous tool for growth. All of this happens informally.

There is a second kind of discipline which we call "formal discipline" (Matt. 18:15-20). This is when a person's unrepentance is hurting him, others, and the church to such an extent that we bring an escalating pressure on him/her to repent. This process begins with an individual confronting the offending party. If this rebuke is effective, no further action is required. If the offending party continues to sin, a second person is brought in to add weight to the rebuke. If this rebuke fails, the elders are involved as representatives of "the church" (v. 17). If the elders are unsuccessful, the congregation might be brought in to appeal to the man. Failing even this, the person is removed as a member, and members are to disassociate with the person: "I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one" (1 Cor. 5:11).

While this process sounds harsh, there are two things that must be kept in mind. First, not every sin constitutes an offense worthy of formal discipline. 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 provides a list of offenses that rise to this level: "sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler" (v. 11). Titus 3:10 adds the person who "stirs up division" in the church.

A second thing to remember is the goal of discipline. Discipline is meant to rescue the sinner, not punish them. Their sin has trapped them in a destructive lifestyle which will bring disaster on them and others if they continue. Church discipline is meant to rescue them from that path. Another aspect of the goal of discipline is to protect the church. Serious sin that goes unchecked will eventually spread and begin to hurt the spiritual life of other believers. Finally, the goal of discipline is the glory of God. Our God is holy, and the church which bears his name must also be holy. Reflecting his holiness is one of the ways we glorify the Lord.

For excellent treatments of this subject, please refer to Jay Adams' *Handbook of Church Discipline* and Jonathan Leeman's *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (9marks). You should also look at the relevant sections of the Sovereign Grace Book of Church Order.<sup>1</sup>

## **Conflict and Reconciliation**

It is inevitable we will sin against each other in a church. If we expect otherwise, we need to read our Bibles more closely! These sins are not to ruin our relationships, however. This is why God is so emphatic that Christians should be marked by forgiveness, mercy, grace, patience, and humility. Such attributes will enable us to overlook the sins of others and walk in unity even in our fallen condition:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,<sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,<sup>3</sup> eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph. 4:1-3)

In the face of our sins, God calls us to be "peacemakers," those who take sin seriously and yet work toward peace in our relationships. This will require us to take the logs out of our own eyes before we begin hunting the specks in the eyes of others (Matt. 7:3-5). It will also require us to be hard to offend and quick to overlook the offenses of others (Prov. 19:11). Love, after all, "is not irritable or resentful" (1 Cor. 13:5).

When we are unable to overlook an offense or get past it, or when the sin is too serious to do so, we need to remove the division between us and our brother or sister. Jesus calls us to go as soon as we can to "be reconciled to your brother" (Matt. 5:23-24). We might need others to assist us in this process. A home group leader, godly friend, or a pastor can be invaluable at such times to help unite two Christians who are at odds.

A commitment to peacemaking also means we attempt to resolve conflicts relationally and not go to the civil authorities (1 Cor. 6:1-6). Governments are a means of grace for God's

people (Rom. 13:1-8), but this does not mean we go to them in all situations.

For a fuller and excellent treatment on these areas, please look at Ken Sande's *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*.

## **Counseling and Confidentiality**

Another implication of our call to holiness is that we are to help one another become more holy. This happens in a variety of ways, but a critical one is by effectively speaking God's Word into one another's lives.

We see this informally throughout the life of the church, but it also happens formally. This formal counseling we call "biblical counseling," because it is rooted in the fact the Bible is the authoritative and sufficient interpreter of our situation and problems. This is the affirmation of Scripture itself:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

When we have areas of sin or hurtful patterns of behavior, we are in need of grace to walk in "every good work." It is the Bible that defines us, our problems, and our ultimate solution in Jesus Christ.

In biblical counseling, a counselor is helping someone else understand his or her situation and solution through the lens of the Bible. The first part of this is seeking to understand your struggles and background. Without this understanding, we aren't in a position to apply God's Word effectively. But sympathy and understanding are only the first steps. The goal is to then apply God's Word in as gracious and skillful a manner as God would enable us to. The entire Bible is "breathed out by God," but in a given situation, some of it will be more relevant than other parts. The pastors are all trained and experienced in

biblical counseling, and there are others in the church skilled in this area as well.

We also value the expertise provided by professional counselors and psychiatrists outside the church. The body's connection to the soul is mysterious and multi-faceted, so we acknowledge the common grace found in medicine and related disciplines, and we recognize the profound help psychotropic drugs can sometimes provide. There are counselors we can recommend if this is your need.

Even if a person chooses to see a professional counselor, it can be helpful to also see a pastor for biblical counseling. The counseling process is often an exercise in trial-and-error and trying to find clarity where there is confusion. The pastor can be a great partner to help you navigate down these paths and even help you process the counsel you are receiving. Of course, there is no obligation to do so. We have simply seen it benefit our members when they approach counseling in this way.

In these areas, we align ourselves in many ways with the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation ([ccef.org](http://ccef.org)).

### Pastoral Confidentiality

The pastors of Sovereign Grace Church are committed to confidentiality in all matters where it is helpful to you and to us. In most counseling there is no need to share anything with others, but sometimes for your benefit we share selectively. A pastor might share with another pastor or his wife in order to get additional wisdom. At times we also share with the other pastors if there is a need for extra accountability in the counseling relationship (i.e., the pastors needs to be accountable to the other pastors). The motivation for all of this is love expressed in a desire to serve you and the church as well as possible (Matt. 7:9; 22:39).

Related to this, certain areas require that a pastor report information to the authorities. North Carolina law states that if a person has "cause to suspect" that a child is the victim of abuse or neglect by an adult, or that they are a "dependent" (child

without adequate adult supervision in the home), that person must report the situation to the county's department of social services.<sup>2</sup> The law is less explicit about reporting a crime against a child that is not abuse by an adult (e.g., a child-on-child situation). It is not possible to write a policy that captures every contingency, but our desire is to involve the authorities as much and as quickly as seems warranted in a situation. The safety and welfare of our children is a concern that overrides a person's privacy and our desire to preserve confidentiality. We recognize that our civil authorities are not perfect, but as obedient Christians we submit to their authority when it does not conflict with our obligation to God (Rom. 13:1-7; Acts 3:19; 5:29). We also recognize that we are often trying to balance the fact that our knowledge and wisdom are imperfect with the need to act as quickly as possible. These exceptions notwithstanding, our desire is to value the confidentiality that should exist between a pastor and a member of his church.

## **Two Convictions to Understand**

Finally, there are two convictions we have as a church that you should understand. The first one concerns divorce and remarriage, and the second relates to the safety of our children. We'll begin with divorce and remarriage.

The issues surrounding divorce and remarriage are emotional, complex, and controversial. A given situation might have any number of complicators that can make it hard to determine whether the divorce is biblical and therefore remarriage an option. Thus, we can only offer a brief statement here on how we think about these issues. Longer treatments worthy of careful reading can be found in Jay Adam's *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* and in John Murray's *Divorce*.

We believe the Bible allows for remarriage under certain conditions and certainly in the case of the death of a spouse.

We also believe the Bible allows for divorce in cases of adultery (Matt. 19:3-9) and physical abandonment (1 Cor. 7:15).

These are the grounds for a biblical divorce and therefore the grounds for biblical remarriage. If a person is divorced on other grounds—not adultery or physical abandonment—that person is, in the eyes of God, still married to their original spouse. They are divorced in the eyes of the state, but not in the eyes of God. For them to remarry is actually to commit the sin of adultery. Someone divorced on unbiblical grounds should remain single and work to be reconciled to their original spouse (1 Cor. 7:11).

In an unbiblical divorce, once the original spouse remarries or gets romantically involved with someone else, that spouse has committed adultery and the person is free to marry another. Finally, regardless of the circumstances, once a person remarries, that second marriage is binding. Neither party is free to leave their spouse in that case. The marriage itself is holy even if the circumstances leading up to the marriage are not.

What is said above about divorce does not apply to separation. If the safety of a spouse is in question, it can be necessary for that spouse to separate. This allows an opportunity for pastors (and sometimes civil authorities) to get involved and attempt to bring change to the marriage. Not every separation is because someone's safety is being threatened. Sometimes a conflict escalates to such an extent that one spouse leaves for a period of time. A separation can continue indefinitely if necessary. Assuming there is no adultery or physical abandonment here, a separation of this kind should not progress to divorce. Neither spouse is free to remarry in this situation (where no adultery or abandonment has occurred), even if the separation becomes a legal divorce.

All of this makes the decision to marry a sobering one. It is truly intended to be "till death do us part." God intends for one man to stay with one woman in abiding faithfulness until one of them dies. Because the covenant requires such commitment, it must be soberly, humbly, wisely, fearfully, and slowly that one enters into it.

## Our Conviction to Protect our Children

A second conviction to understand is that we are committed to do everything reasonable to protect our children. This means we want to do all we can to eliminate the opportunity for harm to come to them, and in many cases we want to remove even the appearance of impropriety. We take this very seriously and want to take every reasonable measure to provide a safe, open, accountable, and supervised environment for them.

For any event at church, we require that at least two adults be present in any environment involving children (Sunday morning children's ministry, boys' and girls' ministries, youth groups, etc.). We have specific instructions for how an adult should take a child to the bathroom (if applicable).

We require background checks for any person working with children. These checks reveal anything of a sexual or criminal nature that is on file with civil authorities. Along with this, a person must also answer a series of questions about their past history with children and any criminal activity.

We recognize that no policy can eliminate sin. Unfortunately, there is nothing we can do that will guarantee the complete safety of all of our children. However, we trust in our sovereign God "who made heaven and earth." He "will neither slumber nor sleep," and "will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life" (Ps. 121:2, 4, 7). God is the ultimate source of our confidence, even as we work to create a safe ministry for our children.

Our children's ministry policies are available upon request. Simply contact the office to get a copy of these.

## Conclusion

This lesson is filled with a sobering set of topics. We wish such discussions weren't necessary, but in a fallen world they are. One day we shall experience the full joy and peace of life with God as glorified saints. All traces of sin and its horrific consequences will be erased, and the fullness of Christ's

redemption will be ours. Until that day, we desire to walk humbly and vigilantly in the face of our sins. We want to treat one another with a love that rejoices with the truth and with a grace that understands the call to be holy. It is what Christ, in fact, died for: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24). Amen.

### To Prepare for the Next Class

- Read chapter eight, *Our Mission Together*.
- Resources mentioned in this chapter:
  - Church discipline: Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*; Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus*
  - Conflict resolution: Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*
  - Counseling: Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (ccef.org); National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (nanc.org)
  - Divorce and remarriage: John Murray, *Divorce; Jay Adams, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*
  - Child Safety Policies: Available upon request from the church staff.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://sovereigngrace.com/polity>.

<sup>2</sup> See the North Carolina General Statutes 7B-101 and 7B-301 to read the relevant sections of the state laws. Available at [http://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter\\_7B/GS\\_7B-301.html](http://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter_7B/GS_7B-301.html) and [http://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter\\_7B/GS\\_7B-101.html](http://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter_7B/GS_7B-101.html) on November 8, 2013.



## Our Mission Together

Healthy, living things grow. A healthy tree is one that grows each year, and if it is a fruit tree, it bears fruit. Healthy grass grows (except perhaps in a North Carolina July). Healthy 13-year old boys grow (and grow).

A church is no different. If it is healthy, it will grow. First is the internal spiritual growth of its members, but then is numerical growth as those church members reach out to the lost world around them. Sometimes it isn't numerical growth, but at least there is an increase in its influence as members serve people in need in their communities. A healthy church growing is no more shocking than a healthy tomato plant producing tomatoes.

One thing about growth we learn from the Bible is that "only God...gives the growth" (1 Cor. 3:7). Whether it is internal or numerical growth, God gives it. While this is true, there is a part for us to play in the growth of our church. This connects to what we mean by our "mission." Mission is what we do to grow, though the final results of our mission are entirely in the hands of God.

In this lesson we want to think more specifically about our mission outside the church walls. What is it we are called to do? What is the mission God has for us? We'll look at five aspects of our mission together.

## **A Mission Given by God and Empowered by the Spirit**

The first thing we need to see is that it is Christ himself who gave our mission to us. After the Lord of the universe rose from the dead, he addressed his eleven apostles about their future mission together. The mission was not for them exclusively, for in this case they are standing as representatives for the whole church. What Jesus says to them, he is saying to us also. He bookends our mission together with two glorious promises about who he is. Listen to Jesus' words:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:18-20)

The command in this passage is not so obvious in the English as it is in the Greek. It is this: "Make disciples of all nations!" That is the imperative we are called to obey. Our mission is to make disciples of all the nations of the earth. As we go and wherever we go, this is our primary occupation as the church. We are to make disciples.

A disciple is not simply a convert, but a follower of Christ. Obviously that must start with evangelism and conversion, but it includes a much longer process of discipleship as well: "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (v. 20). Thus, our mission cannot be completed by an evangelist. It can only be completed by a church that builds into people in a comprehensive manner from baptism to full maturity.

But we need to hear the bookend promises as well. What hope could there be in our success if we stood alone against the fallenness of our world and the devil himself? Here is our hope and confidence: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me....And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Christ is now the unrivalled King of this world, standing with his foot on the neck of the devil. And further, he

is with us—right there next to us as we step out in faith to fulfill this glorious mission of disciple-making.

God has done even more than this, however, in equipping us for the task. Not only is Christ with us, but God's Spirit is in us. He has empowered us through his Holy Spirit. The promise that he spoke, he has fulfilled in us:

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

By no means is the Holy Spirit's only work in our hearts to equip us for mission, but this is one of his chief works. He gives "power" to us to be his "witnesses," wherever we may be and whoever we may be. We may not experience a personal Pentecost that makes us into global evangelists, but the Spirit in our lives will empower us for service and evangelism.

### **A Mission of Evangelism to the Lost**

Since our mission is to make disciples, much of this work will be done inside the church. To obey everything Jesus commanded will require a lifetime of teaching, study, prayer, fellowship, and life together. But remember, Jesus said to "make disciples *of all the nations*." While we are growing as Christians, then, we need to be going outside the church walls in evangelism to make new disciples. This is why evangelism must always be a part of a healthy church.

Evangelism means a verbal proclamation of the gospel, the "good news" about Jesus Christ. While our verbal witness is always to be joined to our good works, evangelism itself is communicating the content of the gospel message to those who do not believe it. Paul reveals this as he tells the Corinthians what is "of first importance":

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup>that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:3-4)

This is what the apostle preached to the Corinthians and to men and women throughout the Mediterranean region. It was the message of Christ's death and resurrection.

The book of Acts confirms this. When we read the sermons recorded there, we don't find endless commentaries on obscure, ancient texts. We don't find feel-good messages that address emotional needs. We find clear presentations of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. We find the promise, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). This is our message in evangelism.

Now one of the marvels of this message is that it is a means for the power of God to entirely transform someone's destiny. This is because it contains the "power of God for salvation":

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." (Rom. 1:16-17)

Our fears and insecurities wreak havoc on our souls when we step out in evangelism—or want to step out! But the pressure is not on us. It's on the message itself. The pressure is also on the Holy Spirit, who spiritually calls the sinner from death to life, regenerating his soul and giving him the power to believe (John 3:5; Rom. 8:29-30). The Spirit is the One who takes our frail words and mysteriously uses them for his own purposes. So, let us be people who talk about Jesus to those outside of the church. And let's see God do amazing things.

### **A Mission of Service to those in Need**

We evangelize to make disciples, but there's another side of our discipleship. A maturing disciple is also to be about a life of good works and service to those in need. We are to be like the good Samaritan who saw the man in need and then attended to those needs, even at personal cost (Luke 10:27-37). Jesus told us this is what it means to love your neighbor as yourself (vv.

27-29). It is to see a need and then be moved to meet it as we are able.

We are surrounded by an ocean of needs. We obviously can't meet all of them, but that doesn't mean we can ignore them all. There will be some needs God is calling us to meet in order to be a light to others:

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:16)

In this way our service and evangelism come together. Both result in making disciples of all the nations. Both are an integral part of a healthy church.

### **A Mission for us Individually, as a Church, and as a Denomination**

But surely it's intimidating to think the fate of the nations or all the needs around me rests on my individual shoulders. Is it all up to me? Is my witness and are my good works the means for the world turning to Christ? There are three aspects to consider here.

First, we can't deny the individual responsibility we have to evangelize and do good works. The mission is for the church, but the church is made up of individuals like you and me. So, you and I have a key part to play in accomplishing this mission. Think of your own conversion. Likely you heard the gospel through a friend or relative, someone who wasn't polished or professional as they told you about Jesus. Jesus wants us to play that same role in the life of another.

This is why we speak of evangelism as both a gift and a discipline. Clearly, some people are gifted to take the truths of the gospel and convey them in a compelling way to an unbeliever. The Bible does acknowledge the place of the "evangelist," after all (e.g., Eph. 4:11).

Yet, evangelism is also a discipline. We might not preach a revival, but we are called to live this kind of evangelistic life as we encounter unbelievers:

Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. <sup>6</sup> Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (Col. 4:5-6)

I couldn't preach Peter's Pentecost sermon with thousands being saved, but I can add a little gospel "salt" to my conversations—a reference to Christ or my church or my faith or the Bible. And with training and a bit of raw courage, hopefully I can even share the glorious truths that Jesus died for sinners and that those who believe in him will receive eternal life. So, the personal side is the first aspect of our evangelism and good works.

Second, God wants us to work together as a local church to accomplish his mission. A church is filled with people gifted in a variety of ways. This is true with all areas of our life together, and it's especially true in evangelism. There are people in our church who are especially skilled at sharing the gospel in a warm, attractive manner. Others of us can't get a single word out because our heart is beating out of our chest and our brain is suddenly unable to make our mouths speak. Yet, these same people can provide heroic, compassionate care to a neighbor grieving the loss of a parent or a co-worker walking through a bitter divorce. Others would rather eat nails than speak in public, but they are able to give a Saturday afternoon to replace a neighbor's radiator (which, I hear, is somewhere in the front of a car).

The key is for the guy who changes a person's radiator to link arms with the guy who loves to talk to people about Jesus. When we work together and use the gifts we have, a powerful gospel witness happens. Thus, maybe we have a cookout and invite our unsaved neighbor and the friend we have who is gifted to share the gospel. We did the work of creating the

context, but it will be our friend who actually shares the truth of Christ.

Another aspect of our mission *as a church* is the evangelism we do in our Sunday meetings, invitation events, and home groups. Part of our burden in preaching is to make sure we are addressing the unbeliever who is in the audience. At times we also hold services particularly geared toward those who aren't Christians. Invitation events include picnics, seminars, and other unique occasions that represent good times to get to know our church family in a non-threatening way. Someone who might not come on a Sunday morning might happily meet some people at a Memorial Day picnic. We also encourage our home groups to brainstorm about ways they can evangelize and serve together.

The church is committed to being a people who do good works within and without the church. This is why we partner with ministries involved with crisis pregnancy and assisting the poor. Some of these are local and some are national or international. You can check out our website for more on these partnerships.

If you're doing the math here, you realize that even if we are individually faithful and working hard as a church, there is no way we can reach "all the nations." The goal is simply too large. This is where our partnership with the Sovereign Grace churches means so much to us. Through our denomination we can join with other churches and combine our resources. Maybe we can't plant a church ourselves, but we can if we work with another church(es). Maybe we don't have anyone called to go overseas, but we can work together as a denomination to support frontier missions. When the churches in a region and across our nation work together, our ability to reach the nations increases exponentially.

Of course, this is also a place to recognize the faithful witness of other denominations throughout the world. In every generation God has raised up men and women who have set aside earthly comforts to take the gospel to new areas. Such

international and inter-generational ministry is the only way that Christ will be preached in all nations.

### **A Mission for our City, our Region, and the Nations**

This leads us to think about our mission geographically. As a local church our heart beats strongest for the city right where God has placed us. This means we see Apex, North Carolina, as more than where our church happens to be located. We see it as the primary place where our mission needs to be expressed. Of course, our people are spread out in this area from Willow Spring to Sanford to Wake Forest and about every city between them. We want evangelism and service to happen in all of these places.

Our region in the Sovereign Grace churches is much broader, connecting us to churches throughout the Carolinas and other bordering states. Partnering with these churches, we hope to plant churches as much as we are able. And as we indicated above, our partnership in Sovereign Grace means we have a means by which to plant churches throughout the world.

### **Conclusion**

God has called us to be part of something amazing. He is sending his gospel message throughout the globe and transforming lives on every continent: "Indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing" (Col. 1:16). What is even more amazing is that he is using people like you and me to do it. Not superstars that will get written up in history books. Just normal people taking risks every day in the name of Christ to see their neighbors and relatives and friends brought to Jesus. That is the mission he has left for us, not to accomplish alone, but to fulfill as a church and a denomination. Further, we do it with his presence and power, not in our own strength: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

## **What are the Next Steps for Membership?**

Now that you've completed the new members class, you might be wondering what the next steps are. The first thing is to prayerfully consider whether or not you want to join our church. There is no pressure to do so. Hopefully you have heard enough in this class and have had sufficient time to make a decision about this, but don't worry if you aren't ready. You can always join at a later date.

If you feel ready to take the next step, go ahead and fill out the Membership Questionnaire, which will help the pastor who does your interview know how best to use that time.

Once the class concludes, please set up a time for your pastoral interview. Contact one of our secretaries to do that. The point of this interview is for you to ask questions you didn't think about during the class, or which are personal and specific to you. This is also a chance to go over any material you missed or did not understand. The basic point of this interview is to help clarify if our church is the one God is calling you to join.

If you need to be baptized before you join the church, tell us, and we will choose a Sunday on which to do that.

In most instances, *a person is a member upon completion of their pastoral interview*. When baptism is required or other circumstances require, sometimes membership is delayed. At such times our desire is to serve the church and to serve you as you engage in this process.

The final step of membership is New Member Sunday, where you are introduced to the church along with the other new members. That weekend we also typically have a dinner so the new members can get to know the pastors and their wives in a less formal environment. We appreciate these events because it gives us a chance to express our gratitude for partnering with us in the cause of Christ, and it allows us to get to know you more.

Finally, if it becomes necessary for you, see our *Member Handbook* for resigning your membership. It is available on the member side of our website and upon request.

May God give you the wisdom you need to decide whether or not Sovereign Grace Church is the one for you. Regardless of your choice, we pray God's grace, power, and blessings in your lives.

### **Further Resources on our Mission Together**

- Recommended reading:
  - Kevin Deyoung, *What is the Mission of the Church?*
  - J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*
  - Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*







