

Exploring Membership

**What it Means
to be in Christ's Church
and in Sovereign Grace Church**

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Sovereign Grace Church
401 Upchurch St.
Apex, NC 27502
sgcapex.org

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INTRODUCTION

By now you've experienced a good bit of our church life. You know what Sunday mornings look like, and you've attended a home group meeting (or several). And probably you've encountered ministries targeted to your situation—young adult, youth, men's, women's, etc. So why would we add a class to our membership process? Why make you go through a process before allowing you to join Sovereign Grace Church? There are three reasons for this class, three goals we hope to accomplish.

First, *we want to introduce ourselves to you* more fully. You've spent enough time with us that you know something (or a lot) about who we are and what we do. The membership class provides an opportunity to meet the elders and get the bigger picture of who we are and what we're about. It's also a key step in the process of us getting to know you. This is closely connected to the second goal.

Second, *we want to inform you* about SGC more completely. This is so that you can discern God's will about whether this is the church for you. Throughout the class you'll hear about our history, our leadership structure, our vision and values, our heart for ministry in the church and outside of it, and our beliefs in several key areas. All of this is meant to inform you as you make your decision about membership. But there's a larger goal here as well. We believe the best members are informed members who really understand what we're doing and pursuing as a church. This brings unity, clarity, and energy as we pursue the will of God together.

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Finally, *we want to inspire you*. God's Word on being the people of God is not just right, it's inspiring. It calls us to action. It sets before us the immeasurable prize of knowing Christ and making him known in the midst of a world lost and dark and desperate. We hope the result of this course is a greater desire in you to pursue God's will for your life with joy, knowledge, and passion. Except in the most unusual of circumstances, we believe Christians are to link arms with other Christians to build thriving churches dedicated to loving God, loving one another, and loving their neighbors outside the church. Further, every Christian is gifted uniquely by God's Spirit for ministry that contributes to such thriving churches (Eph 4:7–12). The New Testament paints the picture of all Christians being ministers in some way, not a few paid professional ministers with dozens of supporters. We hope the class inspires you to move forward in such a vision of the Christian life.

The Six Classes

The basic plan for the six sessions we have together is this:

1. Introduction (chapter 1)
2. Life in the Church (chapters 2–3)
3. The Sovereignty of God (chapter 6)
4. Continuationism (chapter 7)
5. Complementarianism (chapter 8)
6. Our Mission Together (chapters 9–10)

Our History as a Church

Before we dive into current aspects of our church life, we want to give you some background. It's hard to know someone

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accurately unless you know something about their past, so we want to give you the short version here.

SGC started in 1992 as a church plant of Sovereign Grace (People of Destiny, International, at the time). The pastor, Dan Stollendorf, came out of our sister church in Richmond, VA, and couples came from all over the country to be part of the plant team. Some of the team had come from Ohio with Phil Sasser to plant another church, but they prayed and decided to be part of the Sovereign Grace plant instead. The combined group began public meetings in June of 1992.

At the time the church was called Community Life Church, and our family of churches was People of Destiny International. In 2004 the movement changed its name to Sovereign Grace Ministries and our church also changed its name to Sovereign Grace Church.

Our family of churches went through a major upheaval in 2011–2013, which resulted in a complete reorganization. The seventy or so churches that signed the Partnership Agreement in April of 2013 committed to operating in a completely different manner from the first two decades of the denomination. Along with this development came another name change. Sovereign Grace Ministries became Sovereign Grace Churches.

In terms of our location in Apex, we've been here since the fall of 1998. For the first six years our church had a nomadic existence, complete with an extended stay in South Hills Mall in Cary, off Buck Jones Road. When we bought the current building in 1998, it was an old sewing factory complete with bins of recently stitched soccer gear and a hundred industrial sewing machines. The one-story, flat-roofed, brick rectangle was remodeled in 2008 into the facility you see today.

We designed our current facility to accommodate around 600 people, with the intent that we would plant churches

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throughout the Triangle. We have much work to do on that goal, but a growing church actively involved in planting other churches remains a prominent goal for the elders.

The 35,000-foot Look at Sovereign Grace Church

Before we get into SGC in a more detailed manner, here we'll give you a high-level look at things, the view from 35,000-feet up. After this we'll take a deeper dive into some of these aspects.

Sovereign Grace Churches

Our church is connected to a family of churches with the name Sovereign Grace Churches.¹ Right now we're at right around 100 churches, most of which are in the US but with a growing number in a dozen countries or so. This connection to a larger body allows us to partner together in mission, keeps us accountable in our morality and doctrine, provides resources to help with ordaining elders and planting churches, and brings needed encouragement and on-going training for church leaders. Just as it is a great help for an individual Christian to be part of a church body, so it is a great help for an individual church body to be so connected to a larger group of churches and leaders.

Our Elders

We are a church led by elders (which we also refer to as pastors, the terms are interchangeable to us). Note that this means multiple elders and not a single one. Some of these are full-time (Daniel Baker, John McLeod), and some of these are part-time or volunteer (Phil Sasser, Jim Martin, Mike Noel). All the

¹ For more on Sovereign Grace (SG), check out <http://sovereigngrace.com/>.

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elders were ordained in the church after going through an ordination process in Sovereign Grace Churches. Though we have a “lead pastor” (Daniel Baker), the elders operate with equal authority on the eldership (elder board). We try as much as possible to place the different elders into the areas of service where they are most gifted and the need is greatest. Below we look into the topic of elders in more detail.

A Few Elders, Many Ministers

We like to think of SGC as a church with a few *elders* but many *ministers*. The idea here is that of an “every-member ministry.” Every church member has a ministry given to him by God, and we want to help each person grow in that ministry. You can see this perspective in Eph 4:7–14, one of those staple passages for us that helps define what we’re about:

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.⁸ Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”⁹ (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ 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,¹⁴ 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. (Eph 4:7–14)

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Notice that Paul says “grace was given *to each one of us*” (v. 7) to do what he has called us to do. Further, the different church leaders listed in verse 11 are there with a purpose we need to see: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (v. 12). Who is given “the work of ministry”? “The saints.”

That’s a different perspective than you encounter in some places, where it seems the expectation is that elders and church leaders do all “the work of ministry,” and the church members merely support them. Lord willing, we’ll create a place where all of us are increasing in our ability to minister to others so that “the body of Christ” might be built up.

All of this means that for our church to grow into all that God wants of us, we all need to do our part. Though in some seasons we’ll have face greater needs and receive more ministry than we can give, it’s important that role that each of us has in being “ministers” in Christ’s church.

Sunday Mornings

Sunday mornings are a vital meeting for us. We consider it the high point of our week to gather with our brothers and sisters in SGC and experience God, worship God, sit under the preaching of the Word of God, and fellowship together after a week of being apart. Our lives pull us in a thousand directions and the world around us can be a hard place to live a holy and joyful life. This weekly gathering is meant to nourish our souls and empower our lives for ministry. We try and give significant time at these meetings for encountering God through spiritual gifts, music, and prayers. We celebrate the Lord’s Supper together monthly. Announcements are given which highlight what different members of our church are doing in their Christian lives. And there is the preaching of God’s Word, which in some ways is the backbone and plumb line for our

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whole church life. You can expect about a half-hour of musical worship and spiritual gifts and a sermon that is between forty-five and fifty-five minutes. Typically, we preach through books of the Bible, but we also add topical messages as needed.

Home Groups (Small Groups)

Our small groups, which we call “home groups,” are another critical piece of our life together. We expect all our members to attend these as they are able. We know life is unpredictable and schedules can be complex, so no one is there 100% of the time. However, we expect our members to see these as a central part of their commitment to SGC. It is within these groups that most of the “body life” of the church occurs. It’s here that we grow together, laugh and cry together, pray together, serve each other, live out our ministry gifts together, and carve out a space in our lives to practice what it means to “love one another.” To see where and when these groups meet and to take steps to join one, check out <https://sgcapex.org/our-church-life/home-groups>.

Ministry Teams

A lot of the ministry that occurs at SGC happens through what we call “ministry teams.” Not a creative title, we know, but it does describe what these are. These are teams of men and women, almost all of whom are volunteers, that do things like create our weekly Sunday morning children’s ministry, do the greeting and ushering on Sundays, do the sound and video for all gatherings, do all involved for corporate worship times, volunteer with crisis pregnancy centers like Hand of Hope, help us serve community members in crisis through Safe Families for Children, work in discipling the next generation through our high school, middle school, and boys and girls ministries, run Bible studies for our women and men’s meetings for our men,

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create amazing places of hospitality for special events—and the list goes on. You can see a list of these teams and their leaders at <https://sgcapex.org/members/ministry-team-leader-roster>.

Reformed, Continuationist, Complementarian, Baptist, Elder-led

The basic theology of the church—the perspective reflected in Sunday preaching, books recommended, teaching throughout the church, the convictions of the elders—is hard to capture in a single word or tradition in the church. Through our history and especially our study of the Bible, we have become convinced that what best reflects the Bible’s teaching and thus what we call “sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9) is captured by a few loaded (and some hard to spell) words:

- *Reformed*: This speaks to our belief in God’s absolute sovereignty and the total depravity of humanity. It owes much to our study of the “Reformers,” the leaders who were part of the 16th century “Reformation” in Europe.
- *Continuationist*: Our belief in the “continuation” of all New Testament spiritual gifts is best described as “continuationist,” the view that more-or-less stands against a “cessationist” approach, which sees several New Testament gifts as having ceased.
- *Complementarian*: We believe the Bible teaches two genders, and that in a marriage and in the church God has different callings according to these genders. Men and women are not identical but “complement” one another in a marriage and in the church.
- *Baptistic*: As opposed to being paedobaptist (baptizing children), we are credobaptist, which means we baptize those who make a credible profession of faith.

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- *Elder-led*: We are modified-presbyterian in our church government. Elders lead local churches, and elders also have responsibilities throughout the denomination.

Below we'll look into each of these with a little more depth. We give them here at the front-end so you can begin thinking about them and perhaps even discussing them in the members class or with the elders privately.

Office Staff

A group of tireless workers that help make the church what it is includes our office staff. Three women bring their godliness and gifting to the role of administrating so much that happens at SGC: Rhonda Lown, Dorsey Jones, and Donna Walton. If you call the church during the week or send an email to the church address, chances are you'll interact with one or more of them. They have all been here for years and years and serve us so well. In addition to being an ordained elder at SGC, John McLeod is also our church administrator. "Executive pastor" is probably the best way to capture how John serves us.

Deacons

Finally, our church has a group of men who are commissioned as deacons. Some of our roles are sizable enough that we see them as functionally equivalent to the role of "deacon" in the New Testament (Acts 6:1–7; 1 Tim 3:8–13). Every year we commission our deacons to oversee our children's ministry, interact with those facing financial crisis, advise on church finances, oversee our worship team, and lead our small groups. You can see more about this role at <https://sgcapex.org/who-we-are/our-deacons>.

Our Vision as a Church

Given the dozens of churches scattered all around us in Apex and the surrounding communities, it's fair to ask us, "*What are you about?*" We're about three things: Loving God, loving one another, and loving our neighbors (near and far)—all for the glory of God.

"Loving God" is meant in the fullest way imaginable. It means worshiping God as the glorious, infinite, all-surpassing triune God of the Bible. Loving him means obeying him and living out what Jesus expressed in the Great Commission: "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:20). Loving God is not a Sunday-only activity but 24–7 for the rest of our lives—and the rest of eternity. The glory of the new heavens and new earth is not just escaping the pain and grief of this world. It's finally experiencing in fullness what we were created for: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Rev 21:3).

Second, we're about "loving one another." As with loving God, this isn't meant in any kind of mushy, overly sentimental manner. Loving one another means we're committed to living life together in such a way that we're all growing in who God has made us to be. It is being "members" of a single body with different gifts and abilities and roles, but all united in a relational bond that persists through the ups and downs of life. We want to be a tangible expression of the "one anothers" throughout the New Testament, a list that includes:

- "Love one another" (John 13:34–35; Rom 12:10; 1 Thess 4:9; 1 John 4:7–12);
- "Serve one another" (Gal 5:13; 1 John 4:10);
- "Build one another up" (1 Thess 5:11);

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- “Encourage one another” (1 Thess 5:11);
- “Bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2);
- “Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb 3:13).

The New Testament has close to 50 of these commands, and we hope to build a church where men and women and children can truly experience them.

The third piece of our vision statement reminds us that we’re not just here for ourselves. We’re also here to “love our neighbors.” This, too, has many sides to it and we mean it in a dynamic, multi-faceted way. It includes our literal neighbors, those who live next door to us in our houses and apartments and dorm rooms. We want to love them in a way that demonstrates for them what God’s love is like: “Walk in love, as Christ loved us” (Eph 5:2). We want to be Good Samaritans to those in our paths who are hurting and in need (Luke 10:25–37). Like the saints in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament, we want to be committed to serving the poor and all who are in need (Isa 58:6–8; James 1:26–27; Gal 2:10). We want the gospel to be at the ready so that when we encounter those separated from Christ we can be “ambassadors for Christ” able to communicate the life-saving good news of salvation in Christ (2 Cor 5:20). And this also means we “love our neighbors” at home and abroad. Whether it’s through serving at Agua Viva (a children’s home we serve in Guatemala) or supporting Sovereign Grace Churches for the cause of church planting internationally, we see loving our neighbors as filled with implications and opportunities.

Does the Bible Teach Church Membership?

Perhaps it's not a given for 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. In our English Bibles the word "member" is used when Paul is speaking of us as "members" of the "body of Christ" (1 Cor 12:27) and even "members of one another" (Rom 12:5). Being a "member" of a human body is a vivid way to capture being a "member" of an organization. It reveals the *organic* side of it and not necessarily the *organizational* side of it. But the organizational side of membership rightly flows out of this organic dimension. In other words, the language in the Bible that speaks to the organizational side of the church (the leaders of the church, etc.) is all built on deeper truths about the organic nature of the church (one body with many members, united together because united to Christ, spiritually "one" even when relationships are strained, etc.). We never want to think only in terms of the organization of the church, though. If we do we'll miss critical words like these on the organic side:

God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it,²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Cor. 12:24b–26)

Let's see a few more sides of membership within the New Testament.

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

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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.

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.

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.

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

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“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.

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.

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

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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,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ 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,¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,¹⁶ 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. First, *we are built up for ministry when we join a church*. God has given leaders, especially “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.

Second, we 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).

Third, membership in a church provides protection for us. Every generation is filled with “waves and...every wind of doctrine” that threaten to derail our walk with Christ and

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sideline us in the church (v. 14). The church is there to remind us of truth, expose lies, and save us from such destructiveness.

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

Who Can Become a Member of SGC and What Do We Expect of Them?

For a person to join SGC, they need to be *an adult believer who has demonstrated his or her faith through water baptism, is in general agreement with our Statement of Faith, and is willing to support the values, mission, and policies of this church.*

Our conviction is that members of a local church should be professing Christians, and credobaptism (the baptism of those who have professed faith in Christ) is the way we seek to live this out. We'll say more about conversion and baptism below.

Adult membership is a slightly trickier issue. 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

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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.

*General Agreement with our Statement of Faith*²: 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 for members (it is for elders), 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 other doctrines like the precise definition and practice of spiritual gifts or some of the nuances

² To see our *Statement of Faith* go to <https://sgcapex.org/who-we-are/our-doctrine>.

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of church officers (elders and deacons). This is what we mean by a *general agreement* with our Statement of Faith.

Willingness to support the values, mission, and policies of Sovereign Grace Church: A person who joins our church should also be willing to support the basic 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.³

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*.⁴

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

⁴ *Book of Church Order* is available at <http://sovereigngrace.com/polity>, and our *Member Handbook* is at <https://sgcapex.org/storage/documents/SGC-Member-Handbook.pdf>.

What do We Expect of a Church Member?

When you're contemplating joining an organization it's always good to know what they'll expect of you. If you join a group expecting to have weekly matches of Chinese *Checkers* but it's actually a group dedicated to learning the Chinese *language*, you have conflicting expectations and likely it won't be a long-term relationship. Churches are a little more complicated because almost everyone has some expectations of what being a church member involves. Even if you come from solid, Bible-teaching, evangelical churches, the dynamic of church life can vary enormously from church to church.

These expectations are connected to the kind of Christian life we think is displayed in the New Testament, though we recognize that good Christians disagree on this. You might stumble over or have questions on one of these points. If so, talk to one of the elders and offer your questions. We'll do our best to give you more background on why we do things the way we do.

There are five basic expectations for church members:

(1) *Regular Sunday morning attendance.* 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* through all-church gatherings. If we are

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going to live out the “one another” life we mentioned, we 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.⁵ 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

⁵ 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.

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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.

Conclusion

When you look at things from 35,000-feet above the ground, you see the overall landscape and whether it's a city or a farm—but the details are too far away to see with any clarity. This chapter gave you a high-level look at SGC in dozens of areas but didn't touch down into the more detailed understandings. Now it's time to take the deeper dive into certain practices and beliefs of Sovereign Grace Church.

LIFE IN CHRIST'S CHURCH

The British evangelical John Stott left many excellent commentaries on the New Testament, and one of these he dedicated to a study of Ephesians.⁶ As he worked through the text he became more and more convinced that it held a truth vital to us, a truth critical for 21st-century Christians to hold tightly. It is this: *the church is central to the plan of God—not peripheral, but central*. Passages like Ephesians 3:1–10 makes this crystal-clear. Paul tells us there that he is steward of a “mystery” revealed, a “mystery” which is that Jews and Gentiles alike are “fellow heirs” and “members of the same body” and together are “partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (v. 7). All of this happened for a specific purpose: “*so that* through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (v. 10). This is all part of the “eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 11). Stott said this means the church is “central to history,” “central to the gospel,” and “central to Christian living.”⁷ Then he leaves us with this challenge:

If the church is central to God’s purpose, as seen in both history and the gospel, it must surely also be

⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, Bible Speaks Today (InterVarsity, 1979)

⁷ *Ibid.*, 126–129.

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central to our lives. How can we take lightly what God takes so seriously? How dare we push to the circumference what God has placed at the center? No, we shall seek to become responsible church members, active in some local manifestation of the universal church. We shall not be able to acquiesce in low standards which fall far short of the New Testament ideals for God's new society....If instead we keep before us the vision of God's new society as his family, his dwelling place and his instrument in the world, then we shall constantly be seeking to make our church's worship more authentic, its fellowship more caring and its outreach more compassionate. In other words, we shall be ready to pray, to work and if necessary to suffer in order to turn the vision into a reality.

John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*⁸

Indeed, "How can we take lightly what God takes so seriously?" Such a view of the church does not hold if we think of the church as a building or even a single group of people huddled together in one specific location. To see the church in such a grand and even cosmic fashion we need to see God's church in far greater terms.

"A" Church and "The" Church

Part of seeing a church in such grand and sweeping ways is understanding the difference between "a" church and "the" church. For, SGC is not just "a church" but is also part of "*the* church." There is a "church universal" that includes all Christians everywhere in all generations, and there is a "church local" that is an individual church identifiable in a given place

⁸ Ibid., 129–130.

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and time. SGC is thus a local church that is part of the universal church.

We also need to see the difference between a bunch of Christians gathered together and a church. At what point do they become a church? When is a church a *church*? Theologians have often spoken in the language of “marks of the church” to identify those things which are essential in calling a given church a true church. John Calvin said on this,

Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.
John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*⁹

To these two marks, one was added by later theologians that Calvin no doubt saw as implied in the first two: church discipline.¹⁰

Others like Mark Dever want to think more in terms of the marks of a *healthy* church, and so he has famously identified “9 Marks of a Healthy Church.”¹¹ These are:

1. Expository Preaching
2. Biblical Theology (i.e., not un-biblical theology)
3. A Biblical Understanding of the Good News (i.e., the gospel)
4. A Biblical Understanding of Conversion
5. A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism
6. A Biblical Understanding of Church Membership

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Battles (Westminster John Knox, 2006), 4.1.9.

¹⁰ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (InterVarsity, 1995), 101.

¹¹ Fittingly, published by IX Marks in 2005.

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7. Biblical Church Discipline
8. A Concern for Promoting Christian Discipleship and Growth
9. Biblical Church Leadership (at a practical level, this really means a leadership that is based explicitly on the Bible, for there are different kinds which all claim to be biblical)

Thinking in terms of the “marks of the church” helps us when we consider campus ministries, pro-life ministries, ministries to the poor, etc. These are sometimes called “parachurch” ministries. They are not churches and should not be expected to perform all the functions that a church does. These always function best when they work in active partnership with local churches.

Lord willing, as you consider the marks of a church and the marks of a healthy church, you will see that SGC is at least striving to become a much “marked” by these elements. How healthy we are is another matter. But it is certainly our desire to cultivate these various marks of a healthy church as much as possible.

When did “the Church” Begin?

The New Testament “church” is rooted in the Old Testament people of God. Those who come to Christ in the New Testament are rightly called things like “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:29) and a “chosen race” and “royal priesthood” and “a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9). Such terms underscore our inherent connection to believers in the Old Testament.

But in another sense the church—as the body *of Christ* led by elders, which celebrates baptism and the Lord’s Supper and which consists of those who live in the joy of being

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members of a “new covenant”—had its formal beginning at Pentecost.

Acts 2:41 says that after the preaching of Peter and the response of the crowd, “there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). “Added” to *what* is the question. The church in Jerusalem is the answer. Acts 2:42–49 then describes that first church:

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common.⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,⁴⁷ 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 2:41–47)

You hear in this text different elements that we see as models for us:

1. An active pursuit of the apostles’ teaching (now our New Testament);
2. Breaking bread (Lord’s Supper) and prayer;
3. Sharing as able with those in need;
4. Meeting together and house to house (large and small gatherings);
5. The experienced power of God as “wonders and signs” are done in us and through us;

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6. Growth—especially spiritual but also numerical

Like many churches, our goal is to try and become as much of a “New Testament church” as possible—when the church looks and acts like it’s supposed to in the New Testament, anyway! We see in Acts and the New Testament not just a snapshot of what the church *was*, but also a compelling vision for what we hope our church *becomes*.

The word “church” is from the Greek *ekklēsia*, which means “assembly” or “congregation.” In fact, this word is used dozens of times in the Old Testament to refer to “the assembly” of Israel gathered together. At times it refers to them gathered at Mt. Sinai (Deut 4:10; 9:10) or when Moses read the words of Deuteronomy to them at the Jordan River (Deut 31:30) or Joshua reading the words of Moses to “the whole assembly of Israel” (Josh 8:35).

The fact *ekklēsia* is more accurately “congregation” is a powerful idea. In fact, when William Tyndale, the great English Reformer, was translating the New Testament he made sure to use “congregation” (in the older spelling, *congregacion*) instead of some variation on “church.”

By the 1500s when he was translating the Bible, the Roman Catholic Church had so confused the culture with its theology that it was virtually impossible to separate the word “church” from the massive cathedrals and labyrinthian organizational priestly structures of the Catholics. Priests and cathedrals were what the masses envisioned when words like “church” were used. To combat this, Tyndale (following in the footsteps of Luther) created a new and more accurate vocabulary for his New Testament. “Church” was abandoned for “congregation” and “priest” was replaced with “elder”

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where the New Testament called for it.¹² The effect becomes dramatic when you see a verse like Acts 14:23 in Tyndale's translation (slightly updated for readability):

And when they had ordained them elders by election
in every congregation after they had prayed and
fasted they commended them to God on whom they
believed.

When you see “congregation,” it becomes easy to imagine a group of believers gathered in various places, and then Barnabas and Paul pick out worthy men from their midst for this role. When “church” is used, the temptation is there to envision the building where this ordination service was held. The organic quality of the word is lost. We don't want to overstate the effect of these translational choices. Yet, in Tyndale's day they earned him the harshest of critiques by the Catholic Thomas More, the same More who would make it his life's ambition to see Tyndale executed for his criminal ways—most notably the “crime” of translating the Bible from the Greek and Hebrew into the English understood by the ploughboy and the politician alike. More's desires would be fulfilled, for Tyndale was strangled and then his body burned on October 6, 1536. His last words were a prayer that the King of England would finally support a vernacular Bible: “Lord! Open the king of England's eyes.” That desire would be indeed be fulfilled as a later king named James would endorse a complete English translation of the Bible, what we call the King James Bible. Part of what so maddened More was the way Tyndale

¹² Stanley R. Maveety, “Doctrine in Tyndale's New Testament: Translation as a Tendentious Art,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, The English Renaissance 6 no 1 (Winter, 1966): 151–158.

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was subtly attacking some of the very foundation stones of the Roman Catholics. And part of this was in seeing that a “church” is not a building, it’s a “congregation” of believers.

The way the word is formed in the Greek also helps explain what is distinctive about this particular “assembly” or “congregation.” It is formed from two words, “out of” (*ek-*) and “called” (*-kaleō*). The church is the special collection of all those who have been “called out of” the world by God to be his people. There are two sides to this: We have been “called out” *from the world* and “called out” *to the living God* to belong to him. Of course, we’ll see that this calling also means we are called to go back “into the world” (John 17:18) and “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19).

All this means the church is certainly not a building you go to or even a place for worship. It’s a gathering of the people of God. At times it refers to *all* the people of God throughout all ages (Matt 16:18), and at other times it refers to a specific group of Christians which gathers together in a specific place and time (1 Cor 16:19).

This is why some theologians speak of the church from two vantage points. There is “the Church as God sees it, which contains only believers,” and there is “the Church as man sees it, consisting of those who profess Jesus Christ.”¹³ Among “those who profess Jesus Christ” are those who are not Christians but think they are. It is thus a mixed church that we see from our vantage point. God is not so confused, however, for “the Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim 2:19).

This sampling shows how the word “church” is used in different ways in the New Testament:

¹³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1949), 624.

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And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matt 16:18)

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. (Acts 13:1)

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: (1 Cor 1:2)

The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. (1 Cor 16:19)

The word “church” is far from the only way that the New Testament uses to describe us as the people of God. These are words that fill out more deeply and personally what it means to be “the church”:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet 2:9–10)

You are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Cor 12:27)

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You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph 2:19–22)

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev 7:9–10)

First Things First: The Gospel

We started with the church, because membership in this church brought us to this class. But to see things accurately we need to go back a few steps in Acts 2.

When those thousands were added to the Jerusalem church, several things had already happened we don’t want to miss. One of these is that the gospel was preached to them in 2:22–36, and this gospel message is what we want to consider here.

The word “gospel” in the New Testament comes from a Greek word *euaggelion* that means “good news.” When you see “gospel” in the New Testament, it is referring to the “good news” that is connected to the person and work of Jesus Christ. That’s why we call Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John the “gospels”: They tell us the “good news” about Jesus. Mark is emphatic about this in his opening sentence: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1).

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This “good news” gets defined in different ways in the New Testament. When Jesus preaches the “gospel,” it typically refers to the message of God’s promised Messiah having come and the kingdom of God now being among men in a distinctly new way:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God,¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:14–15)

A passage like this is helpful, because it shows a connection between the phrases “the gospel of God,” “the kingdom of God,” and what is simply called “the gospel.” Jesus preached the good news of God’s kingdom that was to be found in him, the King:

The kingdom of God then, we may say, is God’s redemptive reign, in the person of his Son, Jesus Messiah, which has broken into the present evil age. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*¹⁴

A person encountered God’s kingdom when they encountered Jesus and his power. And they entered—and enter today!—through faith in and submission to the King of this kingdom, Jesus Christ himself. Only in Jesus’ ministry do you get this phrase, “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 24:12; Mark 1:15). After Jesus’ ministry, “gospel” and “kingdom” terms are used somewhat differently. “Gospel” is used more often and seems more centered on the person and

¹⁴ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* (Crossway, 2011), 127.

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redemptive work of Jesus (e.g., 1 Cor 15:1–5). “Kingdom of God” is used much less often and seems a broader term to capture a very comprehensive message of God and his ways with humanity (e.g., Acts 28:31).

The apostles and early church continued to preach the “good news,” but for them it was the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified and the forgiveness and eternal life available through faith in him:

Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. (Acts 8:25)

But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. (Acts 8:40)

Two places in the New Testament unpack vividly the message of salvation contained in “the gospel.” The first is the middle part of Peter’s message at Pentecost, a message that becomes the skeleton for all subsequent gospel presentations in Acts. The second text is from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians where he specifies to this overly distracted church what is of “first importance”:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. . . . ³² This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. ³³ Being

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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.³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand,³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.’”³⁶ 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 2:22–24, 32–36)

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand,² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (1 Cor 15:1–5)

Note that in these two places, “the gospel” is a fairly straightforward presentation of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Acts 2 speaks of the ascension and sending of the Spirit, but the gospel is nonetheless a simple message that covers the key points of the life and work of Christ. It gets adapted according to the purposes of the speaker and the needs of the audience, but it clearly centers on Jesus and God’s salvation through him. Truly, “the gospel is the joyful message from God that leads us to salvation.”¹⁵

¹⁵ J. Mack Stiles, *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus* (Crossway, 2014), 33.

Some Assembly Required

But for this gospel to go from “good news” to a message of “good news” *for me*, I must respond. I need to repent of my sins and my pursuit of being my own god and turn to Jesus as my all-sufficient Savior and Lord and Master and King who possesses all authority. This aspect of the good news is critical. Without faith and repentance this message of salvation and forgiveness will not be the message of *my* salvation or *my* forgiveness.

You can hear this required response to the gospel in Paul’s famous words to the Romans:

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.¹⁷ 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)

“The gospel” here will result in “salvation” for those who respond in faith: “who believe.” It is a great universal promise that “*everyone* who believes” will receive this salvation. And yet, this is a message with a restriction on it as well, for *only those* who believe will be saved. Faith is what brings to us “the righteousness of God” as a gift we did not earn and could never achieve. Paul even says of this gospel that it makes the “ungodly” those who are “declared righteous” (Rom 4:5).

This is why we love to preach that no one is too sinful for salvation: It is the gospel that brings the righteousness that God requires. No one is beyond the reach of such a gospel. Any lack in us—and our lack is immense!—is more than made up for by the total, abounding, eternal sufficiency found in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

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Taken this way, the gospel both encourages and humbles us. The encouragement is more obvious. We are given what we don't deserve and the very opposite of what we do deserve.

But how does it humble us? It reminds us that our sins are so great that apart from the undeserved and miraculous intervention of the Son of God, we would all suffer eternally in the fires of hell. My sins are that numerous and that evil. Paraphrasing the late Jerry Bridges we can say it this way¹⁶:

You are never so bad that you are beyond the *reach* of God's grace. And you are never so good that you are beyond the *need* of God's grace.

This is why we never tire of preaching "the good news" of Jesus. It is the best, the truest, and in many ways the only essential message that all humanity needs to hear and receive personally. In a world like ours so filled with so-called "news," may we always preserve a unique place for God's "good news" about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Baptism: Following in the Steps of Jesus

The next step in the progression of Acts 2 is that those thousands in Jerusalem who "received" Peter's "word were baptized" (Acts 2:41). This order is important: *gospel proclamation* → *faith response* → *water baptism*. Such an order is why we feel "believer's baptism" or "credobaptism" is the New Testament norm and not "paedobaptism" (sometimes pedobaptism) or "infant baptism." The word *credobaptism* is

¹⁶ In his book, *The Discipline of Grace* (Navigators, 2006), Bridges says, "Your bad days are never so bad that you are beyond the *reach* of God's grace. And your good days are never so good that you are beyond the *need* of God's grace" (19).

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formed by *credo*- (Latin for “I believe”) and *baptism*. A good definition of this position comes from Wayne Grudem:

Baptism is appropriately administered only to those who give a believable profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*¹⁷

This is in contrast to *paedobaptism* (or *pedobaptism*), which is *paedo*- (Latin for “child”) plus *-baptism*. Paedobaptism is the belief that the infant children of believers should also be baptized, typically by sprinkling and not by immersion.

The 1689 London Baptist Confession provides a good historical definition of the credobaptist position we hold:

1. Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, to be unto the party baptized, a sign of his fellowship with him, in his death and resurrection; of his being engrafted into him; of remission of sins; and of giving up into God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3–5; Col 2:12; Gal 3:27; Acts 22:16)
 2. Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance. (Acts 2:41; 8:12, 36–37; 18:8)
 3. The outward element to be used in this ordinance is water, wherein the party is to be baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (Matt 28:19–20; Acts 8:38)
 4. Immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary to the due administration of this ordinance. (Matt 3:16; John 3:23)
- 1689 London Baptist Confession, 29:1–4*

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1999), 377.

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But it's not because Reformed Baptists like Charles Spurgeon, John Piper, Mark Dever, or Wayne Grudem hold this position that we also hold it. It is simply because we think it reflects best the teaching of the New Testament.

Credobaptism within the New Testament actually starts with John the Baptist. "John the Baptist" is called that because of his ministry of "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," which was done through immersion in the Jordan River (Luke 3:3).

But then there is the example of Jesus himself. Jesus received John's baptism in water "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). For Jesus this wasn't to renounce his own sinfulness but to fully identify with the Jews of that generation. He must submit to this greatest prophet born to men before he could bear the sin of the world.

Jesus' baptism in water was then immediately followed by his baptism in the Spirit: "Immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and [John] saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him" (Matt 3:16). We'll see later that this, too, is a biblical model worthy of consideration.

With respect to credobaptism, note that Jesus was baptized as a grown man, fully cognizant of the meaning of the act and its connection to his own life and ministry. It was an act that expressed the faith he possessed and in no way was it expressing the faith of his parents or anyone else.

In the Great Commission Jesus makes it clear that baptism was not just unique to John the Baptist's ministry. It was meant to be an essential part of the church's:

"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,²⁰ teaching them to

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observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:19–20)

Baptism is a step in the process of making disciples “of all nations.” “Baptizing” and “teaching” are two broad categories of our work to “make disciples.” “Baptizing” reminds us of the initial work of evangelism and first steps of faith. “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded” reminds us that the work of maturing as a disciple is never finished.

The Example of the Early Church in the Book of Acts

Once Jesus is ascended and the Spirit is given at Pentecost, the church is formally established. And as we saw above, one of the first things to happen is that thousands hear the gospel, respond, and then are baptized. This pattern of hearing with faith and then being baptized repeats throughout the book of Acts. The converted Samaritans hear with faith and then are baptized (8:12). The Ethiopian eunuch hears with faith and then is baptized (8:32–38).

An interesting example is the Philippian jailer, who also hears with faith and then gets baptized (16:30–33). What is interesting is that “he and all his family” (v. 33) are baptized. “He and all his family” is a phrase that some use to defend the practice of infants being baptized. Yet, the passage itself speaks directly against this. As the narrative continues we read that “he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God” (v. 34). The ones that were baptized are the ones who “rejoiced...that he had believed in God.” An infant cannot “rejoice” that his father is converted, so the passage is clearly talking about those old enough to give a sincere profession of faith.

Baptism Through Immersion in Water

Looking at John the Baptist, Jesus' example, and the recorded baptisms in the book of Acts, it is clear that "the practice of baptism in the New Testament was carried out in one way: The person being baptized was *immersed*, or put completely under the water, and then brought back up again."¹⁸

The Meaning of Baptism in the Rest of the New Testament

As baptism is discussed in the rest of the New Testament, more about what it *means* becomes clear. It is important to note as you read some of these Bible passages that the New Testament imagines that faith is always part of our baptism. It also tends to speak as if our baptism happens at the first moment of faith, as at Pentecost or in many of the Acts examples. This is why the New Testament authors can speak of things true in our baptism—union with Christ, cleansed of our sins, etc.—that are really only true because of our faith and repentance *which is expressed by our baptism*.

Romans 6:1–7 addresses the issue of our union with Christ. Being a Christian means that we have died with Christ, been buried with Christ, and even raised with Christ. When Paul discusses this he says that those who have been "baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death":

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the

¹⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1999), 377.

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glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin. (Rom 6:1–7)

Galatians 3:27 also speaks of our having been “baptized into Christ,” which is another way of speaking of being baptized in the name of Jesus (Matt 28:19–20). He says there that “as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” To “put on Christ” is another way of speaking of our union with Christ, putting on a new identity to replace the old. This renewal is part of what baptism pictures and our faith accomplishes.

Colossians 2:11–12 is an important passage because it gives us insight into how baptism (new covenant sign) and circumcision (old covenant sign) relate. Paedobaptists rightly relate baptism to circumcision, but they wrongly see where these two differ. A key distinguishing mark is that circumcision was to be applied within days of birth (Lev 12:3) and so was clearly an involuntary act done without any need for awareness or faith on the part of the child. It was hoped that this circumcision of the body would one day result in a circumcision of the heart (Deut 30:6), but the original act did not require this. However, baptism is different. As Colossians 2 says, it connects to a “circumcision made without hands” which is importantly “through faith.” Without faith, then, baptism simply isn’t fulfilling the biblical picture of what it is meant to do. Here is what Paul says:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,¹²

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having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Col 2:11–12)

1 Peter 3:21 is the last passage useful to see in brief. In this text Peter makes the surprising claim that “baptism...now saves you.” Here again we need to remember that in the New Testament baptism is discussed in such a way that it connects the initial response of faith with a fairly immediate baptism. Thus, it’s not the baptism itself that “saves you,” but that baptism combined with “an appeal to God for a good conscience,” as Peter says. In other words it is once again faith that gives the real power to the baptism, though the baptism is the right expression of that faith:

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 Pet 3:21)

Peter reminds us of the cleansing that baptism pictures. It is right that we are baptized in water, because that is the biblical mode. But it’s also right because it is water that we often use to cleanse our physical bodies, and this is a vivid picture of the spiritual cleansing that we have experienced because of our faith in Jesus.

Life in Christ’s Church

To be a Christian is to be drawn into the most privileged association in all the world. We’ve all seen exclusive groups we could never be part of—alumni from highly elite institutions, groups united by the fortunes they make, advisors to Presidents, the Kennedys, movie stars, etc. And yet, to be a member of

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Christ's church surpasses all these in countless and indescribable ways. It means being a "new creature" with a new past and a new future (2 Cor 5:17). It means being a "brother" or a "sister" in God's family with Christ as our firstborn elder brother (Rom 8:29) and God as our heavenly Father (Matt 6:9). It means forgiveness of all our sins and eternal life and a destiny that includes no more tears, death, disease, sadness, or pain (Rev 21:4). Most of all it means knowing the true and living God, a treasure of "surpassing worth" (Phil 3:8) that makes all things pale in comparison.

Life often demands that we pay attention to the concrete difficulties right in front of us—the fender bender we just caused, the deadline at work, the crying baby, the torn ACL. It's easy to lose sight of eternal and powerful realities that are more important and more wonderful than anything we could imagine. For the Christian, being a part of Christ's church is one of those realities almost too good to be real. Don't lose sight of that.

LIFE IN SOVEREIGN GRACE CHURCH

What we said in the last chapter is true of all Christians everywhere. Whether you're in a house church in remotest China or the mega church of Dallas, Texas, it's true. But now we want to dive a little deeper into five areas of our church life that warrant a little more comment and discussion. For two of these it's because of their importance to us and to Christian fruitfulness: the Sunday meeting and home groups (our small groups). For the others it's because they are commonly misunderstood or even controversial: church discipline, our leadership structure, and money. For practical reasons we've chosen to postpone the discussion on "Our Mission Together," which comes at the end. But please know that "Life in Sovereign Grace Church" has mission at the heart of it. Separating this chapter from the last one in no way means these issues are separate in our life together!

The Sunday Meeting

As elders, it's difficult to put into a few words all that we think and feel about the Sunday gathering. We understand why one of Paul's longest discussion topics to the Corinthians was about what to do (and not do) "when you come together" (1 Cor 11:17). In fact, he uses the verb "come together" (Grk. *sunerchomai*) seven times in 1 Cor 11–14 (and nowhere else in

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his writings). The length of his discussion is the great apostle saying, “This is important!” Here we want to summarize some of our convictions about this unique time of the week.

The Sunday gathering is many things. It is a family reunion of those who are brothers and sisters in the family of God, all part of the “household of God” (Eph 2:19). It is a way to express our unity as individual members of the single body of Christ (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:27; 14:26; Heb 10:25–26). It is a way to collectively express our joy in God, the praise due his name, the “Amen!” to the life of worship that we are to live Monday to Saturday (Rom 12:1–2; Ps 150). And it is even more.

The New Testament models for us a large group/small group rhythm that we seek to emulate at SGC: “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). This gives us the principle of large meetings with all together and smaller meetings “in their homes.”

A meeting on Sunday has a long history because Paul refers to the Corinthians meeting “on the first day of the week” to take up a collection for the poor (1 Cor 16:2); and John speaks of “the Lord’s day” (Rev 1:10). It also seems that, in the first generation of the church, the Jews among them honored both the Jewish seventh day Sabbath and the Christian first day celebration. A move from Sabbath to Lord’s Day tells us just how big of a deal it was that Jesus rose from the dead. Just as Jesus moved our calendar from BC to AD, he also moved the weekly rhythm of God’s people from Saturday (Sabbath) to Sunday (Lord’s Day). Of course, some people honor a day of rest (Exod 20:9–11) on Sunday as well to combine these aspects.

Goals of the Sunday Meeting

We have three broad goals for our Sunday meeting. Primary for us is the business of glorifying God (1 Cor. 10:31; 1 Peter 2:9–10). Closely related to this is the goal of “building up” our brothers and sisters in Christ. In fact, Paul says to “let all things [in the corporate meeting] be done for building up” (1 Cor. 14:26). And third, we also see evangelization of the lost as one of the goals of our Sunday meeting (Matt. 28:16–20; Acts 2:22ff.). As the word is preached, praises are sung, and Christians demonstrate their faith, the gospel is being presented to the lost in our midst. We desire to see God’s Spirit bless this gospel proclamation with conversions.

Elements of the Sunday Meeting

But what do we actually do when we gather? The choices that a church makes about what to do and not do in its weekly gathering have significant impact. How much a church leans toward ministry to the unsaved versus its members, what a church believes about spiritual gifts in the gathering, what songs and musical styles are adopted—all these define the personality of the church and even its theology. A driving concern of ours is to create weekly meetings that reflect as much as possible the teaching of the Bible. In this sense, we are in the heartiest agreement with what has been called the *Regulative Principle*, a term given to a portion of the Westminster Confession of Faith:

But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.

Westminster Confession of Faith, 21:1

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Of course, to this must be added important words from the opening section of the Confession on how we approach things *not* specifically detailed in the Bible:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:6

So, we start with what is “prescribed in the holy Scripture” (21:1), but then we add our “Christian prudence” (1:6) for matters not articulated in the Bible. The Bible commands us to sing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph 5:19), but it was “Christian prudence” that said we would start at 10am instead of 7:15am.

In this section we want to give you a quick survey of the things we try to regularly include in our Sunday meetings.

Reading, preaching, teaching, and hearing the Bible (Deut 31:10–12; Neh 8; 1 Tim 4:11, 13; 2 Tim 4:1–2; James 1:22–25). Because this is a primary activity throughout all eras of the people of God in the Bible, it must always remain a priority for our church and every church.

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Corporate and individual prayer (Neh 9; Acts 2:42; 1 Tim 2:1–2, 8). Corporate and individual prayer is a hallmark of the corporate gatherings of the people of God throughout the Bible and should be a regular component of our gatherings as well. This includes formal liturgical prayers, pastoral prayers, corporate intercession, thanksgiving, and prayers of all kinds that occur in our meetings.

Singing, musical accompaniment, and physical expressions of worship (1 Cor 14:26; Eph 5:18–21; Col 3:16; Pss 47:1; 149:3; 150; etc.). God’s people have always sung of his attributes and redemption (cf. Ex. 15; Rev. 5:9–10), and we desire that this mark our weekly meeting with very few exceptions. Further, the Bible commands us to use instruments and includes a variety of physical expressions like clapping, dancing, raising our hands, and more to be a part of the praise of our great God. You’ve probably noticed that raising hands is much more common than dancing in our meetings, but we see all of these as appropriate for praising God.

Prophecy, tongues, and spiritual gifts (1 Cor 14:26–30; Eph 5:18). The expectation of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12–14 is that our corporate gatherings would be times where the Holy Spirit manifests himself through various spiritual gifts. He commands us to “earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:1), and he creates the expectation that when we gather many would have contributions to make in the corporate meeting (1 Cor. 14:26). Elsewhere he says not to “quench the Spirit” (1 Thess. 5:19). So, even as we pursue an appropriate order and spiritual discernment in our meetings (1 Cor. 14:26ff.; 1 Thess. 5:21–22), we want our meetings to be marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The “prophecy microphone” near the stage is one small expression of this. It is not called a “*prophecy*”

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microphone,” because everything spoken there is a prophecy but to remind us of the kind of words we hope are spoken there—prophecies, tongues, words of exhortation, etc. and not prepared teachings or lengthy personal testimonies.

Collecting tithes and offerings for the ministry of the church, the poor, churches in need, and various aspects of our local and extra-local mission (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; Matt 28:18–20). We worship God by giving our financial resources for his purposes. The work of ministry is to be funded by members giving sacrificially. The poor in our community and the needy in our church are to be ministered to by our giving. Gospel outreach is to be funded by local churches providing for ministers of the gospel to give themselves full-time to making disciples of all nations.

The Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:17–30; Matt 26:17ff.; Mark 14:12ff. Luke 22:7ff.). Few corporate worship elements are highlighted in the New Testament, so the ones that are demand special recognition. The Lord’s Supper is one of these. We celebrate the Lord’s Supper with an open table (open to all believers) on a regular basis, typically monthly. As with many Christian traditions, we consider the Lord’s Supper one of two “sacraments” or “ordinances” of the church (the other being baptism). These two words are helpful but also mysterious: we don’t use either one much in common speech. “Ordinance” means something commanded by the Lord. Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). “Sacrament”¹⁹ is a word

¹⁹ “A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, in which by sensible signs the grace of God in Christ, and the benefits of the covenant of grace, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers, and these, in turn, give

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with a long history but not an easy one. As a “sacrament” we mean simply that it is a visible, physical act or object (or *sign*) meant to point to an invisible, spiritual reality. The external, physical part of the Lord’s Supper is the bread and the cup and our eating of these. These tokens point to the spiritual reality of Christ’s broken body and shed blood on our behalf. It is, in fact, an emphatic statement that we belong to Christ and he belongs to us, and that our sins are truly and completely and forever forgiven. The eating of the elements points to our connection to them and thus our union with Christ by faith. What we are remembering in this Supper is the redemption and full salvation *that is ours* in Jesus. It is for good reason, then, that the Supper has as much celebration as it does sobriety (1 Cor 11:26). We do it corporately as Paul commands (1 Cor 11:17–34).

The Lord’s Supper is the ongoing ordinance to complement baptism as the once-for-all ordinance. The Supper helps us remember the sacrifice of our Lord (Luke 22:19), recognize our unity in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:29), proclaim Christ’s redemptive sacrifice and his return (1 Cor. 11:26), participate in his death (1 Cor. 10:16–21), and reflect on his presence among us and our inclusion in him (John 6:51; Romans 6:1–5).

Finally, to accomplish what it is intended to requires an active faith on our part. Just like listening to God’s Word preached is a great means of grace but one that requires faith to bear its full fruit, so the Lord’s Supper is no mere ritual. It is one to which we want to bring a hearty and energetic faith.

Individual and corporate confessions of faith (Rom 10:9–10; 1 Cor 15:3–4; 1 Tim 3:16). In the context of baptisms

expression to their faith and allegiance to God” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [Eerdmans, 1949], 684).

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we often hear public professions of faith. As part of our corporate worship we occasionally read historic creeds or other confessions of faith.

Baptism of believers (Matt 28:16–20; Acts 16:29–33; Rom 6:1–7). While it is not required that baptisms be practiced in the corporate meeting, we see it as edifying to do so. These are often events that involve someone in our families or network of relationships that has come to faith, so it is a church event in that sense. For this reason we include these on Sunday mornings when we can.

Ordination of elders and deacons (Acts 6:1–7; 13:1–3; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6). The ordination of various officers into their respective ministries at Sovereign Grace Church happens in the Sunday meeting. Deacons are ordained annually in September and elders are ordained as they are needed in the life of the church.

Expressions of fellowship such as personal greetings and the informal care that happens as we meet (Rom 16:16; James 2:1–4; 1 Peter 5:14). Sunday meetings are not just a collection of activities that we perform, but it is the coming together of brothers and sisters in Christ that God has joined in the household of God. Therefore, we see these gatherings as times to express affection toward one another, to greet others, and to minister to various needs as we are able to in the context of the weekly meeting.

How these activities are practiced will largely reflect Christian prudence and practical wisdom, but the goal is to see these clear, biblical practices represented in our meetings. Some of these are practiced virtually every week (preaching God’s word, singing God’s praises, prayer, giving financially). Others are practiced regularly (Lord’s Supper, spiritual gifts). Others

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occur less often and typically as needed (baptisms, ordinations, confessions of faith).

Home Groups

Few things bring more care and more fruitfulness in our lives than being part of a small group of committed believers dedicated to living out a shared life according to the Word of God. It is because of that that our home groups (small groups that meet in the homes of various members) mean so much to us. You can find them right there in the church that began at Pentecost. 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 know each other really 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

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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.²⁰

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 someone sees small group participation as a value he wants to practice, this is a sign our church may be for him. If someone doesn’t see the benefit of it or lacks a desire to participate, that is usually a good sign another church will likely be a better fit.

A last thing to say here is that our home group leaders are not pastors, but they are deacons. We don’t expect them to have the role of “shepherd” and spiritual counselor and

²⁰ John R. W. Stott, *One People* (Falcon Books, 1969), 70–71.

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doctrinal teacher that an elder might. Rather, they are deacons, facilitating the “one anothers” of the New Testament within their home groups. Of course, as men of character, gifting, and some doctrinal knowledge (1 Tim 3:8–13), they will inevitably have significant influence in our church. It is no exaggeration to say that so much of the overall unity and strength in our church is due to the tireless service of these heroes in our midst.

Church Discipline at Sovereign Grace Church

“Church discipline” is a mysterious phrase to many, largely because it is an often-neglected part of the modern church. This is certainly unfortunate and leads to the weakening of the church and not its overall health. Here we want to make at least a few comments on this subject.²¹

One key idea to remember is that “discipline” can be both positive or negative. It was formational and positive in the case of Jesus’ own discipline (Heb 5:8; cf. 1 Sam 7:14). Jesus wasn’t disciplined because he did anything wrong. He was given challenges and trials to make him stronger and to allow him to demonstrate his inward perfection. Negative discipline is some kind of painful consequence or treatment that is intended to help someone stop an undesirable or sinful behavior. “Church discipline” refers to those steps taken by a church to help the sinner turn from the sinful behavior(s) that is hurting him and others and bringing shame to the name of Christ.

²¹ For more on our specific policies and beliefs regarding informal and formal church discipline, see the *Member Handbook* (<https://sgcapex.org/storage/documents/SGC-Member-Handbook.pdf>).

Critical Words on a Critical Topic

Three passages provide important clarity on this issue, namely, Matthew 18:15–18; Titus 3:10; and 1 Corinthians 5:9–13. We’ll start with Matthew 18, the most famous one on this issue. In it Jesus says the following:

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt 18:15-18)

Note the step-by-step process here. It is not an instant, sweeping action by the elders or others in the church. There is an action taken and then an opportunity for response. If the response is not adequate, then the next step is taken. These steps continue until the final step of removing someone from the membership and fellowship and worship of the local church. The step-by-step and clear process means that we should work to allow for “due process” in such situations.

Note here as well that the circle of involvement remains as small as necessary. One and then two and then a few and *then* the whole church is involved. It does not start with an email blast or churchwide announcement. It starts with a set of private conversations.

A third truth to see here is that the issue is one of sin—“your brother sins against you.” We don’t go through these steps when someone disagrees with us about a church logo or a

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parenting practice or a presidential candidate. We utilize this serious course of action for observable, actual sins.

Titus 3:10 adds an important category for us as well:

As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him. (Titus 3:10)

Notice the new element of “stirs up division.” The unity of the church is a precious gift that is worth fighting for. Paul referred to those who destroy the unity of the church as “fierce wolves” (Acts 20:28). Such a dangerous practice requires a swifter course of action because of the permanent damage it can do. For this reason it is simply “once and then twice.” After these two, clear warnings, if there is no change with the offender, “have nothing more to do with him.”

A third critical text is 1 Corinthians 5:9–13:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now 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. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Cor 5:9–13)

This is an important passage for a few reasons. One is that it broadens the categories where church discipline is appropriate. He even captures verbal abuse (“reviler”) in his list. But the passage also clarifies what our final step of church

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discipline is to look like. Some would say those who are excommunicated can attend Sunday services but not take the Lord's Supper or become members. We believe Paul paints a different picture in 1 Corinthians 5. Here he says we are "not to associate with" a person who calls himself a Christian but acts in a way so completely contradictory to this. If someone "bears the name" of Christian but practices behavior totally out of step with his profession of faith, eventually we are to treat him as his behavior requires and not his profession. Someone who doesn't claim to be a Christian and who sins in this way is someone whom we will evangelize. Someone who claims to be a Christian and yet sins in this way demands a very different approach.

The Goals of Discipline

The process of discipline is not at all about punishment but has a very different set of purposes. One of the key goals is the rescue of the sinner. Someone trapped in a sin like the ones listed above is at risk of bringing destruction on himself and many connected to him. Church discipline is meant to rescue the person from his self-destructive path.

A second goal is the protection of the church. Certain sins unchecked can destroy a church and a pastor's ministry. Church discipline helps protect both the purity and the unity of the church.

A third goal is evangelism. If the church becomes filled with people who are Christians in name but not in lifestyle, the gospel itself is defamed and its good news will be rejected by a watching world.

A fourth goal is the glory of God. God has placed his name upon his people (Matt 28:18–20). It brings shame on his name when we neglect the holiness that he requires. It brings

glory to him when we act in such a way that shows he is holy and requires holiness of his people.

Who Leads Sovereign Grace Church?

Our next topic concerns the leadership of the church. Who leads the church is a question with many sides to it. At an ultimate level, Christ does. It is his church and the one for which he paid the greatest price. That's why throughout the New Testament phrases like "the body of *Christ*" (1 Cor 12:27) and "a dwelling place *for God*" (Eph 2:22) and "the church of *God*" (Acts 20:28) are used. Any human leader in a church is at most an under-shepherd working under "the chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4).

But human leaders are indeed important and a vital means of grace. So we return to our question, "who leads Sovereign Grace Church?" The basic answer for us is that *elders are to lead a church*. In this sense we are a "presbyterian" church from the Greek word for "elder" (*presbuteros*).²² An *episcopalian* government believes that the "bishop" has primary authority in a church,²³ and a *congregational* government places that authority in the congregation. But for *presbyterian*

²² A full-blown Presbyterian model traditionally includes elements that we reject like a significantly pronounced difference between a "teaching" elder and a "ruling" elder, the "teaching" elder being a member of the "Presbytery" and not the local church. Most often, Presbyterian churches are also cessationist and paedobaptist, but we are charismatic/continuationist and credobaptist. But insofar as this word refers to the church being governed by the elder(s) and those elders also being key governors in the denomination (extra-local government), we are indeed "Presbyterian."

²³ A derivative of this is to see the "apostle" as having the primary authority in a church. This is the government of Sovereign Grace's early days, but in April 2013 the denomination voted overwhelmingly to adopt the current presbyterian form of government.

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governments, the primary authority to lead the church is with the elders. As Alexander Strauch has said,

According to the New Testament concept of eldership, elders lead the church, teach and preach the Word, protect the church from false teachers, exhort and admonish the saints in sound doctrine, visit the sick and pray, and judge doctrinal issues. In biblical terminology, elders shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the local church.

Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*²⁴

Here we'll offer some brief points about elders in a local church. A full-blown exegesis of this is beyond our purposes here.²⁵

The New Testament Establishes Elders as the Leaders of the Local Church

By example and clear teaching, the New Testament shows us that it is the “elder” who is to lead the local church.

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

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—⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of

²⁴ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Lewis and Roth, 1995), 16.

²⁵ For more explanation on elders in our family of churches, you can turn to the Sovereign Grace *Book of Church Order*, especially Part Two on “Local Church Polity” (<http://www.sovereigngrace.com/polity>).

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debauchery or insubordination.⁷ 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,⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.⁹ 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)

We use the term “elder” and “pastor” interchangeably as the New Testament does. “Overseer” is another interchangeable term, which is found in Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:2; and Titus 1:7. Acts 20 is one place where the synonymous use of these three terms is clear, the passage where Paul gathers the Ephesian leaders for a final charge to them:

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the *elders* of the church.... “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers, to shepherd* [i.e., to pastor] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” (Acts 20:17, 28, NASB)

Elders Serve in a Variety of Ways

A basic list of the elder's job description includes the following: The elder is to teach sound doctrine and preach the whole counsel of God, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to protect the sheep against internal and external threats, to love the church and serve them joyfully, to be an example for his church, and make decisions that enable a local church to grow in fruitfulness. Some of the passages that point to these various functions are these:

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And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. (Eph 4:11–12)

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. (1 Tim 5:17)

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” (Acts 20:28)

Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. (1 Pet 5:2–3)

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 1:9)

Elders are to be Men of Character

One of the most sobering aspects of the elder is that he must be a man of character (we’ll say more below on elders being men). Churches and people have been damaged terribly by compromising these character requirements. And while there are dangers attached to being overly rigid and legalistic on these lists, there are even greater dangers that accompany letting ungodly men have significant responsibility in a church. Here are two of the most important character lists connected to the role of elder:

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The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.⁷ 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—⁶ 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.⁷ 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,⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.⁹ 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)

Elders are Not Infallible and Can Be Charged Accordingly

Does a church member or congregation have any recourse if they believe an elder is sliding into immorality or heresy or gross neglect of his duties? Yes. An important part of the church government of the Sovereign Grace Churches relates to

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the “Discipline of an Elder.”²⁶ There is a carefully laid out process for such charges that is meant to create a due process that captures the spirit of Paul’s words to Timothy:

Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.²⁰ As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.²¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. (1 Tim 5:19–21)

Sovereign Grace takes this seriously and has specific ways to go about doing this. The key in this is to balance the need to protect a congregation against a sinful or doctrinally wayward pastor with the need to protect an elder by having a due process.

Elders Have Local and Extra-Local Responsibilities

Elders are to be concerned primarily with their local church. However, in Acts 15 when the Jerusalem “apostles and elders” gathered to work through the difficult issue of Gentiles being added to the church, there is a theologically significant precedent set for us. At this key juncture in the young church’s history, “elders” are six times mentioned right alongside the “apostles” as those who heard the case, discussed the case, decided the case, and then sent an authoritative letter to other churches (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4). To cite one example:

As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that

²⁶ See the chapter called, “The Discipline of an Elder,” in the current edition of the *Book of Church Order* at <http://www.sovereigngrace.com/polity>.

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had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. (Acts 16:4)

We believe that Luke, the author of Acts, and especially God the author of all Scripture, is saying through this narrative moment that elders can also have authority to do certain things outside of their own local context. They can't do just anything and be micro-managing busy-bodies, but a passage like Acts 15:1–16:4 helps us see they can get involved with discipline and doctrine. The book of Acts also shows us they can get involved with church planting (13:1–2) and various expressions of care and fellowship (11:28–30). These are some of the key reasons we treasure our connection to Sovereign Grace.

Elders and Authority

When we speak of “authority” we mean the right and responsibility to lead, with the expectation that others are also called to follow. We believe the New Testament teaches that the elder has such authority in a local church, and this authority is to have a complementary response in the congregation. A church is to submit to the authority of the elders as those elders exercise that authority within the life and ministry of the church. As with all Christian submission—wives to husbands, children to parents, employees to employers, citizens to governments—this submission is never absolute. The only authority that gets our absolute submission is God himself. For everyone else, we submit unless we are being asked to transgress God's Word.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb 13:17)

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Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. (1 Tim 5:17)

One aspect of the relative authority that elders have over congregations, is that it is not at all categorical or spreading into every area of life. An elder can speak into your life and declare your theology not to be in keeping with what is true Christian orthodoxy. But an elder is out of bounds if he speaks into your life and says you must change majors in college or choose a different car to drive or cancel your cable. Areas like these might come up in a conversation and an elder might even comment on them or give advice on them, but it would be wrong for him to demand a response in personal areas like these.

Elders and “Plurality”

What in the world is a “plurality of elders”? Great question. A “plurality” means more than one elder, and SGC places a very high value on having a group of men serve in this role. The word “elder” is always plural in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2–6; 1 Tim 4:14; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1, 5), and we believe this is an indication that churches are to be governed by a plurality of elders as the Lord will’s. Yet, since these men must be qualified men, the need for a plurality can never trump the need to have truly qualified men. But as the Lord allows, a small church or church plant should always be moving toward a plurality. Such a plurality provides protection, a variety of gifts within the eldership, and the ability to provide adequate care for the people in the church.

Elders and Victims of Abuse

It is a hard and sobering reality that we live in a world where a few words on this difficult issue are appropriate. Yet, as long as the darkness of a fallen world surrounds us, these sins will continue. There are a number of related aspects here we want to briefly explore.

First, our church works hard to create safe and accountable environments for children of all ages. This is and has been a great concern for the elders. Many of our children's ministry policies involve making sure an adult is never left alone with a child and that use of the bathroom is handled in an age-appropriate and safe manner as well. Background checks are automatic for anyone working with our youth through high school age in any organized ministry. We have recently begun requiring training for all workers through a ministry called MinistrySafe,²⁷ and this adds a greater insight into and awareness of these issues.

Victims of abuse are recipients of physical, emotional, and psychological pain that can sometimes be lifelong in its devastation. We believe in God's power to heal, but the visible and invisible scars that such treatment leaves are not always restored in this lifetime. Further, abuse often happens in a relationship with a huge power disparity that gives the abuser a huge ability to manipulate the victim far beyond what might even seem rational or reasonable.

All of this means that our heart as a church is to protect and come alongside victims when the situation becomes clear to us. Unfortunately, abuse often remains hidden for some length of time. In our cities and state and country, we feel the laws against abuse are useful protections for us in the church. ***It is***

²⁷ See <https://ministrysafecom/> for more information on their ministry.

thus our practice to report child abuse and domestic abuse when it is required by law to do so, and in some situations we feel a moral obligation to report even when there is no legal requirement to do so.

Actual abuse situations can be complicated and involve some basic investigation to understand what is being alleged. Yet, the elders are committed to reporting any situation where there is actual or suspected abuse or neglect. The risks of not reporting or reporting too slowly are too great to adopt another practice. We are committed to letting civil authorities (at times the police, at times social services) know what is happening so that they can perform their God-given role to approve the good and punish the evil (Rom 13:3–4). In the area of abuse, such authorities can become powerful means of grace to protect the innocent and punish the guilty.

Depending on the severity of the abuse in a given situation, it might at some point be appropriate to encourage the victim to forgive the abuser. However, churches have at times made grave errors in wanting to shorten what is often a very long process of healing, understanding, and rehabilitation. At times we want something to take months but it takes years. We want it to take a year when it actually takes a decade. We want something to happen in this life that can only happen in the next one. This is part of the trauma and devastation of abuse.

One of the key issues here is the repentance of the offender. Pedophiles are often serial pedophiles, so repentance must be demonstrated by years (or even decades) of obedience. Domestic abuse often has an “on again/off again” cycle, so repentance here must also be demonstrated over a considerable length of time. Only when the repentance of the offender can be shown with the passage of time can reconciliation even be considered, if ever.

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But a second key issue is the rehabilitation of the victim. Certain kinds of abuse can so damage a victim that any meeting between the victim and the abuser is simply not practical in this life. For a victim to encounter the oppressor is often to re-experience the original trauma. This is the hard reality of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other related issues. We trust that the justice of God and the reality of the new heavens and new earth and the glorification of the people of God will take care of what needs to be taken care of at such times.

Overall, though justice and due process are important values for us, our tendency will be to err on the side of protecting and supporting the victims in such situations. Finally, though such situations involve far more people than simply the elders, we do see such times as calling for the protective and caring side of our role as shepherds of the flock of God.

There is more we could say on the role of eldership, but the above gives you a basic picture of this office at SGC. And based on your history and concerns, you might have more questions about our church government. Please feel free to ask any one of the elders such questions. We are eager to help you in any way we can.

Financial stewardship at Sovereign Grace Church

For a church to talk about money is...*complicated*. There's no getting around it. Most people have a story (or seven) about a pastor or church or ministry or politician or business owner making selfish use of money entrusted to him. Greed and money seem to so often go together that it can be easy to assume there is no righteous use of money. Truly, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim 6:10).

Yet, talk of money is vast in the Bible in places like Proverbs, the teaching of Jesus, and the exhortations of the

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epistles. Some estimate as many as 2,000 verses speak to the issue. The Bible is not shy about speaking of this part of our lives. The truth is, money is a huge part of everyone's life, so it makes sense that the Bible would speak to it so often.

Our goal is not to capture all of God's teaching on money here, but simply to make a few points about how money connects to your involvement with SGC.

Giving is a Way to Worship

Giving is a way to express our worship and our heart for God. To give of our money is to give something of ourselves that (literally) costs us. You can see this in the Old Testament when the nation gave of themselves for the building of the temple. When David collected these gifts, they were called "freewill offerings" and said to be an expression of consecration to the Lord. Their generous offerings are then joined to praise:

Then the people rejoiced because they had given willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to the LORD. David the king also rejoiced greatly. ¹⁰Therefore David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly. And David said: "Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. ¹¹Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all." (1 Chr 29:9–11)

Paul speaks in a similar way about the giving of the Philippians, calling it "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (4:18).

Giving some of our money in the form of a tithe (ten-percent) is a way to express our worship to God who owns and

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provides *all of it*. There is some amount of controversy surrounding the principle of a tithe and whether it still continues in a new covenant context. We feel it does and is a good practice to adopt when a Christian is able to for several reasons. One reason is that tithing predates the law of Moses and so the practice isn't tied only to the law of Moses (Abraham in Gen 14:20; Heb 7:2–4). Further, all the purposes of the tithes of the Old Testament continue into the New Testament (e.g., funding ministry, acts of worship, expressions of God's ownership of all we have), Jesus commends the tithe (Matt 23:23; Luke 11:42). Finally, the rest of the New Testament points to giving that seems to be *at least* as great as a tithe (Luke 21:4; Phil 4:14–18; 2 Cor 8–9). At a practical level, too, ten-percent is a great guide for us since it is enough to press us but for most people not enough to put us into financial distress. Having said this, however, if someone prefers to speak in terms of “generous giving as one is able,” we won't make a big deal of it. The key for Christians living in a time like ours is to feel the burden to give to the local church. That is certainly part of New Testament Christian living.

Giving to the Church Helps Us Minister to the Poor

Money is one way the church is able to minister to the poor. Taking up offerings to give to the poor and those who serve the poor or those in need has a long history to it (Acts 2:45; 4:34–35; 11:26–30; 1 Cor 16:1–3). This giving could be for local needs or those outside of our immediate context.

Giving Helps Provide for Ministers of the Gospel

Money is also a way to provide for those who make their living by ministry in the church. Just as the priests in the Old Testament were to receive tithes so they could devote

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themselves completely to their ministries, so are New Testament ministers when the church is able (Neh 10:35–39; 12:44–45; 1 Cor 9:9; 1 Tim 5:18).

Giving Helps Fund Ministry Throughout the World

Another reason to give money to the church is for the sake of serving the poor and missions work throughout the world (Acts 11:28–30; 13:1–2; 1 Cor. 16:1–3; 2 Cor. 8–9; Phil. 4:10–19). The New Testament presents a beautiful picture of the interconnectedness of Christians throughout the world. When a church somewhere is in some kind of need, we see other churches coming alongside them as they're able. This happens in cases of material need (Acts 11:28–30). There is also the cause of church planting, where a church sends its resources to support evangelists and pastors traveling to places to start new gospel works (e.g., Rom 15:24). Our involvement with Sovereign Grace Churches is a key way we live this out. The hundred or so churches that are part of our denomination pool their resources to equip and deploy church planters throughout the world. This is a task that would be virtually impossible if each church acted alone. Working together we can take real steps toward accomplishing Jesus' call to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19). Of course, no single denomination can do this alone. We praise God for the many denominations working toward this end.

Giving is an Appropriate Part of the Weekly Gathering

And finally, the New Testament models for us that this giving can be part of our weekly gathering on the Lord's day. Paul told the Corinthians regarding "the collection for the saints," that "on the first day of every week, each of you is to put something

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aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come” (1 Cor 16:1, 2).

Conclusion

There is a lot in this chapter we hope never finds expression in our church life. Church discipline and matters of abuse are things we never want to see. But we include them in this book so that we are prepared if and when they do come. And it’s helpful to think about money and the different ways the Bible discusses it. Finally, we hope the talk of Sunday meetings and small groups inspired you to want to go deep in your pursuit of God and his purposes in these settings. The next part of the class will take us into some of the distinctives of our beliefs.

SOUND DOCTRINE

In a day like ours where “tolerance” is king and everyone is happy until you clearly state what you actually believe, it is critical that Christians stand against the tide. We are indeed tolerant of the beliefs of others and their right to hold those beliefs, but we must also be those who know what they believe and why. This is one of the areas where we become *counter-cultural*. You can hear this counter-cultural idea in Paul’s words to those Christians surrounded by an immense Roman culture:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:1–2)

Being “conformed to this world” is a good picture of letting the culture shape and define your beliefs and actions. Paul is saying don’t be like soft clay that gets molded by whatever force presses into it. Instead, “be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” In other words, be actively changing according to the truths and standards we find in the Bible. Rome cannot be what primarily shapes us; God must. This, in fact, is part of how we “present our bodies as a living sacrifice” and offer “spiritual worship.”

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In the letters of Paul, he often referred to “sound doctrine” (1 Tim 1:10; Titus 1:9; 2:1), which can be translated as “healthy” or “wholesome teaching.” He also called the church “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim 3:5). Though Jesus is “the truth” (John 14:6), and so knowing him is knowing truth, there is also “the truth” that is received and which the church is entrusted to pass down from generation to generation. This passing of the baton is vividly pictured in 2 Timothy 2:2, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”

Such passages remind us that being a Christian involves believing in the right things. Some things are essential to salvation. Someone who does not believe Jesus is both God and man cannot be a Christian (1 John 4:2; 5:1; Rom 10:9–10; 1 Cor 15:3–5). Anyone who fails to believe that God is Father, Son, and Spirit cannot be a Christian (Matt 28:19–20).

But there are also truths that are not essential to salvation but which are part of what our church calls “sound doctrine.” Every church has such beliefs. This is why Baptists and Presbyterians can link arms as brothers and sisters in Christ but also have their own gatherings on Sunday mornings.

It’s important to note that in this section we’ll give you what *our elders* believe themselves and what they teach on Sundays and throughout the life of the church. Not every member holds all these views or, at least, not in the exact same way. Further, this is not everything our church teaches but those areas which might separate us from other truly Christian churches. With these truths, our desire is not to be novel or traditional, liberal or conservative, cutting edge or old-fashioned: *Our desire is to be biblical*. At times this makes us old-fashioned, and at times it makes us cutting edge. Our desire

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is to be faithful to God's unchanging Word in a perpetually changing culture. What follows are important theological truths we teach at SGC.

A BOOK LIKE NO OTHER

From the earliest days of Sovereign Grace Churches and Sovereign Grace Church, the Bible has been esteemed. In fact, one of the hallmarks of the revival that gave birth to both of these was a firm commitment to “go back to the Bible” in every area of life.

This early zeal remains even though there is a greater appreciation of the place of church history and historical theology. Though the Bible remains our final judge of all truths and practices, it’s always good to remember that we aren’t the first to wrestle with these issues. Along these lines, our current doctrine of Scripture is not at all exclusive to us. In almost every way it is adopted from those who identify as “Reformed.” This means we hold that *the Bible is God’s inspired, authoritative, inerrant, sufficient, clear (perspicuity), and self-attesting word*. We’ll look at each of these terms in this section.

First, the basic and foundational view of SGC is that the Bible we hold in our hands today is precisely what the apostle Paul said it was as he exhorted his protégé in the ways of ministry:

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

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This means that this Bible, which is the words of a score of human authors, is first and foremost “breathed out by God.” The apostle Peter captures the same idea by saying the words of the prophets record what “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). And the author of Hebrews likewise says that the Old Testament book of Psalms gives us what “the Holy Spirit says” (3:7). Notice the tense of the verb there: “what the Holy Spirit *says*.”

All of these passages are making the same point, that the Bible’s words are God’s *inspired* words. It contains precisely what he intended for them to contain—at least, in the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts.

This idea of its inspiration extends to its individual words and not simply its general ideas. That’s why at times authors in the New Testament will base their arguments on specific words in the Old Testament. When Jesus was confronted by the Sadducees prior to his crucifixion, they questioned him about the resurrection. He responded by citing God’s words to Moses in Exod 3:6, “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Matt 22:32). But his argument hangs on the verb of this sentence, “I am.” God telling Moses, “I *am* the God of Abraham” instead of “I *was* the God of Abraham” points to the fact these patriarchs are still alive, and the resurrection is real. Of course, it’s important as well that the Son of God himself would point to an Old Testament text as authoritative proof of what God is like. For Jesus and the apostles, the Bible is indeed God’s inspired Word. As one astute theologian said,

I listen to Scripture to hear God preaching and instructing me in matters theological and practical, matters of belief and matters of behavior, matters of doctrine, matters of doxology, matters of devotion,

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matters of orthodoxy (right belief), and matters of orthopraxy (right living).

J.I. Packer, “The Challenge of Biblical Interpretation”²⁸

Second, we believe the Bible is *authoritative* because it is God speaking to us and therefore speaks with God’s own authority. You can hear this dominance in places like 1 Peter 1:15–16, “as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” Peter here is citing Leviticus 11:44 from the Old Testament in such a way that he expects his readers to hear the authoritative voice.

Scripture is powerful, decisive, and authoritative because it is nothing less than the voice of God. . . . Submission to the Scriptures is submission to God. Rebellion against the Scriptures is rebellion against God. The Bible can no more fail, falter, or err, than God himself can fail, falter, or err.
Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word*²⁹

Third, the Bible is *inerrant*, meaning that it is without error in all that it teaches. This can be a tough pill to swallow for moderns who assume that such an old book built on miracles and heroes can’t possibly be reliable history and provide detailed information on facts, figures, and precise theological ideas—much less, archaeology. And yet, we believe heartily in its utter trustworthiness in the manner of the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*:

²⁸ *Engaging the Written Word* (Hendrickson, 2012), 162.

²⁹ DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word* (Crossway, 2014), 108, 119.

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We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit. We deny that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.
Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, Article XII (1978)

This is reflective of places like Psalm 12:6, “the words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.” Proverbs 30:5 adds, “Every word of God proves true.” Jesus prays similarly, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). Such statements are the natural overflow of the nature of God himself: “God is not man, that he should lie” (Num 23:19).

Though this truth is first a conviction we hold by faith, it is one that becomes more and more reasonable as different facets of the Bible’s teaching can be verified. An important piece of this doctrine is the point that it is inerrant in *all that it teaches*. The Bible speaks of the rising of the sun (James 1:11), but it isn’t intending to teach that the earth is stationary and the sun orbits around it. It is speaking from a human vantage point as things are typically observed. But this is no different from the New York Times, which also provides the time for the sunrise and sunset each day. No one questions this, because it’s simply a manner of speaking that all understand.

The doctrine of inerrancy is also helpful when we wrestle with perceived contradictions in the Bible. Since we know the Bible is God’s Word and thus without error, a perceived contradiction is just that, *perceived*. It can’t be a true contradiction. This pushes us to wisely and humbly pursue a

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way to harmonize seemingly opposing verses, and when we can't find a suitable answer we can rest on the truth that God is beyond us and thus his Word at times stumps us. To unbelievers this can be seen as a cop out, but it's nonetheless the right response of a finite creature contemplating the work of an infinite God. The truth is, when people flippantly make the comment that "the Bible is full of errors," they have rarely done any real study on the specific errors they are referring to. Most of these supposed errors have reasonable, straightforward solutions to them. Many books have been written to address such issues.³⁰

Fourth, the Bible is *sufficient*. It would be silly to say the Bible is sufficient as a math textbook or a book on science. But the Bible is indeed sufficient for all that is needed to know, trust, and obey God. It is also sufficient for people to know themselves and to live out the fullness of life intended by God—that is, with the Spirit's help. Above we quoted 2 Timothy 3:16–17 which says, "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable...that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." This helps us define what we mean by "sufficient." This is what is needed "for every good work." You can't know God accurately without the revelation contained in the Bible, and you can't know yourself either. And you can't do the works God intends for us to do without the guidance and wisdom we receive from his Word. This is true at an individual level but also in a church and even in a society. A society that ignores or rejects the Bible's teaching can never achieve its full potential, because it is rejecting a necessary and

³⁰ E.g., Andreas Köstenberger, Darrell Bock, Josh Chatraw, *Truth Matters: Confident Faith in a Confusing World* (B&H Academic, 2014); Gleason Archer, *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Zondervan, 2001).

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sufficient source of essential knowledge. Another aspect of the Bible's sufficiency is that no other tradition or source of knowledge is necessary to place alongside it. By itself we have what we need to know.³¹

Fifth, the Bible is *clear*. In theological discussions this is often called its "perspicuity," which means that within the Bible's pages the knowledge of salvation is clear to all humble and faith-filled readers. This doesn't mean real work isn't required or that teachers and scholars aren't necessary to understand the details of it. It just means that in the most critical issues of life, the Bible is indeed "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 119:105). Related to this is the idea that "Scripture interprets Scripture." The best teacher for how to interpret the Bible is the Bible itself. The New Testament helps us interpret the Old Testament, the later books help us interpret the earlier books, the earlier books give the background and foundation we need to interpret the later books, and more besides.³²

The final point we want to make here is that the Bible is *self-attesting*. This means that it is the Bible that teaches us first how to articulate what the Bible is, just as it teaches us on a whole array of matters:

Just as the Bible contains a doctrine of God and man, of Christ and redemption, it also offers us a doctrine concerning itself; and we receive this in faith on the basis of the divine testimony.

Louis Berkhof, "The Inspiration of Scripture"³³

³¹ See Louis Berkhof, "The Inspiration of Scripture," *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1932), 167–169.

³² *Ibid.*, 167.

³³ *Ibid.*, 146.

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The New Testament speaks of the Old Testament as God's Word (Heb 3:7), the Old Testament speaks of the words given to Moses as God's Words (2 Kings 14:6), and when prophets or apostles speak God's Words they never hesitate to simply speak them as such. Micah 6:1 says, "Hear what the LORD says"; Isaiah 49:5 says, "And now the LORD says." The Bible is thus its own witness that it is indeed the Word of God. In this sense, it is *self-attesting*. It is also self-attesting in a more experiential sense. As we seek to read it, understand it, and live according to its teaching we begin to accept that it is indeed God's Word. But this happens in an individual only because the Spirit is in us attesting to the Bible's divine origin. As the Spirit works on the heart of the Christian, that Christian believes what he previously did not, holds as infallible and inspired what he previously could not.

For all these reasons, at SGC we seek to heed the admonition of Paul to Timothy on Sunday mornings and throughout every major ministry of the church: "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim 4:2).

Making it Practical

A high view of Scripture is an important part of a biblical theology (i.e., theology that is consistent with the Bible). Truly, the Bible is no mere book among other books! Yet, a vivid sense of the Bible's inspiration and uniqueness is also something meant to have a daily impact on our lives. When you lift up your Bible and see in it the very words of God, that needs to touch down in the hours and days and weeks of your life.

This isn't mysterious. Pretend a friend of yours points to a book on his bookshelf and then says to you, "I believe this book contains the very words of God, the essential truth about

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him we need to know, and possesses content that is meant to evaluate every thought, word, and deed for every person in all of history.” What would you expect of your friend at this point? You would expect that he actually reads, studies, loves, memorizes, and meditates on this book. In fact, if he didn’t, you would question whether he really believed all those things he said about the book. This isn’t because you have a keen insight into the human heart. You would feel this is pretty obvious from the way he described the book.

And the same is true for us. Those who have the highest view of the Bible should be those who spend the most time reading, studying, memorizing, and meditating on it. We desire to have a church of such people.

Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day....
How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!...
Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (Ps 119:97, 103, 105)

OUR SOVEREIGN GOD

What it Means to be Reformed

One of the most significant changes in Sovereign Grace's (the denomination) past happened in the 90s. Authors and teachers like Jerry Bridges, J. I. Packer, R. C. Sproul, John Piper, and Wayne Grudem began to impact the leaders of our young denomination as our leaders wrestled with more theological matters. Historical authors like Charles Spurgeon, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Jonathan Edwards, and John Calvin also became more prominent in our church libraries and sermons. By the end of the decade Sovereign Grace had become more officially a "Reformed" group of churches. But what does that mean?

"Reformed" is certainly a term that means different things to different people. To conservative Presbyterians it means a strong allegiance to the Westminster Confession of Faith and all that it teaches. This includes paedobaptism, cessationism, and the distinctive church government of traditional Presbyterians.

But for non-Presbyterians who call themselves "Reformed," the word has become a shorthand way to say that we identify with *some* elements of traditions that date back to the Reformation though not with *all* of them. Remember, the Reformation is that 16th century European move of God that swept through the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther was a central figure and he essentially turned to the teaching of the Bible instead of popes and bishops and began to critique the

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church by the teaching of Scripture. While he set out only to “reform” the church, not leave it, it was quickly apparent that he would need to form a new kind of church to allow for the teachings of Scripture to prevail. Men like John Owen, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, John Knox, William Tyndale, and others would add their weight to this move of God. By the middle of the 16th century there was the ancient Roman Catholic Church on one side, and on the other was a scattering of pastors and congregations throughout Europe that were “Protestant” since they had protested the false teaching and especially false gospel of the Catholics.³⁴

What are some of the teachings that united these magisterial Reformers and are common for people today calling themselves “Reformed”? Typically, these include:

- A high view of God and especially the absolute sovereignty of God;
- A high view of the Bible as inspired and authoritative and sufficient for all to live a godly life (see above);
- A view of man that sees the wreckage of sin from the Fall as impacting his ability to think, act, and respond to God. The current state of humanity is such that unless God changes the heart, a person will never move toward God but will always resist him;

³⁴ The name “Protestant” dates to 1529 and the Diet of Speier. The Roman Catholic Charles V passed a law to forbid the further spread of Luther’s teachings, but followers of Luther stood and read a *Protestation*, from then on earning the name of “Protestants” by their opponents (Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries* [Zondervan, 1996], 287).

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- A view of salvation that believes God is the primary determiner of who will be saved and the primary Agent in the process of each person's salvation.

In this section we'll hit two ideas that cover several aspects of the above four points, namely, the sovereignty of God over all things and his sovereignty especially over an individual's salvation.

Sovereign Over All Things

What do we mean by “the sovereignty of God”? This phrase overlaps with how theologians speak of “providence”:

Providence...may be defined as that work of God in which He preserves all His creatures, is active in all that happens in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end.

Louis Berkhof, “Providence”³⁵

Sovereignty has to do with that last piece of this, “directs all things to their appointed end.”

God Directs All Things

It was not the invention of the Reformers to see God as sovereign, but it was an idea that ran like a river throughout their writings and in the writings of the men mentioned above. Early church fathers like Augustine also held a high view of God's sovereignty. This is the notion that all that happens happens according to God's sovereign plan. It is not just that he *knows* what will happen, but that he *causes* to happen all that

³⁵ Louis Berkhof, “Providence,” *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Kindle).

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happens. Romans 11:36 expresses this idea as succinctly and completely as any passage:

For from him and through him and to him are all things. (Rom 11:36)

John Calvin speaks of God's sovereignty as an extension of his omnipotence. With the idea of providence, God's omnipotence is "directed toward individual and particular motions," such that "he so regulates all things that nothing takes place without his deliberation."³⁶

He then explains that God's sovereignty (what he also calls "providence") extends to all things. God brings rain and drought (Lev 26:3–4; Deut 11:13–14; 28:12), food to the young (Ps 147:9), causes sparrows to fall to the ground (Matt 10:29), governs a man's steps and actions and words (Pro 16:1, 9; 20:24; Jer 10:23), controls the weather (Jonah 1:4; Ps 104:3–4), humbles some and raises others (Ps 75:6–7), brings both barrenness and children (Gen 30:2; Ps 127:3), provides our daily bread (Mat 6:11), and so much more.³⁷

If we ask, *what things are under his control?*, the answer from the Bible comes to us emphatically: "All things."

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 1:11)

God Controls the Good and the Bad

So, above we said that "God controls all things." Here we just want to see that "all" means "all," the good *and* the bad and

³⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Battles, 1.16.3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.16.5–7.

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everything in between. It is sobering that the good and the bad in life all come from the hand of God, but this is the clear testimony of Scripture:

I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things. (Isa 45:7)

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

This doesn't mean that God is active in the exact same way with the good and the bad. You can see this in the way a parent acts with his child. For many of the good things the parent brings to the child, the parent is initiating and actively engaged. But sometimes the hard things a child experiences have to do with how a parent allows a child to go through something he knows will be difficult for the child. A parent lets a child join a sports team that is in many ways beyond them. A parent shepherds a child through a difficult relationship and doesn't let that child give up on it. These aren't perfect analogies at all, but they do speak to how God can be involved in the good and bad yet differently in each.

God Uses Our Sin but is Not the Author of Sin

One of the most mysterious aspects of God's sovereignty is how he "does all that he pleases" (Ps 115:3) in all things but is *never the author of sin*. James 1:13–14 remains perfectly true:

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.¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. (James 1:13–14)

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Of course, this is most vividly seen at the cross. God takes a whole mess of human depravity—Judas’ betrayal, Peter’s denials, Pilate’s cowardice, Jewish jealousy—and brings it together to crucify Jesus. But this is all according to his eternal plan to save his people. In Acts 2:22–24, Peter is direct and right when he says to his Jewish audience, “you crucified and killed” the Son of God (v. 23). But even the collective sins that resulted in the death of Jesus were “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.” Who killed Jesus, then, *ultimately*? God did.

We see divine sovereignty and human sin come together with Joseph and his brothers in the Old Testament as well. His brothers were bitter and jealous of his apparent status, especially after Joseph (foolishly?) shared the content of his dreams (Gen 37:11). They thus conspired to sell him into slavery for “twenty shekels of silver” (37:28). Joseph’s life took several difficult turns, but throughout his journeys “the LORD was with him and...the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands” (39:3; cf. 39:21, 23).

As the story unfolds, Joseph through a miraculous chain of events becomes second-in-command in Egypt, behind only Pharaoh. Eventually his dreams are literally fulfilled as his brothers and even his father bow before him in this powerful nation (42:6).

It is how Joseph summarizes his life of toil and subsequent elevation that is crucial for us to see. Speaking to his brothers he provides this stunning perspective: “As for you, you meant evil against me but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (50:20). Human sin is part of the way God accomplishes his sovereign will: that is the message of the Joseph narrative. Further, nothing will thwart what God intends to do. Jealous

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brothers and years in prison could not keep Joseph off the throne in Egypt. That was God’s plan and it would be accomplished.

Truly,

“All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” (Dan 4:35)

God Works All Things for Our Good

One of the most important statements about God’s sovereignty is Romans 8:28–31:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.²⁹ 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.³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom 8:28–31)

According to this passage, which things are under the absolute control of God in our lives? “All things” (v. 28). What is God doing with “all things” in our lives? “Working them together for good” (v. 28). How do we know this? Because his eternal foreknowledge (which is no bare knowledge but really means “fore-love”) resulted in his predestining us (v. 29)—which then resulted in his calling us (internal, spiritual calling), which then resulted in his justifying us (declaring us righteous at our conversion), which will then without fail result in our

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glorification (our being transformed into our fully redeemed bodies and souls) (v. 30).

Like the way a cooking recipe takes elements disgusting by themselves (flour, oil, raw eggs, sugar, salt, baking powder) and brings them together to result in cookies or pancakes or bread, so God's sovereignty makes all the ingredients of our lives come together "for good." Truly, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (v. 31).

The great theologian Herman Bavinck has thus rightfully said:

In all circumstances of life, it gives good confidence in our faithful God and Father that he will provide whatever we need for body and soul and that he will turn to our good whatever adversity he sends us in this sad world, since he is able to do this as almighty God and desires to do this as a faithful Father.

Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*³⁸

And the great Welsh preacher and expositor Martyn Lloyd-Jones has said similarly,

"I do not know which way to turn or to go; I do not understand why these things are happening, and I do not know exactly what to ask for at this moment. But I know this, that in spite of my ignorance, and in spite of everything that is happening to me, this and everything else is working together for my good." That is the final comfort and consolation of the Christian.

³⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, Vol 2 (Baker Academic, 2004), 619.

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Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans 8:17–39*³⁹

Here is one final summary of these verses from Tim Keller:

Paul tells us that if we follow Christ, our bad things turn out for good, our good things cannot be lost, and our best things are yet to come.

Tim Keller, “The Christian’s Happiness” (sermon)

Finally, God directs all things for his plan of redemption—and our individual salvation! We’ll focus on this much more in the next section. Here we simply want to see that the same sovereign control of destinies we’ve seen above extends to how God accomplished his plan of redemption. We see this dramatically in Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 where he assigns the blame of the crucifixion to the Jews but wraps even this up in the sovereignty of God:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.” (Acts 2:22–24)

How Should God’s Sovereignty Affect Us?

The stunning truth that God’s hand is behind all things should impact us in at least three ways. First, it should impact our

³⁹ Lloyd-Jones, *Romans 8:17–39: The Final Perseverance of the Saints* (Banner of Truth, 1975), 177.

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prayers. If God isn't sovereign, there's no reason to pray. If he is, we can pray for him to change people and situations.

Second, a belief in God's sovereignty should impact how we respond to hardships—and sins and failures. God is accomplishing his perfect plans in your life. So, take heart even in the midst of hardships and failures. This truth isn't always a happy one, especially when we are in the midst of a profoundly hurtful situation. Yet, it gives us comfort that the devil, this world, human enemies, and even our own corruption do not have the final say in how long or how bad something gets. God is the greater Sentry who will say, "This far and no further." He is the one that sees the whole journey and not just this spot in the road. He knows why some things are in your life and others aren't. We all wish his plans for our lives were carbon-copies of the one that has "happy and easy" written on it. But that isn't how he works. The good news is that this all-wise, all-loving, and all-good God is actively at work and engaged in our situation, always accomplishing what is best.

Third, these truths should impact how we worship. The God you worship is no small entity. He isn't just *aware* of things, he's *active* in every aspect of them. He is infinite, transcendent, and glorious, but he's also personally engaged with you. He listens to your prayers and speaks to you. He forgives your sins and comforts you in the darkness of your lives. How appropriate it is, then, to worship him.

The Sovereignty of God in our Salvation (TULIP)

By now it should be clear that God indeed is sovereign. Now we want to think about one piece of this sovereignty in more detail: a person's salvation. 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

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question on the table as we think about God's sovereignty in salvation. To get us to the answer, we'll look at some history and then 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 AD 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."⁴⁰ In AD 412, 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, and 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 remonstrance⁴¹ at a meeting of church leaders, pastors, and theologians in the city of Dordrecht (Dort) in 1618. Those who affirm the teachings of Arminius are generally called

⁴⁰ Joel R. Beeke, *Living for God's Glory* (Reformation Trust, 2008) 61.

⁴¹ "Remonstrance" means "reasons for opposition or grievance."

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Arminians. The Synod of Dort, as it is now called, rejected the Remonstrants.⁴² 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:

Total Depravity
Unconditional Election
Limited Atonement
Irresistible Grace
Perseverance 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?”⁴³ 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

⁴² Name given to those Dutch Protestants who adhered to the ideas of Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609). 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.

⁴³ J.I. Packer, “Introductory Essay,” *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Banner of Truth, rep. 1995), 11.

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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 any “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.

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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 9 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,

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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.⁴⁴ The distinguishing mark was “God’s purpose of election.” God chose Jacob simply because he did.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ 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

⁴⁴ We have faith because we were predestined. We are not predestined because we have faith.

⁴⁵ 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.”

⁴⁶ 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).

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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,²³ 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

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addresses the extent of the atonement. It answers the question, *for whom did Christ die?* The basic answers are that he died for all (Arminian) or that he died for his people (Reformed/Calvinist). 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” (or “particular redemption,” as it’s sometimes called) is the way the New Testament typically speaks of Christ’s redemption 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):

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“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*.⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.¹⁰ 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 *not* “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

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world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). There are two things to see in Jesus’ statement to make it more understandable what “the world” means. First, “world” is not a simply statement synonymous with “every person.” In John’s gospel, “the world” is often fallen humanity: “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him” (1:10). So, John 3:16 is not a statement of God’s amazing love for something so big (every person in every nation) but a statement that he would love something so evil.

The second truth to remember is 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 4, 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). The Jews in this case are not reading their Old Testament accurately, for in it God made clear that his plan included the nations. Most dramatically it is in the promise to Abraham, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3). Isaiah makes it clear as well, “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:6).

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

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world” and not just for the Jews. In John’s gospel and first letter, “the world” often occurs in places where he wants to underscore the astounding truth that Jesus’ redemption is for both Jews *and Gentiles* and not just the Jews: “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).⁴⁷

Again, the key issue for the Calvinist when considering the atonement of Christ is that it did indeed and could not do anything other than achieve the great saving purpose for which it was intended. Christ died to save his people, and that’s precisely what he did! You might even say that far from being a “limited” atonement, the atonement we proclaim isn’t limited at all since it will unfailingly achieve its purpose. 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

⁴⁷ Another text often brought up in such contexts is 2 Peter 3:9. On this see John Piper’s, “Are There Two Wills in God?” (<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/are-there-two-wills-in-god>).

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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.

Charles Spurgeon, "Particular Redemption"⁴⁸

—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 to that 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 he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son....And those whom [God] predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Rom.

⁴⁸ Charles Spurgeon, "Particular Redemption," *The Complete Works of C. H. Spurgeon*, Vol 4 (Delmarva, 2013), 280.

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8:29–30). This has been called the “golden chain” of our salvation, and it’s easy to see why. The chain begins in eternity past with “foreknew” and “predestined.” Then these privileged ones are “called” at a particular moment in their lives. Those (and only those) so “called” are then “justified,” and in the future they will be “glorified.” So certain is that future glorification that Paul speaks of it as having already occurred. What is critical to see here is that all those “called” in this sense will be “glorified.” This can’t refer to all people in the universal call sense, but must refer to the special, saving, internal call that only Christians “hear.”

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.”⁴⁹

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:

⁴⁹ J. I. Packer, cited by David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (P&R, 1963), 21).

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Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.⁶ 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

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predestined us to be his. This is why all praise must go to the Lord for our salvation. It is his work from beginning to end, from first to last.

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)

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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:

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out....³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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 6:37, 39–40)

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” (John 10:27–29)

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)

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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.

Making it Practical

God’s sovereignty has application all throughout our lives. It should inspire worship as we contemplate a God so all-powerful and all-knowing that he can simultaneously keep the planets in their orbit, the tiniest insects in their station, and all the affairs of human history in its rightful outworking. It should keep us on our knees in prayer, because the God to whom we pray is the One who can alter and change and inspire any human heart and any human body as he sees fit. But God’s sovereignty should also enable us to rest in a complete trust in him, for

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God in His love always wills what is best for us. In His wisdom He always knows what is best, and in His sovereignty He has the power to bring it about.
Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God*⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts* (NavPress, 1988), 18.

CONTINUATIONISM

Understanding Spiritual Gifts

As you've probably noticed in our Sunday meetings or small groups, SGC believes that the gifts of the Spirit we find in the New Testament "continue" into the present, and this makes us Continuationists. This is in contrast to some who say that many of the New Testament gifts have "ceased" or Cessationists. Both sides vary a good deal in how they think on spiritual gifts, so this chapter is to explain what *we* mean when we say that we are a Continuationist church.

Sovereign Grace (our denomination) was born in a time of revival, one that swept the nation in the 1970s. It was part of what has been called the "Charismatic Renewal" movement. A common starting point for this movement is the experience of Dennis Bennett, an Episcopal rector (pastor) who announced to his unsuspecting congregation on April 3, 1960, that he and some others in the church had received the baptism in the Spirit and had spoken in tongues. His church fired him shortly thereafter, but his ministry continued in other churches and contexts. This eventually came to be called the Charismatic Renewal.

The earlier 1906 revival on Azusa Street in Los Angeles resulted in millions of Pentecostals and many Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God. But the Charismatic Renewal impacted mainline churches and even many Catholics. Some sense of the impact of this renewal is

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evident in a New York Times article from May 17, 1964, which gave a surprisingly level-headed look at the spiritual gifts associated with the new move of God:

A movement emphasizing a restoration of charismatic, or spiritual, gifts to the Christian ministry has been spreading speedily through the nation's Protestant denominations. It is marked, among other things, by glossolalia, the practice of praying, singing or speaking in fluent accents whose meaning is not known to the speaker....Across the United States, hundreds of ministers and thousands of laymen in some 40 denominations have adopted this strange prayer form. Most of them have also begun to practice a variety of other spiritual "gifts," especially healing by prayer with the laying on of hands. These and other phenomena are part of a random but pervasive movement called the Charismatic Renewal. It takes its name from the word *charism*, which means a divine gift bestowed upon a believer. "Glossolalia Wins New Adherents"⁵¹

This charismatic wave in the 1960s became a revival in the 1970s that swept the nation, especially among hippies and young adults. Many of Sovereign Grace's early leaders were saved at this time. They formed Bible studies and then churches and then a family of churches they called People of Destiny, International (which after several iterations became what we now call Sovereign Grace Churches).

Another significant influence from the early years of Sovereign Grace was the "Third Wave" of the Spirit. It got its

⁵¹ "Glossolalia Wins New Adherents: Speaking in Strange Tongue Gains in Protestantism," *New York Times*, May 17, 1964 (<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/05/17/archives/glossolalia-wins-new-adherents-speaking-in-strange-tongue-gains-in.html>).

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name from C. Peter Wagner,⁵² who spoke of the Pentecostal Azusa Street Revival as the first wave and the Charismatic Renewal as the second wave of the Spirit. While the charismatic renewal movement focused on the baptism of the Spirit with speaking in tongues, the Third Wave movement emphasized the “signs and wonders” of the New Testament, especially as these related to evangelism and church growth. Its key adherents were men like John Wimber of the Vineyard and theologians like Wayne Grudem. A distinctive of this view was the notion that you were “baptized in the Spirit” at conversion but could be “filled with the Spirit” throughout your Christian life.⁵³

In the 1990s these different streams of non-cessationist teaching were seen as united in their “continuationist” beliefs. That is, while they might differ on how the baptism of the Spirit or apostles are to be understood in the contemporary church, they were united in their belief that the spiritual gifts of the New Testament “continue” beyond the age of the apostles and are to be expected and pursued. By the end of the century, “continuationists” and “continuationism” were terms used by authors and theologians.

Sovereign Grace Church is a “Reformed-*Charismatic*” or “Reformed-*Continuationist*” church because we believe the spiritual gifts of the New Testament as God’s plan for the church *until Jesus returns*. There will come a time when spiritual gifts “cease,” but as Paul tells us, this is only when we see Jesus himself:

⁵² C. Peter Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit: Encountering the Power of Signs and Wonders Today* (Servant Publishers, 1988).

⁵³ C. Samuel Storms, “A Third Wave View,” *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* (Zondervan, 1996), 176–177.

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Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part,¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor 13:8–13)

Notice that Paul holds up “prophecies,” “tongues,” and supernatural “knowledge” as things that will “pass away” once “the perfect comes.” This will happen when we see him “face to face” and we “know fully.” The “perfect” coming is thus not the New Testament canon, which is nowhere in view here. Instead it is Jesus himself, whom one day we shall see “face to face.” The sign gifts and all spiritual gifts, then, remain until the return of Christ.

The same point is made in Ephesians 4:7–13, where gifted people and spiritual gifts are given to build up the church “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (v. 13). When is it that such full maturity is reached? That, too, is when Jesus returns and the church is glorified. Once again, this is speaking of our full glorification in the new heavens and new earth, not a slightly more advanced stage of the church in another decade or century.

Now we want to unpack some key elements of a Continuationist position.

Continuationism and Salvation History

When we step back and take in the flow of salvation history, we realize an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church expressed by spiritual gifts is part of the plan of God. He foretold that this would happen and then fulfilled it in the redemption of Christ and in the early church. The Old Testament prophesied of a coming age of the Spirit in which the people of God would experience a profoundly new and increased depth of life in the Spirit. No Old Testament text says this as emphatically and clearly as Joel 2:28–32a, the passage Peter uses in his Pentecost sermon:

“And it shall come to pass afterward,⁵⁴
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
²⁹ Even on the male and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit.
³⁰ “And I will show wonders in the heavens
and on the earth,
blood and fire and columns of smoke.
³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness,
and the moon to blood,
before the great and awesome day of the LORD
comes.
³² And it shall come to pass
that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD
shall be saved.”

But Joel’s word is uniquely important in the Old Testament because of the sweeping perspective it contains:

⁵⁴ When Peter cites this text in Acts 2:17 he modifies this phrase to be, “And in the last days it shall be, God declares...”

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1. First, it provides a salvation historical setting—what Joel prophesies will take place “afterward” or the “in the last days” (Peter’s more explicit phrase in Acts 2:17). As long as the “last days” endure, the Spirit abundance of Joel 2:28–32a will remain.
2. Second, it communicates the spiritual abundance to come—God will “pour out” his Spirit and it will fall “on all flesh,” including young and old, men and women, rich and poor. This is not a trickle of the Spirit but a deluge! It’s not on a single person—like a prophet or a key leader—but on “all flesh.”
3. Third, it underscores the spiritual diversity to come—prophecy, dreams, visions, and “wonders,” and these are given simply as representations of an even greater variety in the fulfillment (Rom 12:6–8; 1 Cor 12:4–11; Eph 4:7–13; 1 Peter 4:10–11).
4. Fourth, it tells us of the spiritual power to come—these are nothing short of “wonders” that will come (and Peter will add the word “signs” as well in Acts 2:19).
5. Finally, it connects all this to evangelism that takes place until the last day: “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved” (cf. Acts 2:21; Rom 10:13).

So much more could be said, but this gives something of the flavor of the Old Testament’s promise about a coming day of the Spirit. Other Old Testament passages fill out the picture even more fully. Ezekiel 36:25–27 speaks of regeneration by

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the Spirit; Jeremiah 31:31–34 speaks of a new people of God defined purely by their conversion and new hearts and not their racial background; Isaiah 32:14–20 and 44:1–4 promise a coming outpouring of the Spirit on the spiritual dry land of fallen humanity; and Zechariah 12:10 says this coming outpouring will happen “when they look on him whom they have pierced” (i.e., Jesus). These Old Testament passages are like a massive billboard with giant letters telling us, “A New Day of the Spirit is Coming! Wait for it!”

Jesus is the next great step forward in the progression of salvation history with respect to the Holy Spirit. He does not come unannounced, however. Centuries before he was born to Mary, Isaiah spoke of the Anointed One: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (61:1:1). Luke 4:18–19 will show Jesus reading this very promise and saying, “It’s me!” Jesus was also announced by his cousin, John the Baptist. John’s ministry was one uniquely connected to water baptism but also promising a coming Baptizer unlike anyone we had ever seen. His prophecy and later echoes of it are emphatically stated in the New Testament:

John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Luke 3:16)

And while staying with them he [Jesus] ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” (Acts 1:4–5)

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[Peter speaking to the church in Jerusalem] “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning.¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’” (Acts 11:15–16)

Such passages point to the uniqueness of Jesus, for he is the “Mightier” one specially anointed by the Spirit under John’s ministry (Luke 3:16). But he is unique also as the Spirit-baptizer, the one who at Pentecost brought his Spirit baptism.

Yet, we should not miss the bombshell of Peter’s words in Acts 11:15–16. The same kind of Spirit baptism the first disciples received at Pentecost was also experienced by Cornelius and those with him (cf. Acts 10:44–48). We will say more on the baptism of the Spirit below.

Pentecost is intimately connected to Jesus’ cross and resurrection and ascension. We often think only of the cross and resurrection when we consider Jesus’ redemptive work, but the pouring out of the Spirit by Jesus is an essential part of the whole redemption that he accomplishes. This is something Jesus himself prophesies and something Peter makes explicit in his Pentecost sermon:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)⁵⁵

⁵⁵ John 7:37–39 vividly parallels the Lukan Pentecost and should be seen as such. Ephesians 4:7–14 can be said to be the Pauline Pentecost, for in this

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“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.²⁷ And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.” (John 15:26–27)

“This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.³³ 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.” (Acts 2:32–33)

Such passages remind us that Jesus’ work was not simply to die for sinners (1 Cor 15:3) or be raised for our justification (Rom 4:25), but it was also to ascend to God’s right hand and then pour out the promised Holy Spirit on his people. Richard Gaffin is right to say, “the gift of the Spirit is the crowning achievement of Christ’s work,”⁵⁶ and Derek Thomas that “Pentecost was a part of the continuing work and ministry of Christ.”⁵⁷

Pentecost was a day of the greatest historical importance and uniqueness. It is virtually impossible to *overstate* its significance in the history of salvation. However, we can *misstate* its importance even if we cannot overstate it. The Pentecostal scholar Douglas A. Oss captures well what we dare not miss!

passage Jesus is portrayed as coming down to us and then ascending and giving the Spirit and gifted individuals described there. Luke, John, and Paul give different but parallel accounts of the Acts 2 Pentecost.

⁵⁶ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost* (P&R, 1979), 20.

⁵⁷ Derek Thomas, *Acts* (P&R, 2011), 28.

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To argue that Pentecost is not a repeatable event because it was the once-for-all giving of the Spirit to the church misses the essence of the Pentecostal position and shifts the debate off of the real issue. No Pentecostal would argue that the *day* of Pentecost, as the once-for-all, historical day on which Christ gave his Spirit to the church, is repeatable in that sense. Rather, Pentecostals argue that since Christ has indeed poured out his Spirit, and since the Spirit does indeed dwell in the church, the Spirit is available to all believers in the same experiential manner as it was available to all the believers on that first day: in power. In that sense Pentecost is repeatable. Douglas A. Oss, “A Pentecostal/Charismatic Response”⁵⁸

Peter said the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost was a definitive sign of “the last days” (Acts 2:17). These “last days” of the Spirit remain until the future and final “day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day” (2:20). Such a perspective is found in 1 Corinthians 2:6–16 where Paul speaks of “this age” as the time when the Spirit was revealing the mystery of the gospel. Ephesians 4:7–14 also establishes such a framework, where Spirit/grace-gifts are given until the time of full maturity of the church, which occurs at the return of Christ. John records the teaching of Jesus about the Spirit in similar terms. The key in John’s gospel is the mention of Jesus sending the Spirit only *after* he “goes away”: “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper (*Paraclete*) will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (16:7). This Helper will remain with us until Jesus returns on the final day to judge the world (John 5:24–29).

⁵⁸ Douglas A. Oss, “A Pentecostal/Charismatic Response to Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.,” *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* (Zondervan, 1996), 89.s

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This means that Pentecost is the beginning of an age, an age marked by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit on the people of God. This age continues until Jesus returns. The death of the first apostles and the closing of the canon are significant events, but nowhere in the New Testament are these connected to the end of an era of the Spirit. This gives us good reason to expect the *continuation* of the first gifts of the Spirit and not their *cessation*. The rest of the New Testament confirms this expectation.

All Christians have a Spiritual Gift(s)

The New Testament indicates that all Christians are given spiritual gifts for the purpose of serving others in the church. Notice the emphasis in these passages on “each one of us” receiving a gift:

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. (Eph 4:7)

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord;⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor 12:4–7)

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace:¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies-- in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet 4:10–11)

There are More Spiritual Gifts than Those Listed in the New Testament

The New Testament provides various lists of spiritual gifts which are important to note but also indicators that there are more besides the ones mentioned. Here are some examples:

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching;⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Rom 12:6–8)

For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Cor 12:8–11)

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet 4:10–11)

Such gifts are always presented in an incidental manner and imply strongly that there are even *more* gifts that the Lord will give to his church as they are needed in each time and place.

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But having said that, we don't want to miss the gifts that *are* mentioned. We would expect to find *many* of the gifts mentioned in the New Testament—or shouldn't be surprised to find them, anyway.

It's not easy to organize the gifts of the New Testament. Peter speaks of gifts of service and gifts of speaking. That's useful. *Speaking gifts* could include ones that Paul mentions: “the utterance of wisdom” (word of wisdom), “the utterance of knowledge” (word of knowledge), “tongues” and “the interpretation of tongues,” “prophecy,” “teaching,” “exhortation,” and ones like those mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 (“apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers”). *Service gifts* could include others mentioned by Paul like “service,” “contributes,” “leads,” and “acts of mercy.” A third category could be *power gifts* like “faith,” “gifts of healing,” “the working of miracles,” “distinguishing between spirits.” No categories are perfect, but these three capture some of the important kinds of gifts we see in the New Testament. Truly, “God gives the church an amazing variety of spiritual gifts, and they are all tokens of his varied grace.”⁵⁹

Not just “Open” but Zealous

Given the divine plan that orchestrated the gifts and the diversity and usefulness of them, the gifts are to be a zealous pursuit and not something we are merely “open” to. We are even commanded in the New Testament to “earnestly desire” them (1 Cor 14:1). Thus, to be merely “open but cautious” in

⁵⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1999), 399. Though there is much debate on precisely what these gifts look like, useful starting points in finding some definitions can be found in Sam Storms, *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Gifts* (Bethany House, 2013) and Wayne Grudem, “Gifts of the Holy Spirit,” *Bible Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1999), 396–426.

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our approach to the gifts of the Spirit is to be too passive and casual. We want to see this as an earnest pursuit among the members of our church:

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled⁶⁰ with the Spirit. (Eph 5:18)

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. (1 Cor 14:1)

Further, there are many passages in the New Testament that communicate a dynamic experience of the presence of God even if there is no explicit mention of the Holy Spirit in the passage. This helps us to see the rich variety of experiences in the Spirit we can (and should) have. We don't want to limit an encounter with God to speaking in tongues or a certain kind of worship or anything overly narrow. These passages remind us that God wants his people to encounter him in memorable and transformative ways.

And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 13:52)

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory. (1 Pet 1:8)

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because

⁶⁰ As many have noted, the Greek verb used here is one that implies a persistent, ongoing obligation, not something that is done once and then we move on.

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God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Rom 5:3–5)

But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him. (1 John 2:27)

It's easy to read such verses on “joy” and assume it's the basic Christian character of Galatians 5:22–23 or similar texts. But Peter is speaking of something much more dynamic—“joy that is inexpressible.” And Luke connects the “joy” of these disciples directly to being “filled...with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52). There is no reason to see “holy laughter” here or some odd behavior. Likely it is simply a deep awareness of the goodness of God to an undeserving sinner and an experience with this God that brings an abundant and overflowing happiness that is beyond words.

And Paul's words to the Romans speak in a similar manner. We often read 5:3–5 as if it says, “sufferings are good because ultimately they produce hope.” But Paul doesn't stop there. Why is it exactly that “hope does not put us to shame”? Why is it that “hope” is always a reasonable and superior reaction for the Christian? It's because something has happened to us: “God's love has been poured out through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” “Poured out” is from the Greek *ekcheō*, the same verb used in Acts 2:17 when Peter spoke of God “pouring out” his Holy Spirit on all flesh. The verb only appears two other times in Paul's writing, and one of these is Titus 3:6 that speaks of “the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” In other words, it is likely that Paul is imagining in Romans 5:5 the experience of

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the Christian where he has subjectively encountered God's love in an undeniable and transformative way. Why do we *know* that the hope we have won't give way at the end? Because we are those who have received an unforgettable encounter with the love of God that tells us we belong to God and he will never therefore forsake us.

1 John 2:27 points to a different work of the Spirit in the Christian. He refers to the Spirit as "the anointing that you received from him." As Jesus was "anointed" by the Spirit (Luke 4:18; cf. Isa 61:1), so we, too, have been. And this "anointing" is one that even "abides in you," a phrase that can also be translated "remains in you." The net effect is that the teaching Holy Spirit is inside of us and "you have no need that anyone should teach you." This should remind us of Jesus' promise in the upper room discourse of John's gospel: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (14:26). We shouldn't use this to reject those in the church with the gift of teaching (Eph 4:11) or the words of others as they exhort us (Heb 3:13), but it's a good reminder that the Spirit in us *speaks to us!* This isn't pointing to a single, undeniable encounter with the Spirit, but an ongoing and real and observable work of his as he "abides" in us.

There is obviously much debate on all these issues and texts, but we believe the New Testament provides a picture for us of a life lived encountering and experiencing God's presence. Being a continuationist is more than a doctrine. It is meant to be an inspiration to a kind and quality of life.

Baptism in/with the Spirit

There are two basic approaches to the baptism of the Spirit.⁶¹ One is to assume that it happens at the time of our conversion and is basically equivalent to being a Christian in the first place. Since there is no spiritual life apart from the Spirit of God, no regeneration without the Spirit of God operating on the heart, no response of faith without the prior work of the Spirit, all Christians must have the Spirit at conversion (1 Cor 12:3). Third Wavers like Sam Storms approach the baptism in this manner: “Spirit-baptism is a metaphor that describes what happens when one becomes a Christian.”⁶² 1 Corinthians 12:13 is an important verse for those who hold this position. Paul assumes that the Corinthians “were all baptized by one Spirit into one body,” the body of Christ. This happens at our conversion and so Spirit-baptism is thus a conversion event. This argument basically says that the way conversion and the baptism of the Spirit in Acts were sometimes separated in time was unique to this early stage in the church and the presence of the apostles. The epistles are seen as more reflective of the typical church and Christian experience, and these do not hold up the baptism of the Spirit as a second experience. This view represents the majority of elders in our denomination.

⁶¹ A third view is offered famously (notoriously?) by James Dunn in his book, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Westminster, 1970). He takes the odd view that you can respond in faith and repentance to God without the presence of the Spirit. Once a person responds in this way, *then* they are given the Holy Spirit. But this is basically to ignore the doctrine of regeneration, which is the initial work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian’s life. Some will take this approach in their study of Acts, but the elders of SGC do not see it as a legitimate reading of the New Testament.

⁶² C. Samuel Storms, “A Third Wave View,” *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* (Zondervan, 1996), 176.

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Another view of the baptism of the Spirit is the Charismatic/Pentecostal view represented by those like Martyn Lloyd-Jones who says that “it is possible for us to be believers in the Lord Jesus Christ without having received the baptism of the Holy Spirit.”⁶³ This view says that the baptism of the Spirit is modeled by Jesus and the early church in the gospels and Acts. Faith and repentance are works of the Spirit and typically prior to the baptism of the Spirit. What happens in Samaria (Acts 8:5–17) and Ephesus (Acts 19:1–7) are thus not exceptional cases but the type of experience that is open to Christians today. In these places the gospel is preached, faith and repentance are demonstrated, and *then* the laying on of hands and “receiving” the Spirit occurs. This is the type of “receiving” of the Spirit connected to the gifts and power of the Spirit, not the internal, invisible work that results in faith in the first place.

The use of “receiving” the Spirit in places like 8:15–17 and 19:2 is important, because it shows that the language of “baptism” does not need to be used for the experience to be present. This makes a passage like Galatians 3:2–5 intriguing, for there Paul says,

Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?⁴ Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?⁵ Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith. (Gal 3:2–5)

⁶³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Joy Unspeakable* (Harold Shaw Publishers, 1984), 21.

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It's quite possible—and even likely—that Paul here is referring to two different operations of the Spirit. They indeed had “begun by the Spirit,” which speaks of regeneration and the gift of faith and repentance. Yet, it's possible that his opening question about how they “received the Spirit” points to a subsequent baptism of the Spirit. In fact, it's likely that Paul has something like this in mind since he is using their undeniable experience of the Spirit as proof that “faith” and not “works” is that critical factor. Their “faith” and not “works” brought their undeniable experiences of the Spirit before, so why are they turning away from faith to works now?

1 Corinthians 12:13 for the Charismatic/Pentecostal is a verse that needs to be seen in its context. Earlier in this part of Corinthians Paul spoke of a “baptism” that the Israelites experienced in the Red Sea. This Red Sea baptism united them to Moses and to God. But clearly this is using “baptism” in a metaphorical way to speak of an initiatory experience. 1 Corinthians could be referring to regeneration with “baptism” language in the same way. It's important to see that while we want a technical use of certain words, the New Testament seldom uses words in such technical and precise ways. We might want “baptism” in the Spirit to be a radically different experience from “fill” with the Spirit (Eph 5:18), but if we trace how Luke and Paul use their verbs connected to the Spirit's work, we will find that they are less rigid than our use. A clear example is Pentecost itself in Acts 2. Nowhere is “baptism” used except to speak of water baptism (2:38, 41). Instead, this clear Spirit-baptism moment uses language like “filled with the Holy Spirit” (2:4) and “receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38).

Note Luke 11:13, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the

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heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" Other passages speak of "giving" (Grk. *didōmi*) the "Spirit" (John 3:34; Acts 5:32; 8:18–19; 15:8; Rom 5:5; 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; 1 Thess 4:8; 1 John 3:24; 4:13), but no others speak so concretely about "asking" for the Spirit.

At Sovereign Grace Church

In terms of Sovereign Grace Church and its teaching and corporate life, once again we are simply “continuationists.” This means that some of us might be Third Wavers and some might be Charismatic/Pentecostals. In fact, historically the elders of our church have had both sides represented. Both sides converge, however in seeing:

1. There is absolutely no spiritual life apart from the work of the Holy Spirit—no faith, no repentance, no nothing; the regenerating work of the Spirit is essential if there is to be any response at all to the gospel or God’s Word;
2. A dynamic and experiential life in the Holy Spirit is something to be expected, pursued, and a part of our life together; and
3. We see all the ministries and gifts of the Spirit described in the New Testament as part of the church today (or, at least, potentially a part of the church today).⁶⁴

⁶⁴ In the cases of apostles, this is complicated, but we do see this gift as part of God’s provision for the church in the present. The role of the Twelve (apostles) as eyewitness of the resurrected Christ is no longer for the church. Yet, the role of apostle as pioneer church planter, “pastor for pastors,” and leader gifted to speak to many churches (and not just a single church), all of

Making it Practical

The first thing we need to see with spiritual gifts is that they are a key part of God’s plan and provision for the church. For some of us, this might require further study to be truly convinced.

Once we’ve grasped this idea, we want to take it further and realize that they are also a key part of God’s plan and provision *for us individually*. Remember, each one of us has spiritual gifts (Eph 4:7; 1 Peter 4:10–11). And these gifts are part of how we are to serve and build up and encourage our brothers and sisters in the church—and perhaps even impact the world outside the church. The overall health and happiness of the church depends on each of us stepping out in a humble boldness to minister to others. That’s both frightening and exciting. Pray for grace to take new steps in your service toward others. And if you aren’t sure about what spiritual gifts you might have, identify a need in the church or in the life of another and then seek to meet it. God often gives a person unique sensitivity to certain needs in a church or person, and often he gives a unique ability to be a part of meeting that need as we become aware of it. In all of this, the glory belongs to God and never to us. We are merely tools in his hand, jars of clay filled with his “treasure...to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor 4:7).

which are clearly an aspect of the office in the New Testament, seem necessary and helpful for the church’s full strength today. In Sovereign Grace this occurs through elders ministering to other elders. No one is identified as an “apostle,” even though an elder’s ministry might have many parallels with New Testament apostles like Silas, Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, and others.

COMPLEMENTARIANISM

Gender Roles in the Church and in the Home

Few things are as simultaneously obvious *and* mysterious as what it means to be a man and a woman. The relationships on sit-coms connect with people, because there really are some things obvious (and laughable) about being a man or a woman. Popular love songs work, because, again, people get the boy–girl thing. And yet, a person is also profoundly mysterious and how his/her gender affects his/her personality, psychology, cognitive abilities, creativity, reflexes, drives, and a hundred other things is beyond—and will always be beyond—the reach of scientific exploration. People are indeed “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps 139:14), and our gender is an intimate part of this.

Because of this mystery, the questions abound: Is calling a person a “man” or a “woman” a matter of simple biology, or is there more to it? Is a person’s calling before God different depending on his or her gender? Does the fact we live in a day far removed from the Bible culturally and historically and technologically impact how we read the Bible’s passages on manhood and womanhood? Our own day has added even more questions to this list, like do the pronouns “him” and “her” still work, do we need to expand the options? We’ll hit these

questions in various ways as we think about the topic of Complementarianism. At the end, we'll point to some sources for further study if you want to explore the topic more fully.

Definition(s) of Complementarianism

We should start with a definition. The word “Complementarianism” is certainly long and a bear to spell—it’s not “*complimentarian*,” which I suppose is someone who compliments people a lot, but “Complementarian.” Yet, it points to a relationship between a man and a woman in certain contexts. Such a relationship is one where the two are different and yet they “complement” one another, hence the name. Players on a basketball team demonstrate this in a small way. The team is a unit, a single entity. And yet, it’s made of individual players. As much as those players work together and fulfill certain roles, they’ll be successful. In this way the players individually “complement” each other by working together and not being carbon-copies of one another.

Ligon Duncan defines Complementarianism this way:

Complementarians believe that the Bible teaches that God has created men and women equal in their essential dignity and human personhood, but different and complementary in function—with male spiritual leadership in the home and believing community, the Church, being understood as a part of God’s design. That means that both men and women are image-bearers of the living God. We are each fully human in all that entails. We are equals before the cross, brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ. But God has made us different. He has given certain functions and roles to men,

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and certain functions and roles to women, that are distinct.
J. Ligon Duncan, *Women's Ministry in the Local Church*⁶⁵

Note the way that there is here both a significant emphasis on equality when it comes to dignity and image bearing and difference when it comes to roles in the church and home.

In 2017 a group of men and women got together in Nashville, TN, and crafted a document from a similar perspective called *The Nashville Statement*. It was meant to be a response to our culture's thinking on gender and sexuality. There are few things as volatile and controversial in our world today. Two of the paragraphs (called "Articles") connect to this idea of "Complementarianism" and are worth quoting:

WE AFFIRM that God created Adam and Eve, the first human beings, in his own image, equal before God as persons, and distinct as male and female.

WE DENY that the divinely ordained differences between male and female render them unequal in dignity or worth.

Article 4

WE AFFIRM that divinely ordained differences between male and female reflect God's original creation design and are meant for human good and human flourishing.

WE DENY that such differences are a result of the Fall or are a tragedy to be overcome.

The Nashville Statement, Articles 3–4⁶⁶

Notice the tension in their words between Adam and Eve (and thus men and women) as "equal" but also "distinct," equal in "dignity" and "worth" but also possessing "differences." This is

⁶⁵ Ligon Duncan and Susan Hunt, *Women's Ministry in the Local Church* (Crossway, 2006), 32–33.

⁶⁶ For the complete document, see <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/>.

why the term “complementarianism” is such a fitting one. It expresses how a man and a woman are made to “complement” one another. Like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, they fit together to make something bigger and better than each on its own.

Now that we’ve explained the word we want to see how the idea is developed in the Bible. To do that we go all the way back to...the beginning.

Made in the Image of God

The first emphatic statement made on this issue in our Bible is not about differences between men and women but about their equality or commonality: *Man and woman are made in the image of God*. Genesis is clear on this:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen 1:26–28)

The passage points to three critical convictions that are foundational for any discussion of gender. First, man and woman are said here to have *the same source*—none other than the living God and transcendent Creator.

Second, man and woman have the same essence, for both are *made in God’s “image” and after his “likeness”* (v. 26). An “image” or “likeness” implies both similarity and

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difference. A picture of something is not the real thing even though it's a "likeness." It is, however, a representation and possesses a true similarity. People are in no way equal to God, but we share certain similarities with God in a way no other creature or part of Creation does. As his image bearers we also reflect him as in a mirror and represent him on earth. Herman Bavinck has pointed out several ways we reflect the image of God:

1. We are "living" (Gen 2:7) because of the Spirit of God in us;
2. We have a "heart" which possesses personality, mind, will, and emotions;
3. We possessed "virtues" in the Garden, a kind of holiness and righteousness prior to the fall;
4. We were given "dominion" over "every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen 1:28);
5. Our original home was a place devoid of all sin;
6. We have bodies that manifest our inner glory just as the universe manifests God's glory.⁶⁷

God reflects these qualities perfectly and infinitely, but we reflect them in part—both as men and women. We should also note that in this case, the common essence is also a common *exaltedness*, for in being made in the image of God they are placed in a position above every other creature.⁶⁸

Third, man and woman are also given a *shared commission* from God, what some call the "cultural mandate":

⁶⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 2 (Baker Academic, 2004), 562. See also Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Eerdmans, 1986), 67–68.

⁶⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1939), 199.

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“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (v. 28). Our bodies underscore our need for each other, for being physically fruitful requires a man *and* a woman. Yet, more is meant here than having children. It is a calling to a life lived that is creative, constructive, and industrious. “Subdue” the earth speaks to the idea that we take the raw materials of the earth and transform them into things like cooking utensils, farming implements, and then much later, cars, planes, cell phones, medicine, and food to supply the world’s billions with daily bread. But it’s broader still, for these raw materials are also the basic building blocks of priceless paintings, life-changing novels, beautiful clothing, music that moves the soul, and homes that can both serve us and beautify our lives. And all this is given to both the man *and* the woman.

“Male and Female He Created Them”

Our view on man and woman, male and female, must begin in Genesis 1. But after these priority points of unity, we need to honestly hear what God speaks in Genesis 2. Here we realize the depth of what is meant that “*male and female* he created them” (1:27). Genesis 2 says five things which distinguish the man from the woman. These cannot mean that man is superior, for Genesis 1 has already established the equality of the two. But while not a superior-inferior relationship, Genesis 2 does establish a *difference* between the two and a basic *structure* in the ordering of the pair. As Ray Ortlund, Jr., says, “what will now emerge clearly from Genesis 2 is that male-female equality does not constitute an undifferentiated sameness.”⁶⁹ Here are four ways the man and the woman are distinguished:

⁶⁹ Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1–3,” *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Crossway,

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1. *The Order of Their Creation.* The man is made first (2:7), and then the woman from the man's rib (2:21–22). We know the order is important, because Paul points to it as a reason for a woman not having authority over a man in the church (1 Tim 2:13).

2. *Man the Gardener, Woman the “Helper Fit for Him.”* The different roles of the man and woman are evident in the work they are first given to do. Both are given “vocations,” which is another way of saying “callings” from God (*vocare* is the Latin for “call”). But the man's calling is to “work” and “keep” the garden (2:15), while the woman is made as a “helper fit for him” (2:18). It is assumed that the man won't be able to accomplish his work alone, which is part of the reason why God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (v. 18). We shouldn't miss that statement in verse 18. Amidst all the assessments that things are “good” and “very good,” here is something which “is not good.” A solitary man is not a good thing when his vocation is considered.

With the word “helper,” we must not think “slave.” This would be an entirely wrong notion to derive from this passage. God himself is said to be the “helper” of Judah using the same word (Deut 33:7; Ps 40:17), so the term itself cannot mean an inferior slave. The point is simply that where Adam is made for the work of the garden, the woman is made to help him succeed in that work. She offers her intelligence, creativity, initiative, energy, and overall support to the vocation (calling) given to the man.

3. *The Giving of “the Law.”* The man is entrusted with “the Law of God,” which at this point simply meant the

2012), 89. See also R.C. Sproul, *The Intimate Marriage* (P&R, 1975); Gary and Betsy Ricucci, *Love that Lasts* (Crossway, 2006).

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freedom to eat from all trees *except* the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:16–17). Yet, this invitation to eat from some trees and prohibition to not eat from a certain tree also has a symbolic importance since it constitutes the revealed will of God to humanity at this time. Thus, it is no small thing that this word is spoken to the man before the creation of the woman. Eve, too, must live according to this commandment and he is to teach it to her (see 3:2–3), but this divine word is given to the man first.

4. *The Naming of the Animals and Eve.* A fourth important difference has to do with the task of naming both the animals (2:19–20) and Eve (2:23). Naming someone or something is an action that typically implies some kind of responsibility for someone and sometimes even authority over them (2:19–20; e.g., Gen 4:25; 17:5). The same is true today. Parents name children, and this expresses their role as authorities over and caretakers of their children. Business owners name their businesses, because they have that right.

Headship and Submission

These are all important distinguishing marks which point to Adam’s headship over Eve. “Headship” is a word meant to describe a position of authority and leadership. It comes from passages like Ephesians 5:23, “the husband is the head of the wife;” and 1 Corinthians 11:3, “the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” Unlike a business or the military, where you become the “head” through your achievement or connections, for a husband to become the “head” in his marriage requires simply that he be the husband. “The husband *is* the head of the wife,” not, “the husband *should seek to become* the head of his wife.” He might

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be a rotten or an amazing head in his marriage, but he's still the head.

But having said that, we dare not miss Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:3, "the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God." Notice that he says, "the head of every man is Christ." This means so much. It reminds us that no man is an unaccountable leader in his house. He is always an "under-head," leading as one who himself has a Master, King, and Judge in heaven who is omnipotent, omniscient, and who has spoken clearly what love, service, holiness, and even leadership looks like. The passage also reminds us that if Jesus is the "head," then we must look to him as the preeminent example of what a "head" is and does. There is no more vivid passage than Mark 10:42–45 to capture this idea:

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.⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵ 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)

The idea of a "servant leader," then, is no modern invention but is rooted in the greatest of all earthly authorities and "heads," the Lord Jesus Christ himself. The New Testament's teaching on what loving husbands are to do confirms this. A husband is to "love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25). A husband is to "live with his wife in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel ["weaker" like fine china, not an inferior athlete], since

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they are heirs with you of the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7). Any notion of a chauvinistic, dictatorial understanding of “head” is thus completely unbiblical and is rooted in sinful perversions of God’s Word and not what the Scriptures actually teach.

Genesis 1–2 really provides the basic framework for the key texts in the New Testament on how a husband and a wife are to relate—note: not how *all women relate to all men*, but how *an individual wife is to relate to her individual husband and vice-versa*. Two of the most important statements are in Ephesians 5:22–33 and 1 Peter 3:1–7:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Eph 5:22–33)

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be

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won without a word by the conduct of their wives,² when they see your respectful and pure conduct.³ Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—⁴ but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.⁵ For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands,⁶ as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.

⁷ Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered. (1 Pet 3:1–7)

In both of these passages the wife is called to “be subject to” or to “submit to” her husband (cf. also Col 3:18; Titus 2:5). The verb here is *hypotassō*, a verb used of servants being subject to masters (1 Peter 2:18) and citizens being subject to governing authorities (1 Peter 2:13) and the church being submitted to Christ (Eph 5:24). In other words, it’s pretty clear from how the word is used in the New Testament that it’s a fairly strong and categorical term. There is a clear sense of one who is in authority and another who is under that authority who is then called to submit to that authority. As Martha Peace and John Crotts express it, “The wife...is to obey her husband in all things unless her husband asks her to sin.”⁷⁰ There is nothing demeaning in the term, for even Christ “submitted” to his parents while on earth (Luke 2:51) and was “obedient [to the Father] to the point of death” (Phil 2:8).

⁷⁰ Martha Peace and John Crotts, *Tying the Knot Tighter* (P&R, 2007), 62.

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Yet, “submission” remains a controversial term—so much so that Courtney Reissig even calls it “the dreaded S word.”⁷¹ She then makes clear some of the common *mis*conceptions of it, “doormat” and “personality killer” being two of the most common. She then goes on to define it as “a willing decision to bridle your strength out of respect for your husband, but ultimately out of obedience to God and reverence for his Word.”⁷² “Bridle your strength” is her way of describing the way a wife will bring all of her gifts and abilities and “strength” to the marriage but will seek to bring these under the control of the husband (and ultimately Christ above him) and his loving leadership. But remember what we said above, all earthly authorities are themselves under authority. Every earthly “head” has a heavenly “head” to which all must submit and to which all are absolutely accountable (1 Cor 11:3; Rom 14:10).

Submission is not the only thing commanded in the two passages above, however. The husband’s obligation is just as clear. He is called to “love” his wife “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). He is to “nourish” and “cherish” the wife, even as his own body (5:28). He is to live with her with patience and understanding and honor her as an equal heir of the grace of Christ (1 Peter 3:7). He “is the head,” but the Lord Jesus Christ has also infallibly established what kind of head he is to be.

One final point to make here is that the husband’s love and honor and understanding are not a condition for her submission, just like the wife’s submission is not a requirement before the husband loves and leads her. Both are called to fulfill their obligations regardless of how the other spouse is acting.

⁷¹ Courtney Reissig, *The Accidental Feminist* (Crossway, 2015), 70.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 73.

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Below we'll look at ways to respond when one spouse is sinning in ways destructive to the marriage and the other spouse.

A Beautiful Collaboration

Before we leave the garden's harmony and peace, however, we want to see the basic picture of complementarianism that's given there. The husband is indeed commissioned to lead in the marriage in such a way that the husband and the wife together carry out the commission he is given by the Lord. The wife is to submit to his leadership, obeying his directives (in the rare cases when directives will be ushered) and being sensitive to his needs as an intelligent helpmate. These clearly defined roles are not meant to keep the woman down or sinfully elevate the man. They are meant to be a picture of wise and loving collaboration that leads to greater fruitfulness than could ever be achieved by either of the two of them alone. The word "harmony" implies different things blended together in such a way that there is an increased depth and richness and beauty. Certainly, that fits the way a husband and wife are to relate. They are different! And yet the differences enable the united effort of the two of them to accomplish extraordinary things.

Further, this beautiful collaboration has an even greater significance than the work they can accomplish. In Ephesians 5, Paul compares the husband and wife relationship to that of Christ and his bride, the church: "As the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church" (5:24–25). He even goes on to say that the husband and wife union of Genesis 2:25 "refers to Christ and the church." This means that when a loving husband leads his wife in a life-giving way, and when a godly wife submits to that leadership

and expresses initiative and creativity as his helpmate, they are demonstrating to a watching world how it is that Christ and the church are to relate. The harmony of the couple becomes a gospel presentation to a dead and hopeless world. And when the world's broken marriages and distorted understanding of marriage are considered, this gospel presentation becomes all the more radical and rare.

Having painted this picture of the ideals of marriage, we need to look honestly at what happened to the first couple and how it impacted all of us.

Complementarianism and the Fall

Genesis one and two are as glorious and inspiring as chapter three is tragic. Genesis 3 records the sad undoing of the harmony of Eden and the corruption of the entire universe. While we could go into great detail about this chapter, the two points we want to make relevant for our discussion here have to do with original sin and the impact of the fall on gender roles.

First, “the fall” or “original sin” as it is sometimes called, was the moment when Adam and not Eve sinned. This is important. While it is true that the woman was deceived first, “the fall” of creation happened because of Adam’s sin—not Eve’s. Romans 5:12–21 says that “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin” (v. 12). It is the “transgression of Adam” that caused such devastation and not the sin of Eve. This is another pointer to the gender differences between a man and a woman.

The fall brought sin and death to all humanity, and this has a profound impact on how we relate as men and women also. Just as crops, mountains and the universe itself are corrupted and long for their own redemption when Christ returns (Gen 3:17; Rom 8:19–22), so men and women are

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impacted in every facet of their lives by the fall of Adam. Where Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 are in beautiful harmony together, because of the fall Eve's "desire shall be contrary to your husband, and he shall rule over you" (3:16). The "helper fit for him" now has an enemy within her (sin) that will at times cause her to rise up and reject his authority and work against his success instead of working for it.

The second point we need to see in this section is the order of Genesis 1–3 here. Gender and gender roles are given before the fall and then corrupted by the fall. At times people seem to assume that gender roles are the *result* of the fall, but this is not true. Sin does not *create* gender roles, it *corrupts* them.

Sin can tempt a woman to want to rule her family and usurp the place of her husband; sin can also tempt a woman to suppress her intelligence and creativity and take on a doormat posture. Sin can tempt a man to be an abusive⁷³ tyrant in his home and ignore the full integrity and dignity and capabilities of his wife; sin can also tempt a man to be utterly passive and maybe even absent in his place as head of his family. Once again, such behaviors are not because sin has *created* gender roles, but instead show how sin *corrupts* them.

We're seeing in our day that not only does sin corrupt gender roles, but it also distorts our understanding of gender itself. The phrase "gender dysphoria" captures an experience that many have, where they feel out of alignment with their God-given bodies. They are born male but feel like a female, born female and feel like a male, etc. Some kind of internal

⁷³ For more on the sobering reality of abuse, the sinful heart behind it, and some helpful responses to it, see Chris Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse* (Focus, 2015).

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confusion is not uncommon as we grow from children to adults. When it persists it can be troubling and problematic. Our culture has not helped, for it wants to encourage and even celebrate such abnormalities instead of guiding people to healing and acceptance of their God-given sex. Thus, the dysphoria itself and the unbiblical responses of some to it are both evidences of the fall. The church needs to be a place where people can find help and healing in such circumstances, not judgment and bigotry. But part of the help and healing is pointing people back to God's good plan in creation, where we are made "male and female" and our bodies reflect God's intentions for our lives.⁷⁴

Gospel Hope

Many of us feel these sinful tugs in our heart that tempt us to distort our God given roles (and gender). Yet, the gospel meets us right here in this place of need. The truth that God sent his only Son to die on the cross for our sins and then raised him to life and then unites us to him by faith through the Holy Spirit means everything. It is forgiving grace to the wicked wrecked by a life of rebellion against God: "To [Jesus Christ] all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43). The gospel is transforming grace that lovingly and persistently shapes us into conformity to Christ (Rom 8:29). The gospel is power and ability to walk in "newness of life" (Rom 6:4). And the gospel is God's seal and unbreakable bond that we will one day be perfected and glorified (Rom 8:30). So, even while sin remains a temptation for the Christian, grace is greater. A born-again husband and a born-again wife can walk according to the

⁷⁴ A useful resource for more on this topic is Andrew Walker's *God and the Transgender Debate* (The Good Book Company, 2017).

loving and intelligent Complementarianism we see displayed in the Bible.

Complementarianism in the Church

But what about the church? How do we see such a view of gender roles in the church? Here we can start with the clearest teaching in the New Testament and move toward the less clear. It is clear to us—and you have no doubt observed this—that elders are to be male. This is rooted in both explicit and implicit teaching in the New Testament. The explicit teaching comes in three places. The first two are where the requirements for elders are detailed for us. 1 Timothy 3:1–7 tells us what an “overseer” or elder must be. Within this list he says the elder must be “the husband of one wife” (v. 2). He goes on to say an elder “must manage his own household well...for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (vv. 4–5). Titus 1:5–9 speaks in almost identical language, saying an elder must be “the husband of one wife” with children who are “faithful”⁷⁵ (1:6).

There is a third explicit text that doesn’t mention elders but provides the same theological idea. 1 Timothy 2:12 says, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man.” We believe Paul to be speaking of life within the church here, and not all segments of the society and the workplace. But clearly, the elder is an authoritative role and so 2:12 would relate to it.

⁷⁵ Some argue that Paul’s word means “believers” here, certainly allowable within the Greek text. Yet, we think it more likely that he was speaking to the general issue “faithfulness” with his use of *pistos*, a usage like 1 Tim 3:11, which speaks of a woman being “faithful (*pistos*) in all things.”

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To these explicit passages we can add the implicit teaching of the apostles chosen by Jesus. Though women were involved in many facets of Jesus' ministry, including providing financial support for him (Luke 8:1–3), the apostles were all men. It is also significant that God chose a set of women as the first eyewitnesses of the empty tomb (Luke 24:1–10) and even the resurrected Christ (John 20:16–18): The culture of the day would not accept the testimony of women as admissible in court. Such passages remind us that the Lord was beholden to no culture and no set of traditions in establishing his church as he saw fit. And yet, within such a freedom he again chose only men to be the twelve apostles. These men would go on to be the first leaders of the Jerusalem church and the global mission of the church.

Additionally, when deacons were needed to serve the widows in Jerusalem, the apostles said to “pick out from among you seven *men* of good repute” for this ministry (Acts 6:3, emphasis mine). Choosing men for this role is consistent with 1 Timothy 3:8–13, where “deacons” are required to be “the husband of one wife” (v. 12). Verse 11 in the ESV says, “their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.” “Wives” can also be translated as “women, likewise,” as in the NASB and NIV. Throughout the New Testament, “wife” and “woman” are both used to translate the Greek word *gunē* used in 3:11. 1 Timothy 2:9–10, for instance, uses “woman” in the ESV.

Yet, we believe Paul meant the “wives” of the deacons in 3:11. This is first due to the context. It would be odd for Paul to refer to the deacons in 3:8–10, switch topics to women deacons in verse 11, and then go back to talking about deacons in 3:12–13. We would rather expect him to talk about deacons completely and then turn to women deacons at the end, his more

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consistent pattern. Further, to have five verses of extensive requirements for deacons and only four phrases for women deacons would be an odd imbalance if two offices were being discussed. The example of Acts 6:1–7 is important here as well. Women served in myriad ways in the early church, but apostle, elder, and deacon were roles to be filled by men and not women. Phoebe in Rom 16:1–2, described as a “servant (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae,” should be seen as a commendable and honored “servant” of the church but not an office-holding deacon.

There are other leadership/coordination positions that are not quite so clear, however. Most churches have a whole array of service teams that enable ministry to happen: Sunday school classes, ushers, audio-visual teams, bookstore, etc. Some of these teams are large and complex or uniquely demanding enough to be led by elders or deacons. Others are more organizational or administrative teams. What about these? Our position is that when leading such a team puts a person in a more authoritative role (setting strategy, being fairly directive as a matter of course, having a lot of responsibility in evaluating others or hiring and firing, etc.), this should be filled by a man *if the team is a co-ed team*. This is because of 1 Timothy 2:12–14 and the way authority is understood in the New Testament. Yet, when a team is more collaborative and effectively a group of peers that simply need someone to organize them, it is a great place for a gifted and competent woman to serve *even if it is a co-ed team*. Many of our Sunday service teams fit this criterion: audio-visual, Scripture reading team, bookstore, etc.

Women Serving at Sovereign Grace Church

While elder and deacon are two roles reserved for men at Sovereign Grace Church, there are dozens of roles where

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women are encouraged to serve. Further, the full health and maturity of the church will never happen without a full representation by the women of the church. Just as a body without its arms and legs is unable to do all that it was meant to do, so a church without its women serving in myriad ways will never achieve its true purpose. A *partial* list of ways that women have and continue to serve at SGC includes:

- A countless number of roles that take place in informal and behind-the-scenes ways as women help meet the needs of other church members in critical and timely ways—women are the relational glue of the church;
- Contributing at all levels for ministries like Hand of Hope Crisis Pregnancy, Operation Christmas Child, Agua Viva, Safe Families for Children, etc.;
- Scripture reading on Sunday mornings for the sermon;
- Overseeing and serving in the women’s ministry;
- Leading women’s Bible studies;
- Teaching at women’s meetings;
- Teaching in our children’s ministry and being a team coordinator for different age groups of the ministry;
- Leading and serving in Keepers (our ministry for girls);
- Serving on virtually all ministry teams of the church;
- Being the coordinator for ministry teams that are more oriented toward the administration of Sunday mornings and different facets of church life, even coordinating teams that include men (e.g., the bookstore, Scripture reading team, a/v teams, information table, hospitality team);

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- Supporting their husbands, caring for their children, and working in their homes in ways that produce profound and extraordinary spiritual fruit;
- Contributing at the prophecy microphone on Sunday mornings.

Such a list couldn't possibly capture all the ways women serve at SGC, but it provides at least a snapshot of their contribution to our life together.

“Act Like Men”: The Church Needs Strong Men

Just as the church cannot thrive without the full and energetic participation of its women, so it will never flourish without its men heeding the apostolic call to “act like men” (1 Cor 16:13). This is not a popular sentiment in our day, but it is vital in every generation. The church needs its men to step up and lead their families, to disciple their children, to walk in integrity, to be “full of wisdom and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:3), to be worshipers of the true and living God and not their careers or comforts or hobbies. A church needs men who will be serious about pursuing the Lord Jesus Christ as a daily discipline. A church needs men who will rise up to become deacons and elders and teachers and evangelists, men who willingly take the mantle of leadership from those who went before them and faithfully pass it along to those who will come after them. Injunctions like Paul’s are found throughout the Bible. Joab told his brother to, “be of good courage, and let us be courageous for our people” (2 Sam 10:12)—and though our enemies are not Ammonites, the need is the same. David exhorted his son Solomon, “Be strong, and show yourself a man” (1 Kgs 2:2)—and though we aren’t kings, the need is the same. It is a vital truth to grasp that just as a church needs its women to serve

energetically and faithfully under the leadership of elders, so a church needs men who will not fail to heed the call to “act like men” in their station and in their generation.

Complementarianism and Singlehood

“I am single. I am complementarian. A lot of times people don’t see how those things go hand in hand.” That’s how Katie Van Dyke begins her article, “Complementarianism and the Single Woman.”⁷⁶ She goes on to make several points useful to consider in a chapter like this one. First, complementarianism isn’t an odd exception in our lives, a restrictive authority in lives of relative independence. Rather, it’s part of an overall framework of authority that God has created to be part of our world. The truth is, we live in the midst of overlapping spheres of authority—parents, teachers, employers, governments, spouses, pastors, commanding officers, etc.—and God calls us to submit to the authorities over us in any given context. We never submit when they require us to disobey God (Acts 5:29), but we do at all other times (e.g., Rom 13:1–7). A single man and woman may not have a spouse with which to live out the complementarianism of marriage, but they are still Christians who both exercise and submit to authority in myriad ways.

Second, Katie Van Dyke notes that being complementarian impacts her reading of the Bible. As she says, “It allows me to affirm with gladness that there are many passages in Scripture that point to the fact that men and women were created equal, but with different roles.” It brings together the Bible’s rich and beautiful teaching on gender as well as marriage.

⁷⁶ See her article at <https://www.9marks.org/article/complementarianism-the-single-woman/>.

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Third, she says complementarianism impacts her involvement in church. It enables her to do more than simply attend: instead, she seeks to cultivate “a spirit of sacrificial involvement in the body.” Complementarianism is rooted in the idea that there is both equality between a man and a woman and yet different roles in a marriage. The church has that same dynamic: One body with many members, one spiritual family with different members called to different ministries and service, empowered Christians with different gifts given for the common good (Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 12:4–7).

Fourth, complementarianism informs how she acts in the workplace. It provides for her a basis to submit to the authorities God has given her. This is an essential quality in any workplace. Yet, complementarianism also implies an active, engaged service, an attitude of utilizing our gifts and attitudes for the good of the community. This, too, makes one an invaluable worker in whatever role he or she performs in the company.

Finally, writing as she does as a single woman, she reflects on how complementarianism impacts her views on dating. It informs the kind of man she wants to date—someone who appears to be one who embraces the idea of the husband being the head of the wife and actually able to do that. As she says, she “wants to see glimpses of these characteristics” in a prospective date. Of course, it also informs the kind of woman she is trying to be.

Katie Van Dyke offers a good sketch for the younger man or woman, one where marriage is a bit distant in his or her future. She is really saying that wherever you are, grow in godliness, in relating well to members of the opposite sex, and in living freely under the authorities God has placed in your life. This is excellent counsel.

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One element to add for the younger single (high school, just out of high school), is to let your complementarianism impact your future-planning. Though only God knows your future—James 4:13–16!—it is good to keep the issues above in mind as you consider your high school and post-high school years. As a man you want to consider how your early adulthood sets you up well for leading and providing for a family. As a woman you want to consider how your early adulthood equips you for a possible marriage fairly soon (20–25 yrs old) but also makes sense if you experience an extended period of singleness.⁷⁷

Making it Practical

We recognize that some of what we say in this section is controversial and some of it even extremely unpopular in a day like ours. These are convictions we hold not because we are old-fashioned, traditionalists, or tied to “the good old days.” We believe this is the way that God has designed men and women to relate in the family and in the church.

Further, it’s more than just a doctrinal position with certain implications. These ideas are also a great blessing. Throughout God’s Word he makes promises about obedience to his ways. He doesn’t just tell us his way is *right*; he also wants us to see that his way is *best*: “Whoever keeps the commandment keeps his life; he who despises his ways will die” (Prov 19:16). “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome”

⁷⁷ For more on this topic for the single woman, check out Carolyn McCulley, *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?: Trusting God with a Hope Deferred* (Crossway, 2004) and Courtney Reissig, *The Accidental Feminist: Restoring Our Delight in God’s Design* (Crossway, 2015).

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(1 John 5:3). Embracing the order and beauty of complementarianism is not just God's intention, it's also the path to the happiest life.

For Further Study

If this chapter represents new ideas for you, you might consider doing further study. Some resources you might consider include:

1. John Piper and Wayne Grudem's *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Crossway, 2012);
2. Andreas and Margaret Köstenberger's *God's Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey* (Crossway, 2014); and Andreas' volume *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundations* (Crossway, 2010);
3. Courtney Reissig's *The Accidental Feminist: Restoring Our Delight in God's Design* (Crossway, 2015); and
4. The various resources available at the website of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (<https://cbmw.org/>).

OUR MISSION TOGETHER

In this last section we want to think about our mission together as a church. What is it that we feel God has called us to do in the community and in the world? This is connected to the larger question, “what is the specific task or purpose that the church is sent into the world to accomplish?”⁷⁸ We have seen above that our first allegiance is to God himself and that our commitment to our brothers and sisters in the church is vital. And yet, our calling extends beyond the church walls to the relationships and opportunities that he brings our way to make a difference in his name.

It’s good to remember what the word “mission” tells us. To speak of our “mission” implies that we are sent by someone to do something. For us as a church, just like for each individual Christian, we are sent by the living God to do something that he has designed for us. Paul exhorts the young Timothy along these lines: “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” (2 Tim 2:3–3). What is it that the one who “enlisted” us is asking of us? There are several things to say here.

⁷⁸ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Crossway, 2011), 20.

“Loving Our Neighbors”: A Church of Good Samaritans

First we are called to be a certain kind of “good Samaritan.” This phrase comes from one of Jesus’ great parables. He spoke it in a conversation with “a lawyer” who sought to stump him by asking, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). Jesus responded by giving the two great commandments of the Old Testament: “love the Lord your God...and your neighbor as yourself” (v. 27). The self-confident lawyer then sought a loophole: “Who is my neighbor?” (v. 29). It is in answer to that question that Jesus tells the Good Samaritan parable.

As the parable unfolds, a man is beaten and left for dead. First a “priest” and then a “Levite” see him but pass without wanting to get involved, perhaps not wanting to become unclean by touching a dead body. But then “a Samaritan” comes. And his reaction is completely different: “When he saw him, he had compassion” (v. 33). And then his “compassion” stirred him to action: “He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine” (v. 34) and then putting the ailing man up in an inn at the Samaritan’s own expense.

Jesus is saying that loving our neighbor means responding with compassion to the needs of others as they appear to us. We can’t meet every need of every person. In a world where needs can be instantly transmitted throughout the world through the internet, this is important. As needs arise, however, especially ones with names and faces close to home, we want to be those who have “compassion” that stirs us to action.

But what does loving our neighbor look like?

Making Disciples of All Nations

A prime way we want to love our neighbors is by meeting their greatest need with God's ultimate provision. The gospel is the offer of eternal life to those who deserve unending punishment. It is every person's greatest need. As with the beaten man in Luke 10, it may not be our only need, but it is our greatest. To love our neighbors, we always want to seek opportunities for the gospel. Evangelism inspired by love for our neighbor has great benefits:

If we understand evangelism itself...as a deep and profound act of love for another person, we will do it *more often* (because we won't have the awkward feeling that we're just giving a sales pitch), and we'll do it with the *right motives*, too (love for people, instead of regard for ourselves). In fact, if we are Christians whose love and compassion is aroused not just by physical and emotional needs, but also by spiritual needs, then sharing the gospel will always be in the forefronts of our minds. We will naturally and readily move toward it as we are loving other people. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*⁷⁹

This is part of what it means to be Great Commission Christians:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."¹⁹ 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,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I

⁷⁹ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Crossway, 2011), 229.

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have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:18–20)

With these last words, Jesus charged the church to go in his authority (v. 18) and with his very presence (v. 20) and “make disciples of all nations.” This includes evangelism, thus the mention of “baptizing them”; and it includes a lifelong discipleship agenda, which is what is meant by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Hearing is not the goal. Obedience to all Jesus’ commands is. This means that an evangelistic crusade can’t be what Jesus meant. He meant church planting. Having pastors and teachers on the ground among a people for the long haul is how you work toward “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded.”

This is why we value so highly our connection to Sovereign Grace. Through our involvement with this family of churches, we join with just about a hundred other churches throughout the world. Our resources are not limited to what we possess only within our own local church. Joining with these other churches we can deploy trained and called men throughout the world to fulfill the Great Commission. We don’t pretend that our denomination alone can achieve it. We’re just playing one small part of a much larger endeavor that is the responsibility of Jesus’ global church.

But thinking globally isn’t all there is to it. The Great Commission needs to hit home for us personally. As we go through our days and navigate through dozens of different relationships, we want to heed these words of Paul:

Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶ 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)

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Paul's words are a bit broad in some ways, for "gracious" can mean a whole range of things. But the mention of "outsiders" (those "outside" the church) and "know how you ought to answer" seems to imply an intentional effort on our part to bring in gospel elements to our conversations and general speech. God isn't telling us here to be 'gospel jerks,' those who offensively, clumsily, and unkindly yell gospel truth to the lost around us. God is giving us a divine command to see our daily interactions as evangelistic opportunities and to thus try and weave in gospel truths when and where we can.

Personal evangelism is simply "teaching the gospel with the aim to persuade," a great definition by Mack Stiles. He elaborates on what he means by saying it this way:

Evangelism is teaching (heralding, proclaiming, preaching) the gospel (the message from God that leads us to salvation) with the aim (hope, desire, goal) to persuade (convince, convert).
Mack Stiles, *Evangelism*⁸⁰

Don't be alarmed by the mention of "teaching" as if this means standing in front of a group of people who all have notebooks and are ready to record all that you say. Any time we communicate aspects of the gospel to the lost we are "teaching the gospel."

Personal evangelism is hard. Much of the time, if we do it at all, it will be done fearfully and very imperfectly (even wrongly). And yet, most Christians come to Christ through a person having the courage to share the life-saving message of Jesus Christ. We want to create a church that equips for and

⁸⁰ J. Mack Stiles, *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus* (Crossway, 2014), 26, 27.

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encourages personal evangelism. Sharing the gospel is one of the greatest expressions of loving our neighbor we can display, for “neglect it, and you will have destruction; heed it, and you will have life.”⁸¹

Good Works

Loving our neighbor also means living a life of “good works.” This, too, is a divine imperative and also one with evangelistic intentions:

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)

As many have said, Christians are saved through faith *alone*, but a true saving faith will never be alone. It will always be joined to a life of good works. As James tells us emphatically: “Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:17). A dead faith has no works and saves no one, so we’re looking to be those with a living faith filled with good works.

Paul in his letter to Titus reminds us that we can even say the gospel has as one of its God-given goals for us to be “zealous for good works.” Listen to these powerful words:

Show yourself in all respects to be ***a model of good works***, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity,⁸ and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.⁹ Bondservants are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they

⁸¹ J. Gresham Machen, “The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol 165 (Jan 1933), 47.

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are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative,¹⁰ not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,¹⁴ 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 2:7–14; cp. 3:8, 14)

Good works come in as many varieties as there are Christians and needs we encounter. They can be as simple as helping someone with a flat-tire or as involved as working with a single-mom to help her find affordable housing in a crisis situation. When we see needs and experience a “compassion” that stirs us to action in the name of Christ, we are matching works with our faith.

Helping Without Hurting⁸²: Poverty Alleviation

One of the good works that means a lot to us and to the Lord is poverty alleviation. Throughout the Bible, God makes it clear that his desire is for his people to have a heart for the poor and a generous attitude toward the poor. In wealthy parts of the US it can be tempting to think that poor people are simply lazy. We found a job and have a good home, why can't they? But as Christians we need to repent of such critical and broad-brush

⁸² A useful phrase coined by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts* (Moody, 2012). It speaks to the idea that sometimes what we regard as helpful is actually hurtful to others.

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judgments. Of course, poverty is *sometimes* the result of personal laziness, but it is *typically* far more complex than that.

Before we dive into the complexity of poverty, let's see a brief set of Old Testament and New Testament texts that reveal something of God's consistent concern for the poor:

“And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.” (Lev 23:22)

Blessed is the one who considers the poor!
In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him. (Ps 41:1)

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.” (Isa 58:6–8)

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:26–27)

Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. (Gal 2:10)

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We could add dozens and dozens of Old Testament and New Testament texts to this list. These and others are why Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert concluded, “Ministering to the poor is a crucial sign that we actually believe the gospel.”⁸³

Saying we desire to work to alleviate the suffering of the poor is good, but we actually need to define a little more specifically what the poverty is that we’re trying to alleviate. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert’s work with The Chalmers Center has been a great encouragement to us in understanding more some of the issues surrounding poverty. They define poverty this way:

Poverty is rooted in broken relationships, so the solution to poverty is rooted in the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection to put all things into right relationship again.

Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*⁸⁴

These “broken relationships” include (1) our relationship with God, (2) our relationship with ourselves, (3) our relationships with others, and (4) our relationship with Creation.⁸⁵ Someone who is materially poor in our estimation might have any one or all four of these in a broken state. For example, in the first category (God) someone in rebellion against God might have the kind of character that goes along

⁸³ DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 174.

⁸⁴ P. 73. Here they are thinking along the lines of Bryant Myers from *Walking with the Poor*, who says, “Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings.”

⁸⁵ Pp. 54–55.

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with such a state and therefore a poor work ethic. In the second category (self), someone might have such a destroyed self-esteem that it prevents them from holding down a job for any length of time. In the third category (others), someone might have no support structure to give them the kind of advantages typically required to get a suitable job with a suitable income. And in the fourth category (Creation), a farmer might adopt practices so destructive to his resources that eventually his farm is ruined and worthless. One of the great benefits of Corbett and Fikkert's work is seeing that poverty is...complicated.

Seeing poverty as a set of broken relationships also helps us identify with those who are "poor." All of us have serious brokenness in our lives at different points. How much and what kind will differ from person to person. But in this sense, all of us are poor in one way or another. Thus, rightly can we identify with Jesus' words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3).

Our response to the poor, then, needs to be nuanced as well. Corbett and Fikkert use a three-step process of (1) relief, (2) rehabilitation, and (3) development.⁸⁶ Relief is immediate and short-term in desperate situations. When a hurricane hits, the help needs to be immediate because the situation is desperate. Rehabilitation, however, is about restoring people to their "precrisis conditions" and will involve working *with* people and not simply giving to them. Finally, development is about actual *progress* where people are restored in the key relationships of their lives.

We have also benefitted from their work in having our pride identified. It is common for so-called rich Americans to

⁸⁶ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts* (Moody, 2012), 99–100.

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parade around the world with checkbooks in hand thinking we are the answers to everyone's problem. Yet, reckless handouts even if well-intended can sometimes do more harm than good. If we rob others of needing to show initiative in their own development or make people dependent on western money to accomplish works of their own or build in people a sense that they are somehow fundamentally unqualified to contribute to their own welfare, our help does more harm than good. Such "paternalism"—a way of being condescending toward others rooted in a sense of superiority to them—is easy for us but damaging to others.⁸⁷

So, where do we start? Where does this intimidating goal of poverty alleviation touch ground for us? It's helpful to think in terms of our "circles of responsibility." It isn't God's will that we go on an endless search for the poorest people in the world and restrict our efforts there. Our "circles of responsibility" help us identify where to start.

Priority 1: Our Family

The place to begin serving the poor is within our own families. There is much poverty that exists because the basic structure of the family and extended family has broken down and failed to fulfill its biblical obligations. We need to start there.

Honor widows who are truly widows.⁴ But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God....But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his

⁸⁷ Ibid., 109.

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household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1 Tim 5:3–4, 8)

Helping within your own family is not easy. It's not always appreciated or asked for. It can come with unhealthy strings attached. Yet, family is a primary means of assistance. This is one place where the category of "relationships with others" by Corbett and Fikkert needs to have a dominant place in our thinking.

Priority 2: Our Church

The next place where ministry to the poor needs to touch ground is within our churches. The priority of the church is given in places like Galatians:

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Gal 6:10)

Sometimes we can miss the people in our lives who are "poor" in many ways, because we take on the attitude that "America is a rich country, no one's poor here." Certainly, our average income is high relative to the world's standards. But there are ways people can fall through the cracks of our society's systems that bring temporary or long-term poverty and, certainly, a brokenness in one or more of the four key relationships mentioned above.

Serving others in the church provides an ideal place for mutual accountability, redemptive relationships (especially where family has sometimes broken down), and a long-term means of care. Right now, we utilize a "Deacon of Benevolence" to help us assess the needs of church members and step in appropriately to meet those needs.

Priority 3: Our Community

Third, we want to work in our communities as we are able and have opportunity. Remember the good Samaritan:

But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. (Luke 10:33–34)

An important part of the Samaritan story is that he responded to a need that presented itself in the normal flow of life. While this could happen globally for us, it will likely be within our own communities where this happens. As the needs of those around us present themselves, our heart is to be like this good Samaritan, whose “compassion” motivated him to action.

As of 2018 we are beginning to organize our efforts with something called The Mercy Cooperative. This is a group of people dedicated to helping our church be more organized and more effective in local efforts like the Hand of Hope Crisis Pregnancy Center and Safe Families for Children. These ministries meet people in the crises of life with true help.

Priority 4: Then...Our World

The fourth area of opportunity is our world. You see such connectedness in places like this in the Bible:

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.²⁸ And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).²⁹ So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.³⁰ And they

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did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:27–30)

This passage of Acts reminds us of our connection to others even when we are separated by hundreds of miles (something comparable to being separated by thousands of miles in our world).

Life in a digital age means we are fundamentally more connected than ever before. This gives us new opportunities for service, because it brings with it new awareness. As with service in our community, this is something we take on “as we are able and have opportunity.” However, we never want our service to the world to hinder our priorities to serve our families and church.

Along these lines, right now our church has a significant relationship with Agua Viva Children’s Home in Guatemala. We have sent many teams there, invest much money, and see it as a way to work toward alleviating the poverty of some of the poorest people on earth. Further, the home has a comprehensive vision for its children to see them restored in all the areas identified by Corbett and Fikkert.

Making it Practical

This chapter gave you a lot to consider. It’s like sitting down at a new job and seeing the entire 6-page job description in front of you. But the Christian life is lived one moment at a time, one day at a time, one opportunity at a time. Consider this season of your life and your family’s life. What would be a good way for you to make a great difference in the lives of others in the cause of evangelism or good works? Perhaps the place to start is developing a prayer list of unbelievers in your life and preparing for gospel conversations with them. Perhaps you read

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about serving the poor and want to invest in one of our trips to Guatemala to serve Agua Viva. Or perhaps the mention of Safe Families for Children intrigued you. Talk to one of the elders or do some exploring on our website to find out more information about these areas of ministry. We would love to connect your desires and abilities with those who serve in these ways.

WELL, WHAT NOW?

God has been good to Sovereign Grace Church since its founding in 1992. It's not perfect or filled with perfect people, but from its start as a church plant, it has sought to glorify God and spread his gospel and help people live faithful lives in a world that is not our final home. We hope you will consider making this your church home for the next chapter of your spiritual journey. If you decide to link arms with us in this corner of the world, praise God. We hope your time here will be fruitful for you and equip you to make a great difference in the lives of others. If you decide not to, we pray God's richest blessings in your life.

You'll hear soon about the next steps in this membership process. We pray this for you:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant,²¹ equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20–21)

Indeed, amen.

